GUIDELINES ITU

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About the International Telecommunication Union (ITU)

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) serves as the United Nations' specialized agency acting as the "global conductor" for all digital and telecommunication technologies. Its necessity is anchored in three vital functions: firstly, it ensures global technical cohesion by establishing universal standards; without these, the world would be a fragmented landscape of incompatible devices, preventing international roaming, global internet navigation, and cross-border data exchange. Secondly, it acts as the custodian of intangible resources, strictly regulating the allocation of radio frequencies and satellite orbits. This oversight is critical to preventing signal interference that would otherwise jeopardize essential services such as global aviation, weather forecasting, and maritime safety. Finally, the ITU fulfills a humanitarian and strategic mandate by serving as the primary multilateral forum where 194 Member States collaborate to ensure that digital progress is not a luxury for the elite, but a tool for the 2.2 billion people still offline. Ultimately, without the ITU, the global internet as we know it would cease to function, and the digital divide between nations would become an unbridgeable chasm.

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Topic 1 : How can equal access to digital education be guaranteed?

Introduction

The digital transformation of educational systems has accelerated over the last few decades, driven by the promise of democratized access to knowledge. However, this technological shift has revealed profound fractures that call into question the ideal of equality of opportunity. The digital divide manifests as unequal access to technology (both in terms of connectivity and the availability of devices) and is further exacerbated by disparities in infrastructure, skills, and financial affordability.

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a powerful catalyst in exposing these inequalities, transforming digital education into a critical issue of public policy. Data from UNESCO indicate that approximately 826 million students worldwide do not have access to a household computer, and 706 million lack an internet connection at home. This observation is corroborated by reports from the ITU, which highlight that as of 2024, despite global progress, approximately one-third of the world's population remains "unconnected," with abysmal gaps between urban and rural areas. Furthermore, the ITU warns of stagnating connectivity in Least Developed Countries (LDCs), where the cost of fixed or mobile broadband access remains prohibitive relative to gross national income per capita.

Faced with this multidimensional reality, a fundamental question arises: how can truly equitable access to digital education be guaranteed?

Obstacles to Equitable Access in Digital Education

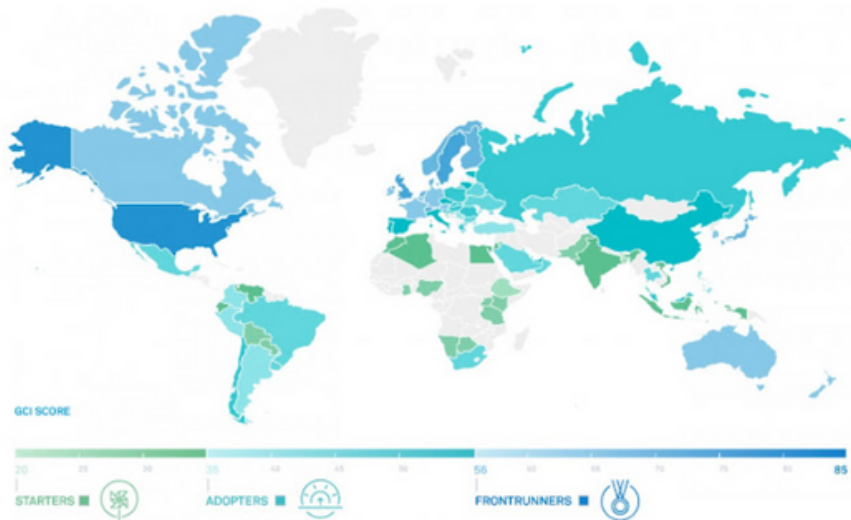## Digital Infrastructure: An Uneven Geography of Connectivity

Access to digital education is predicated on a physical foundation whose geographic distribution reveals profound asymmetries. Contrary to the prevailing discourse that portrays the digital realm as ethereal and deterritorialized, telecommunications infrastructures remain deeply embedded in physical space and are disparately distributed. This materiality of the digital serves as a primary driver of exclusion.

On a global scale, the African continent epitomizes these structural imbalances. World Bank analyses (2019) indicate that approximately 45% of Africans reside more than ten kilometers from a fiber-optic network, drastically curtailing access to stable connections.

This distance impedes distance learning and access to online pedagogical resources—essentials in contexts where brick-and-mortar institutions lack sufficient means. The Connecting Africa Through Broadband report (ITU–UNESCO, 2019) estimates that $100 billion in investment is required to achieve universal internet access by 2030.

The Global Connectivity Index highlights a global hierarchy between "frontrunner" nations and those in a "catch-up" phase, directly translating into unequal educational capacities. UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report indicates that only 40% of primary schools worldwide are connected to the internet.

GCI SCORE

STARTERS ■   ADOPTERS ■   FRONTRUNNERS ■

These inequalities are not confined to the Global South. In developed nations such as France, the persistence of "white zones" (dead zones) or poorly covered areas, particularly in rural settings, serves as a reminder that the digital divide also bisects wealthy nations. The Digital Strategy for Education (2023-2027) emphasizes unequal access in terms of equipment, connectivity, and capacity, revealing that formal access often masks profound territorial disparities.

The Socio-Economic Prism: Beyond Physical Access

An approach focused solely on infrastructure obscures a fundamental dimension: digital inequalities are, first and foremost, social inequalities. Fabien Granjon (2009, 2022) demonstrates that digital divides are primarily extensions of pre-existing social stratifications, which condition the usage and appropriation of technology.

Socio-economic conditions determine an individual's actual capacity to leverage digital tools in their educational journey. Households with high economic and cultural capital can acquire high-performance equipment and provide an environment conducive to digital learning. Conversely, low-income households face a nexus of material and symbolic constraints: shared or obsolete equipment, "smartphone dependency," and a lack of domestic support. Consequently, the digital realm becomes a factor in the reproduction of educational inequalities rather than a lever for emancipation.

Collin (2013) distinguishes between digital inequalities of possession, knowledge, and power, highlighting their multidimensional nature. These are exacerbated by territorial disparities: rural and peri-urban areas, often less endowed with infrastructure and public services, offer unfavorable conditions for digital education. In France, 30% of the population remains digitally estranged due to a lack of skills or residence in poorly connected areas.

The Skills Gap: From Technical Capital to Dispositional Capital

The deficit in digital literacy constitutes a major, yet often underestimated, barrier. Possessing a connection or a computer does not guarantee the ability to use these tools effectively for educational purposes. Digital skills encompass technical, informational, and critical expertise.

Van Dijk's model (2002) identifies four dimensions of digital inequality: motivation, access, skills, and usage. The PISA 2022 survey results show that while students feel relatively comfortable with the technical use of digital tools, they struggle significantly with autonomy and responsibility in their learning process.

These skills are socially differentiated. Paino and Renzulli (2013) show that digital skills constitute a form of cultural capital that fosters academic success. Students from privileged backgrounds benefit from early digital socialization, whereas those from working-class backgrounds face greater difficulty in developing advanced educational usages.

The skills deficit also extends to educators. A UNESCO global survey reveals that fewer than 10% of institutions have implemented internal policies on the use of AI. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these gaps in proficiency severely exacerbated inequalities in pedagogical continuity. In France, 15% of the population still faces "illectronism" (digital illiteracy), hindering effective access to digital education.

The Stakes of Equitable Access to Digital Education

Social Justice and Equal Opportunity in the Digital Age

On an international scale, equitable access to digital education is a cornerstone of social justice. The pervasive nature of digital technology has highlighted a global divide between highly digitized countries and those with limited technological access.

Globally, 244 million fewer women than men use the internet, restricting their access to education and economic opportunities. UNESCO and the ITU emphasize that without inclusive policies, digital education risks reinforcing international hierarchies of knowledge. Conversely, equitable access can serve as a powerful catalyst for reducing inequality and fostering social mobility.

Economic Development and Competitiveness

Equitable access to digital education is a strategic imperative for economic development. Digital skills now dictate the capacity of states to integrate into the knowledge economy.

Doubling the share of women in the technology workforce could increase global GDP by €600 billion by 2027. The Kigali Resolution (ITU, 2022) insists on the central role of digital training in poverty alleviation and the creation of sustainable employment. However, the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report (2023) reminds us that technology only yields positive effects if it is embedded within inclusive and contextualized educational policies.

Digital Citizenship and Democracy

Digital education is now a prerequisite for the effective exercise of citizenship. According to UNESCO, fewer than 10% of students are capable of distinguishing between facts and opinions online, increasing vulnerability to disinformation.

Digital exclusion can lead to political marginalization by limiting access to e-government services and democratic discourse. Internationally, a persistent digital divide risks concentrating informational power within a handful of states or private entities, thereby undermining global democratic governance.

Levers for Ensuring Equitable Access to Digital Education

Proactive Public Policy and Massive Infrastructure Investment

States possess the primary levers for narrowing the digital education gap, particularly through infrastructure financing and telecommunications market regulation. According to the ITU, 3.3 billion people still lack effective internet access in 2024. Disparities are stark: only 24% of schools in Sub-Saharan Africa are connected, compared to over 90% in OECD countries.

Certain public policies demonstrate that proactive state action can yield significant results. Estonia has connected 100% of its schools to fiber optics and implemented national training programs reaching over 16,000 teachers. Over the past five years, Estonia has focused on teaching its educators not just how to use modern tools, but how to teach through them. Internationally, the World Bank allocated $4.5 billion between 2021 and 2024 to digital education projects in low- and middle-income countries.

Continuous Training and Professional Development
for Teachers

Access to infrastructure is insufficient to guarantee effective digital education; the digital divide is also a skills divide. According to UNESCO, in low-income countries, fewer than 40% of teachers have received training adapted to the pedagogical use of digital tools.

Countries that have invested heavily in training show clear results. In Canada, 85% of teachers have completed certified training in digital tools. The European Union has made training a central pillar of its Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027), mobilizing €800 million to bolster the digital skills of both teachers and students.

Open Educational Resources (OER) and Contextualized
Inclusive Content

Equality of access also depends on the quality and cultural relevance of pedagogical content. According to UNICEF, only 10% of global educational platforms meet international accessibility standards for persons with disabilities.

Furthermore, UNESCO notes that 90% of Open Educational Resources (OER) on the internet were created in Europe or North America, and 92% of licensed open resources were designed in English. This linguistic and cultural hegemony marginalizes local knowledge. Initiatives like Khan Academy (available in 80+ languages) and Mexico's "Aprende en Casa" program demonstrate the potential of contextualized content to reach millions, even in low-connectivity regions.

Collaborative Governance and Multi-Stakeholder Cooperation

Bridging the divide requires close cooperation between states, international organizations, civil society, and the private sector. The Giga initiative, led by UNICEF and the ITU, has already connected over 10,000 schools in isolated areas.

The Rewired Global Declaration on Connectivity for Education (UNESCO & Dubai Cares) provides a new roadmap for digital transformation, emphasizing justice, equity, and human rights. International coordination remains indispensable for scaling best practices and ensuring that technology serves as a bridge rather than a barrier.

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Topic 2 : The Fight Against Media Disinformation

Introduction

The exponential growth of digital media and online platforms has profoundly transformed the global information ecosystem. While these technologies have democratized access to information and amplified freedom of expression, they have simultaneously enabled the rapid dissemination of false, misleading, or manipulated content—commonly referred to as media disinformation. Unlike traditional misinformation, which may be spread unintentionally, disinformation is often deliberate, strategic, and weaponized to influence public opinion, destabilize institutions, or undermine social cohesion.

According to the World Economic Forum (Global Risks Report 2024), online disinformation and misinformation now rank among the top five global risks in terms of likelihood and societal impact. The ITU estimates that over 5.4 billion people were connected to the internet in 2024, meaning that false information can circulate globally within minutes, crossing borders faster than regulatory or institutional responses can follow. Social media algorithms, optimized for engagement rather than accuracy, further amplify polarizing and sensational content.

The consequences are tangible and severe. Disinformation has interfered with democratic elections, weakened trust in scientific expertise, exacerbated public health crises, and fueled violent conflicts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization described the situation as an "infodemic," estimating that false health information reached billions of users and directly contributed to vaccine hesitancy and excess mortality. In this context, the fight against media disinformation has become not only a matter of media ethics, but a strategic priority for democracy, public safety, and international stability.

This raises a central question: how can states, international organizations, and digital platforms effectively combat media disinformation while preserving fundamental freedoms?

The Structural Drivers of Media Disinformation

Platform Architectures and Algorithmic Amplification

The contemporary information environment is largely shaped by digital platforms whose economic model is based on attention. Algorithms prioritize content that maximizes engagement (likes, shares, comments) regardless of its veracity. Empirical studies from MIT (Vosoughi et al., Science, 2018) show that false news spreads six times faster than true information on social networks, largely due to its emotional and sensational nature.

On platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, and YouTube, recommendation systems create informational echo chambers that reinforce users' existing beliefs. The European Commission's 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation found that over 70% of users are exposed primarily to content that aligns with their ideological preferences, limiting critical exposure to contradictory viewpoints. This structural bias does not create disinformation per se, but dramatically increases its visibility and impact.

Political, Economic, and Geostrategic Instrumentalization

Disinformation is increasingly used as a tool of political influence and hybrid warfare. State and non-state actors exploit digital media to manipulate elections, discredit opponents, or destabilize rival societies. The Oxford Internet Institute documented organized disinformation campaigns in 81 countries in 2023, compared to just 28 in 2017.

Election interference offers a striking illustration. During the 2016 and 2020 U.S. elections, millions of users were exposed to coordinated foreign influence operations. Similarly, the European External Action Service reported that over 16,000 disinformation incidents targeting the European Union were recorded between 2015 and 2023, many originating from state-sponsored networks. In fragile or conflict-affected states, such campaigns have contributed directly to violence, as observed in Myanmar, where online hate speech and false narratives fueled ethnic persecution.

Cognitive Vulnerabilities and Media Literacy Deficits

Disinformation thrives not only because of technology, but because of human cognitive biases. Confirmation bias, emotional reasoning, and information overload reduce individuals' capacity to critically evaluate content. UNESCO reports that less than 30% of internet users globally have received any form of media or information literacy training.

Young people, despite being digitally fluent, are not immune. The PISA Global Competence Study (2022) found that fewer than 1 in 4 students could reliably distinguish verified information from manipulated content online. Older populations are also vulnerable: a study by the Stanford Internet Observatory shows that users over 65 share false information at nearly seven times the rate of younger users on social media platforms.

The Stakes of Combating Media Disinformation

Democratic Integrity and Trust in Institutions

Free and fair elections depend on an informed electorate. Disinformation undermines democratic processes by distorting public debate, suppressing voter participation, and eroding trust in electoral outcomes. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), over 50% of recent national elections worldwide were affected by organized online disinformation campaigns.

Beyond elections, persistent exposure to false narratives weakens trust in public institutions, traditional media, and scientific expertise. The Edelman Trust Barometer (2024) indicates that only 47% of citizens globally trust the information they encounter online, a decline that correlates strongly with political polarization and social fragmentation.

Public Health, Security, and Social Cohesion

The societal cost of disinformation extends far beyond politics. During the COVID-19 pandemic, a study published in *Nature Human Behaviour* estimated that misinformation contributed to hundreds of thousands of preventable deaths worldwide by discouraging vaccination and promoting ineffective treatments.

In the security domain, disinformation can incite violence and exacerbate conflicts. False rumors spread via messaging applications have triggered mob violence in countries such as India and Nigeria. At a societal level, disinformation fuels xenophobia, misogyny, and conspiracy thinking, undermining social cohesion and peaceful coexistence.

Global Inequality and Informational Asymmetry

Disinformation disproportionately affects societies with weaker media ecosystems, limited regulatory capacity, and low levels of digital literacy. The ITU warns that Least Developed Countries face a "double vulnerability": rapid digitalization without parallel investment in information governance and education. This creates an asymmetry where global narratives are dominated by a handful of actors, while local populations are exposed to unregulated and unreliable information flows.

Levers for an Effective Fight Against Media Disinformation

Regulatory Frameworks and Platform Accountability

States play a central role in establishing clear legal frameworks that promote transparency without undermining freedom of expression. The European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA), implemented in 2024, obliges large platforms to assess systemic risks related to disinformation and to provide access to data for independent researchers. Early evaluations suggest a reduction of up to 30% in the visibility of flagged false content on major platforms within the EU.

The ITU supports regulatory harmonization by facilitating dialogue between governments, regulators, and technology companies, particularly in developing countries where regulatory capacity remains limited.

Media and Information Literacy as a Long-Term Solution

Education is widely recognized as the most sustainable response to disinformation. UNESCO's Global Media and Information Literacy Strategy emphasizes the integration of critical thinking, source evaluation, and digital ethics into national curricula. Countries that have adopted comprehensive programs show measurable results: in Finland, which ranks first in media literacy in Europe, over 80% of students demonstrate high resistance to online disinformation, according to the European Media Literacy Index (2023).

The ITU complements these efforts through capacity-building programs aimed at educators, journalists, and policymakers, particularly in Africa and Asia.

International Cooperation and Technological Innovation

Disinformation is a transnational phenomenon that requires coordinated international responses. The ITU, in partnership with UNESCO and the UN Development Programme, promotes global norms on information integrity and supports initiatives such as AI-based fact-checking tools and early warning systems for coordinated disinformation campaigns.

The G7 Rapid Response Mechanism and the UN Global Principles for Information Integrity (2023) illustrate the growing consensus that multilateral cooperation is indispensable. No single state can effectively counter disinformation alone in a hyperconnected world

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