

# “TO COMBAT DISINFORMATION WE NEED TO BUILD TRANSNATIONAL MOVEMENTS AND A TRANSNATIONAL SOLIDARITY”

• Interview with Otto Saki •

By Sur Journal

*The paths to combat disinformation and its harmful effects are still under construction. At the present moment of historical and technological development, global society's awareness of disinformation has increased, but not to the same extent as the power and influence of the big techs of communication and social media. On the other hand, there are still no easy answers to dilemmas involving, among other things, freedom of expression, the right to privacy, and corporate accountability. However, the human rights paradigm remains a viable ethical route to guide the search for solutions and dialogues among stakeholders, including civil society.*

*“We need to think about ways to be more agile, more responsive, nimbler in our work so that we are not outpaced by the level at which disinformation is being generated,” says Otto Saki, global program officer on the Civic Engagement and Government team of Ford Foundation. In this interview, Saki calls attention to the dimension of power of companies that are equivalent to nation-states, and the need to update activism and human rights practices in the face of the pervasiveness of disinformation channels. For him, it is crucial to build a transnational collaborative model, privileging collective meanings of the human rights agenda, given that the harmful effects of disinformation are produced and felt in borderless scales and mutual exchanges of influence.*

*Sur Journal* • How can we fight disinformation while protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms?

**Otto Saki** • The first thing we need to recognize is that there are new actors, new institutions and new voices in this world which historically had not been involved in the protection of human rights or the generation of information. We are talking about social media platforms, new technologies and companies that are richer and more powerful than nation states. If you look at the power that Meta or Facebook, Amazon or Google has, their capital, their worth and how they are valued, they are richer than most countries, even those deemed to be in the Global North.

They are powerful actors. They are states on their own, especially when you consider their infrastructure. So, one of the things that we need to grapple with is that the instruments we have, which were designed post-1945 under the UN human rights infrastructure, have yet to contend with these new power holders. Considering the way human rights language is structured, it has not fully anticipated situations where you have a company that is more powerful than a nation state.

One thing that we need to look at is: who are the power holders? Who is actually calling the shots insofar as disinformation and information is concerned? These actors might be building on that infrastructure to achieve political objectives, but some of them are actually as bewildered by the presence of disinformation as we are. They do not actually know what to do with it and might not have the political, technical and even the legal infrastructure to address these issues.

The second point is that the area of human rights, due to its nature, has become a point of contention because of the stance that it may not have delivered as an instrument or a tool of engagement. Are we facing a situation where newer tools or newer frames of engagement are arising which are not necessarily human rights-oriented because of our disillusionment with the human rights discourse?

I think that the disillusionment with the human rights discourse is not one [issue] that we should overly invest in because every theory, every social construct tends to go through periods of ups and downs. This is not new to human rights. Democracy has been questioned as a tool. Capitalism has been questioned since time immemorial with the communists and the socialists, but it probably has withstood the test of time because many of us are practicing it or are compelled to engage with it, even though we might be closet leftists or closet communists or socialists.

So, in my view, while the discourse of the human rights framework is limited insofar as information and misinformation is concerned, it still remains the most viable and the most inclusive of many competing interests. If you decide to adopt a capitalist model to control disinformation, you are not going to succeed because more money is made from

disinformation. If you are going to take a welfarist approach, you are also most unlikely to succeed because you are putting certain people at a disadvantage in comparison to others. If you take a market principle, which might not necessarily be entirely capitalist, you still will not be able to find a solution. The human rights dimension has the ability to include all of these competing interests – not to whitewash or gloss over its inadequacies, but to actually highlight the inadequacies as points for development and for progression.

**Sur** • What the role of the private sector and the corporations that dominate the technology market would be in this debate about democracy and misinformation?

**O.S.** • We need to agree that most of these companies are a product of democratic and human rights practices. They have had a fair share of open space for them to be creative. Their flourishing and growth are likely a reflection of the ability of some countries where they are located to provide them with space to do that creatively. What I am concerned with is what might then be the instrumentalization and weaponization of their growth in capacity, to then inform rampant profiteering at the expense of the protection of rights.

They have to come to a realization, and many of them have, but because of the different business models that they have in place, they are failing to realize that a sustainable business model is one that actually protects human rights – including by dealing with disinformation. That is where their creativity and ability should come in in the future. While we currently have groups such as Meta, Google, Twitter, Tiktok and the list goes on and on, developing human rights standards, human rights policies, frameworks and even establishing a whole human rights team – this needs to be complemented by a sincere company-wide approach. It does not have to have just a human rights desk, because the human rights desk in Meta, given how big it is as a corporation, is not sufficient.

As long as they do not have a company-wide human rights approach, these efforts will still be isolated, limiting their effectiveness. This is why when a group such as Facebook and Meta issues a human rights report, as they have just done in the past, it is torn to pieces by human rights advocates and civil society because it is not seen as a company-wide approach. “It is just a minor irritation. I will continue to do business as usual”.

The private sector has to recognize that there are a number of principles and policies in place – the UN business and human rights principles – and now, we are moving towards the development of a treaty on business and human rights. That is important, but until and unless we have these deliberate shifts in these companies’ business models, it might take a few more years to get to the stage where we have very effective responses to disinformation.

Governments and political actors have a love-hate relationship with disinformation. At some point, many of those in power or who are ascending to power can see the importance of disinformation for their objectives. If you are going to talk of a pre-Trump presidency,

would Trump have cared about disinformation? Maybe he did, maybe he did not. But when he came to office, they could see how that information was working to their advantage. So, they then go out and say, “we want to eliminate disinformation in these platforms”. It is a mixed type of relationship – for lack of a better word, one could call it a schizophrenic relationship. At some point, governments want to use disinformation for their political objectives. If you are going against your political opponents, they have no hesitation in creating false information with the intent to cause harm to their opponents. We have seen that time and time again.

For me, the levels of sincerity of governments to actually deal with this is questionable. I do not think they are the best institutions to deal with this because their motives are not always sincere. Hence, our insistence on using an international human rights framework. Bearing in mind the different variations in context, it is the only uniform standard with which you can make everyone accountable: the provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the provisions and principles of the UN Charter or the Declaration of Human Rights or those in regional institutions, such as the Inter-American, African, Asian or European standards. All those standards emanate from the global human rights architecture.

This is a point in the frame of reference for us to use. Governments are important, yes, but I do not think we should give them the sole mandate and responsibility because they have interests in the use and abuse of disinformation and misinformation, including where it serves them and their relationships with the private sector that advance their corporate and profit objectives.

**Sur** • Regarding civil society, in your opinion, what spaces for action are possible, especially at the level of dialogue between countries?

**O.S.** • To combat disinformation we need to build transnational movements and a transnational solidarity. This is why I find the work that Conectas has been doing over time very important. I know it is expensive to have transnational conversations because we are dealing with different cultures, different languages, different time zones... deep-seated colonial infrastructures, which, again, might include the human rights infrastructure since it is an architecture of power and an old one, in some instances. Yet, it is still an architecture that can speak to our diversity and humanity. The development of transnational responses is important because statements from Brazil, for instance, are learned and have a huge impact in some other part of the world – in Zimbabwe, for example – without one knowing that there is that level of transnational impact. And we have seen this with all anti-rights movements: the anti-rights gender movement, anti-blackness targeting and campaigns against African people and people of African descent. This is a transnational issue.

The same goes for disinformation because disinformation just explains to me how certain information is used and weaponized with the intent to cause harm, and it could cut across all these areas that I have mentioned. So, the development of a transnational movement

is important. That is where civil society comes in. Challenging disinformation at a very local and national level is important. You can do it, but you are dealing with transnational actors. Meta does not identify itself as just Meta Brazil. It is Meta “Everywhere”. Google is not just Google in Brazil; it is ubiquitous, for lack of a better word. You might be able to find Google and access this platform in areas where people are not even able to access basic services. That is how pervasive these platforms have become.

Granted, there are issues around Internet access. Almost 80% of the connected world is in the Global North, and the Global South is less connected. That is an effect we need to grapple with. But they still have a wider reach than ordinary public services that we hope to get in most countries.

The building of a transnational model is important. We cannot fight disinformation or respond to disinformation in silos. It will not work. The interest and impact of anyone who is churning out disinformation might be a localized niche of political objectives, but it might have transnational implications.

**Sur •** In the context of fighting disinformation, how do you analyze the decentralization of the roles of those who produce information, in relation to the traditional press, and advocate for freedom of expression on the Internet?

**O.S. •** Press freedom remains important, both in relation to access to information itself and the practice of the profession of journalism. But journalism has also mutated over time. You no longer have certified journalists going to school, to college and getting a degree. We have citizen journalists, content creators, story tellers, media workers who might not necessarily identify as media workers. We need to expand the level of protection or the interpretation that is provided on the issue of press freedom to make it wider and more inclusive.

There are so many concerns about Internet legislation. At some point, Brazil was leading the development of an Internet governance infrastructure and multi-stakeholder approaches. But also, many countries are enacting laws and regulations that are making it difficult to exercise rights online. Free speech online is being criminalized, and the criminalization of disinformation might not be the solution, to just criminalize it. You might also want to encourage people to tell the truth because something that is true can punch holes through anything that is false. If a false statement is damaging, what we do to correct it is to tell what we think or what you think is the truth.

But we are also seeing that governments are encouraging secrecy. We are saying, “we don’t want disinformation”, but at the same time you are encouraging secrecy. If there is a vacuum, what do people do? People fill it with something else, which may end up not being the truth.

The adoption of Internet legislation is happening everywhere. We saw that with the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries adopted laws that criminalized disinformation

around the pandemic. The solution was to get the WHO, as the World Health Organization, to give accurate information around that.

**Sur** • Do you have any thoughts on strategies that have been or are being used successfully to resist and combat misinformation in different countries and contexts?

**O.S.** • The first is to actually build an ecosystem of actors who provide resources to challenge disinformation. It is important for us to invest in that infrastructure. The challenge that we have with our current thinking and approach to the human rights struggle is treating it as a short-term issue. We talk about two years, five years... but these are going to be long-term investments. Anyone who is willing to actually deal with the human rights struggle should be thinking about long-term investments. It is not a programme cycle or a project cycle; it is a lifetime investment, a lifetime commitment to advancing human rights protection and promotion.

The second is that transnational solidarity also needs to have a multi-stakeholder approach. Everyone has to play their role. The private sector has to come on board. And, of course, there are also community policies and approaches. Governments also have to come on board because if we are talking about from the rights perspective, at least the rights infrastructure architecture as it currently stands requires governments to protect, promote and fulfil human rights. We also need to have a role for civil society.

So, these three actors are highly important. But more important is the citizen, the average person – an ordinary person who is the recipient of disinformation and who uses this platform. We have to focus on them in these conversations. What is it that we are trying to do that reduces the harm on the person, the individual, the community?

We also need to talk about groupings and platforms of the private sector. Where do they spend their time? Is it just on the highways in Silicon Valley? Is it just in the boardrooms of media companies or capitals? We have to start investing time in going to places where these actors spend their time to have conversations with them -- and again, that is expensive. But that is where these decisions are being made at a much faster pace than our ability to respond. We also need to think about ways to be more agile, more responsive, nimbler in our work so that we are not outpaced by the level at which disinformation is being generated.

The last component we need to look at is: who are the shareholders of these companies? Who actually owns them? Meta, we might say, is made up of a few major subdivisions under a family, the same as Google. We must start to think more creatively about the other platforms for us to hold corporate power accountable through their corporate structure. If I am a shareholder, even if I have one share among millions, that is my voice in that company. I should say, "where are you investing my quota? Where are you investing my dollars?". Building shareholder activism goes to the root of building an active, global citizenry. This is important because it brings accountability to corporate actors through

individuals who have vested interests, who say, “I am going to have profit, but I am not going to enjoy tainted profit”.

This is the same as what we see in the climate movement: yes, we want profit, we want to get profit out of this, but not tainted profit. The same goes for these tech companies: you should not be investing our money and making a profit from disinformation, surveillance capitalism, marketing of personal data and all. We want human rights-friendly ways of making a profit. I guess that is what they call “sanitized capitalism”, in a way.

**Sur •** How do you see the limits between freedom of expression and privacy rights in cases where people evoke this freedom to spread lies and cause havoc for their neighbours or opponents?

**O.S. •** There is an ancient, long-standing tension between the right to privacy and the right to freedom of expression or access to information. There has always been a way in which these rights complement each other as well. However, if you are a public official and you occupy a position of influence, invoking the right to privacy on public-related aspects does not mesh well with accountability and democratic practices. In that instance, you cannot claim secrecy and privacy for work or things that are done for the public good.

But certainly, where there might be issues of individuals who are neither in public places, nor in positions of influence or elected positions, they can certainly invoke privacy. What we need to realize and focus on is how to advance both rights without seeming to be undermining any one of them. That is how rights have always been; they are interdependent. When there are limitations, those limitations should be legitimate, proportionate and necessary, as well as lawful. If those precepts are not observed, certainly one would say that there is a problem. That is why international law has helped define the parameters for the limitation of these rights.

You see that in so many countries, citizens’ right to privacy has been eroded—for instance, through surveillance. Surveillance infrastructure that is not subject to any oversight. The executive branch of government has disproportionate levels of influence in how telecommunication companies and internet service providers work and in the whole surveillance infrastructure. In that case, both the right to privacy and even to expression suffers because you observe a chilling effect: once journalists, civil society or political actors know that they are being surveilled, they cease to talk, to be critical; they just withdraw. The personal cost can be higher than the reward of being expressive, and you are aware that your inner sanctum, your inner person has been violated because of the surveillance infrastructure.

So, the tension remains, but we also see that both rights are being violated on a grand scale. Privacy advocates should not just see themselves as privacy advocates. They should see themselves as rights advocates because the right to privacy intersects with the right to expression, dignity – you name it. This is the point that I was trying to make about

breaking our silos. Most of us in the human rights fraternity see ourselves in silos. "I am talking about the right to food and therefore, I do not need to talk about someone who is talking about the right to health". If I do not have food, then I do not have health and I do not have dignity. The chain goes on and on.

Maybe because we have been structured to think in terms of project proposals and programmes, we are ceasing to have a collective sense of our human rights agenda. We need to think about that.

**Sur** • In that sense, what is your view on the role of human rights in the struggle for democracy and the challenge to articulate different views and movements towards that goal?

**O.S.** • There is a need for the human rights movement to articulate the "what" with the "how", but also to be very aware that the human rights discourse itself, the words that we use, may not resonate with people. Let us take the pandemic as an example. From a human rights perspective, this is where we saw the importance of implementing the right to health without any variations – everyone should be able to access it, etc. The same as the right to water, the right to housing... all of these "why's" that were spoken about were tested. But someone looking from a different perspective would say, "this is the result of the inequalities caused by capitalism or Global North policies telling us to de-invest in public infrastructure and privatize health, water and education – privatize everything because of a capitalist-driven ideology". But still, it comes back to rights.

The point is that we have to find ways of articulating what we are doing – not in a commercial or a fancy manner – but explain it in such a way that everyone can understand what the human rights language is all about. Right now, in the past few months or so, there has been a resurgence in protests everywhere. Hardly a week goes by before you hear about another country that has gone up in flames in protest. It is Sri Lanka, places you would think of as a tourist destination. It's Mozambique, Malawi... the list goes on and on. At the core of those protests, people are not protesting because they like spending time in the streets. They are protesting because the basics are not there: food, water, employment, access to health. Consider the fact that there were even more protests at the height of the pandemic. It shows that there is a relation with what we, as human rights activists or advocates, are involved with. But we probably failed to connect with the ordinary person. That is important.

There has to be a very deliberate demonstration that democracy and human rights work, that there are dividends we can take from this. Because when we are not able to show those dividends, you might end up seeing citizens placing their trust in powerful men more – the "big man" syndrome, military regimes, people saying, "it is better for us to be under a military regime because we trust soldiers more than we trust civilians", or autocrats actually rising to power possibly because of people's disillusionment with democracy. We know that this will always be short-lived, but why do we have to go through such painful processes before we address them?





Otto Saki.  
Source: personal archive.

...

*Interview conducted by Renato Barreto and Maryuri Mora Grisales in July 2022.  
Original in English.*



"This journal is published under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License"