

UNESCO Committee

TOPIC B:



Combating disinformation and promoting media literacy to safeguard freedom of expression

I. Introduction:

This research paper will cover the topic of combating disinformation and promoting media literacy to safeguard freedom of expression. Involved and affected countries and groups, conflicts and issues caused by relevant resolutions, and current situations will all be taken into consideration when researching all of the possible solutions for this issue. This paper will therefore aim to define the issue, the causes and examples involved, and all the possible resolutions.

II. Definitions of Some Key Terms:

Media literacy: “a framework to access, analyze, evaluate, create and participate with messages in a variety of forms” in order to better understand the role of media in everyday life and establish important skills of inquiry and self-expression (*Media*).

Disinformation: the spread of inaccurate information, often with the intent to deceive and harm, that can affect a variety of human rights and stress tensions in periods of emergency or conflict (*United*).

European External Action Service (EEAS): The European External Action Service (EEAS) functions as the diplomatic service and merges the foreign and defense ministries of the European Union. From 2011 onward, the EEAS has been responsible for implementing the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy, aiming to advance peace, prosperity, security, and the interests of Europeans worldwide (*The Diplomatic*).

EU's Code of Practice on Disinformation: In 2018, the European Commission brought together delegates from prominent technology companies and the online advertising sector to formulate a voluntary framework for industry self-regulation aimed at combating disinformation. This Code seeks to enhance efforts in curbing manipulative tactics employed to disseminate disinformation, such as the use of fake accounts, bot-driven amplification, impersonation, and malicious deep fakes. Additionally, it fosters increased collaboration among signatories to effectively address challenges associated with these techniques (*European*).

III. Background Information:

Combatting disinformation and promoting media literacy are essential strategies to safeguard freedom of expression in the contemporary information landscape. With the rapid proliferation of digital technologies and the rise of social media platforms, the dissemination of inaccurate or misleading information has become a pervasive challenge. Disinformation can erode trust in institutions, manipulate public opinion, and undermine the foundations of democratic societies. Recognizing the gravity of this issue, initiatives to combat disinformation focus on a multi-pronged approach, including fact-checking, media literacy programs, and collaboration between governments, tech companies, and civil society. By enhancing individuals' ability to critically evaluate information, distinguish credible sources from misinformation, and navigate the complexities of the digital realm, societies can foster a more informed citizenry. Media literacy efforts play a pivotal role in empowering people to engage in meaningful, fact-based discourse, thereby upholding the principles of freedom of expression within a responsible and informed democratic framework. Particularly in recent years, global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic has stressed the vital role of the Internet as technology has had the power to save lives and enable people to continue working, studying and socializing in those times. On the other hand, the dark side of the digital world became more evident with rapid spread of disinformation, large-scale manipulation of the public and greater divide. To address the challenges that people continue to face in the technology sphere, the United Nations has created a report entitled "Countering disinformation for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms", which outlines the main challenges posed by disinformation, the relevant international legal framework used to combat the issue and measures that have been taken by governments and technology companies to promote media literacy. The report stresses that it is only through cooperation and by establishing clear rules to regain control over data that human rights and fundamental freedoms can be safeguarded to counteract misinformation and hate speech (*United*).

IV. Major Countries and Groups Involved in the Issue:

These following countries, along with many others, recognize the importance of combating disinformation and promoting media literacy to uphold freedom of expression and protect the integrity of democratic processes. They often collaborate on international platforms to share best practices and coordinate efforts.

United States:

The U.S. government has shown increasing concern about disinformation, especially in the context of elections. Various federal agencies, including the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI, have been working on countering foreign interference.

Non-governmental organizations, media literacy programs, and fact-checking initiatives have also played a role in promoting media literacy and combating disinformation (*U.S.*).

European Union:

The European Union has been actively addressing disinformation through its institutions, such as the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the European Parliament.

The EU's Code of Practice on Disinformation encourages tech companies to combat the spread of false information, and various member states have implemented their own measures to counter disinformation (*European*).

United Kingdom:

The UK has established a National Security Communications Team to tackle disinformation threats. Efforts include promoting media literacy and working with social media platforms to prevent the spread of false information.

The government has also emphasized the importance of collaboration with tech companies, civil society, and international partners in countering disinformation (*Foreign*).

Canada:

Canada has been addressing disinformation through initiatives such as the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security. The government has also emphasized the importance of media literacy education in schools and communities.

Canada has participated in international efforts to combat disinformation and has worked to enhance digital literacy among its citizens (*Global*).

Australia:

Australia has been focusing on countering disinformation through initiatives like the Australian Cyber Security Centre. The government has also launched campaigns to enhance public awareness about disinformation and fake news.

Educational programs aimed at improving media literacy have been implemented to help citizens critically evaluate information sources (*Buckmaster*).

Taiwan:

Taiwan, facing significant disinformation threats, has implemented various measures to counteract them. The government has invested in media literacy education and collaborated with tech companies to address the spread of false information.

Taiwan has also established a Digital Democracy Forum to bring together experts, officials, and civil society organizations to develop strategies against disinformation (*Lee*).

V. UN Treaties/Historical Events:

In early April of 2022 during a meeting between members of the UN Human Rights Council, a resolution from the representatives of Ukraine, the UK, the US, Lithuania, Japan, Latvia, and Poland was brought forth to emphasize the need for governments to crack down on disinformation, as well as stating that the intentional spread of false information, either for political or financial benefit, had reached a limit that couldn't be expanded anymore. Some representatives that were against this draft included China and Venezuela, which stated that the resolution lacked in detail the source of disinformation, as well as a hint of bias behind the main submitters, who might've been involved with disinformation acts. Some representatives including India, France, and Indonesia demonstrated their support for the resolution,

emphasizing the fact that disinformation was a priority problem across social media and various countries, as well as the fact that more governments should work to remove these sources.

VI. Main Issues:

Even though disinformation isn't a relatively new issue around the world, the issue has become even more relevant with the recent advances in technological quality, especially involving online hackers. During the COVID outbreak, many citizens reported receiving messages on WhatsApp, stating that UN workers would bring them food only if they exchanged their personal information, such as credit card details during a period in time when no one could leave their households. This led to many confused locals traveling to their nearby UN embassy demanding food, not realizing the issue. As another example, during the more recent Russian-Ukrainian war, the International Committee of the Red Cross was attacked by a group of hackers attempting to block the communication between the Red Cross volunteers and the citizens in the country. By worsening the trust between the two, the Red Cross can't function as independently as it should be across the nation (*United Nations*).

VII. Possible Solutions:

During a June 2023 meeting between representatives of the EU and UN, António Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, put forward a policy brief on information integrity on digital platforms. This idea suggests a new, international reaction to online disinformation as a code of conduct. The idea would be aimed at whole governments, companies related to technology, advertisers, and more, all while defending human rights and making online platforms more inclusive and safe for users to use. The code of conduct mainly wants to convince big platforms to change for the safety of their users, such as moving them away from damaging business models. Being based on international research and foreign practices, the code essentially includes all UN members' platforms and their current situations, meaning that the organization will have much more moral responsibility over the groups, and can cause change if needed (*United Nations*).

Demands the implementation of laws to control the spread of false information and avoid foreign interference in elections

Encourages the increased regulation of social media and online platforms

Promotes media literacy campaigns and the spread of verified government platforms to publish factual content

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