

**Committee:** UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

**Issue:** Journalistic responsibility and the fight against the spread of false information online

**Student officer:** Manos Moschos

**Position:** Deputy President

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## PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

Dear delegates,

My name is Manos Moschos and I am a student at Pierce-The American College of Greece. Although this will be my first-time chairing, I wish that this study guide will end up being beneficial. I hope you are as excited as I am for the following MUN conference and looking forward to further embracing the MUN community. I started attending conferences in 2017 and I can assure you that Model United Nations is a unique experience and a whole world itself.

As a Deputy President of the UNESCO, it is my personal aim to help every single one of you before and during the committee so as to ensure that the debate will be carried out successfully, maximizing its quality and providing my assistance when needed, but most importantly making sure that the 3d ACGMUN is one of your most fruitful conferences. I would also like to congratulate all of you on choosing to attend UNESCO while simultaneously I can reassure you that you are going to enjoy it.

The topics of this specific committee are not only very crucial, but also of international concern and thus, in order to be solved, they need the implementation of the appropriate measures, which could be suggested in your resolutions. All delegations are expected and strongly encouraged to fully participate in the conference. This Study Guide will aim to help you counter the pestilential issue of journalistic responsibility and fight against the spread of false information. Nevertheless, you are expected to make your own research as well as to fully explore the topic and mostly find your country's policy regarding the issue.

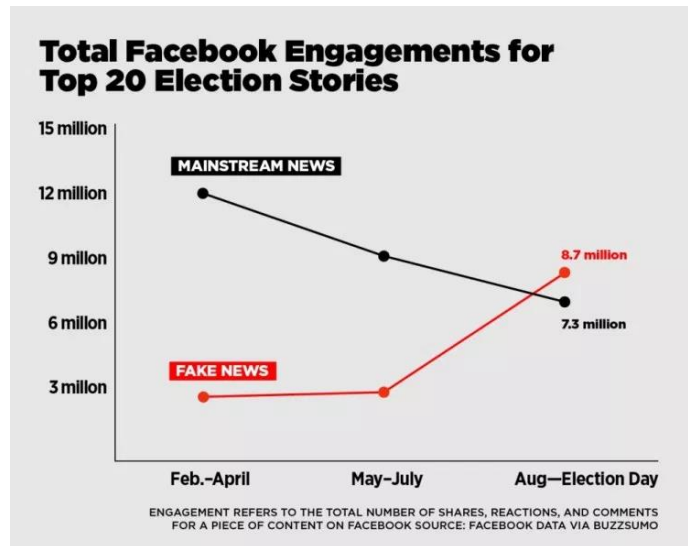
Under no circumstances should you hesitate to contact me if any of you have any questions on the following email address: [manosmoschos0202@gmail.com](mailto:manosmoschos0202@gmail.com) to help you clarify the topic and give you a taste of the absolute experience of an ACGMUN conference.

Best regards,

Manos Moschos

## TOPIC INTRODUCTION

Rumor has it that Mark Twain once said, “a lie can travel halfway around the world, while the truth is putting on its shoes”, yet there is a reason to doubt that these even are his own words. There have been noticed throughout time massive false information outbreaks, especially online. More specifically, many incidents have occurred in social media, such as the bombing marathon in Boston or the “hurricane shark” in Texas. Moreover, it was difficult for one to understand what was happening, taking into consideration that all around social media false information was being spread regarding the issue. For instance, there have been many uploads online in which people are blaming each other for the bombing marathon, making justice even more difficult to be served. For this specific reason, an MIT experiment was conducted, in which the Twitter platform was examined for any possible invalid information, and the results presented that 85% of the posts, in fact, spread false news.



*This picture shows how to what extend do fake news rise during the election procedure*

Therefore, it is obvious that invalid material may be presented for personal reasons, or it may be relevant to politics, financial matters, health and social matters. Nevertheless, it existed long ago and in different forms mostly due to conflicts between people. It has now evolved, as it is not only seen in posters or books but even in articles and of course in digital platforms. Journalists end up violating the code of ethics using the situation to their benefit, while simultaneously they maintain that this issue has a major impact on society.

## DEFINITION OF KEY TERMS

### Journalistic responsibility

Apart from the fact that journalists should make sure that they do not invade anyone’s privacy, the ethical responsibilities are of utmost importance and hence they will be discussed in the committee. They should provide accurate information based on facts as well as be able to avoid being corrupted by third parties and stay objective.

### Code of ethics

The code of ethics is a document that presents the mission and values of an organization or a business, how professionals should approach a problem, and the ethical principles based on the organization’s core values.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Investopedia-small business-code of ethics

## Misinformation

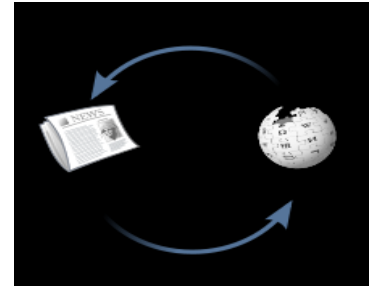
Information, that although is false, was not created with the intention of harming an individual, company or country.<sup>2</sup>

## Disinformation

Information that was deliberately created to harm a person, organization or country, or with the intention of promoting a political idea (propaganda).

## Circular reporting

A situation in which a piece of information appears to derive from multiple sources, but in reality, comes from a separate individual source. However, it can occasionally be intentional, used as a means of spreading propaganda. Similar situations exist where a certain piece of evidence is formed by one party and is constantly used by others, and the original party as well, however accidentally, and therefore it is an example of misinformation.



*The vicious circle between two sources of information that continuously spread the same, invalid material.*

## Propaganda

Information with a misleading nature, used to promote a political point of view.

## Group Polarization

In social psychology, group polarization refers to the tendency for a group to make decisions that are more extreme than the initial inclination of its members. For instance, if someone believes that inoculations cause autism, and sees that there is a group of people supporting this argument, he is prone to support it in a more persistent way.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

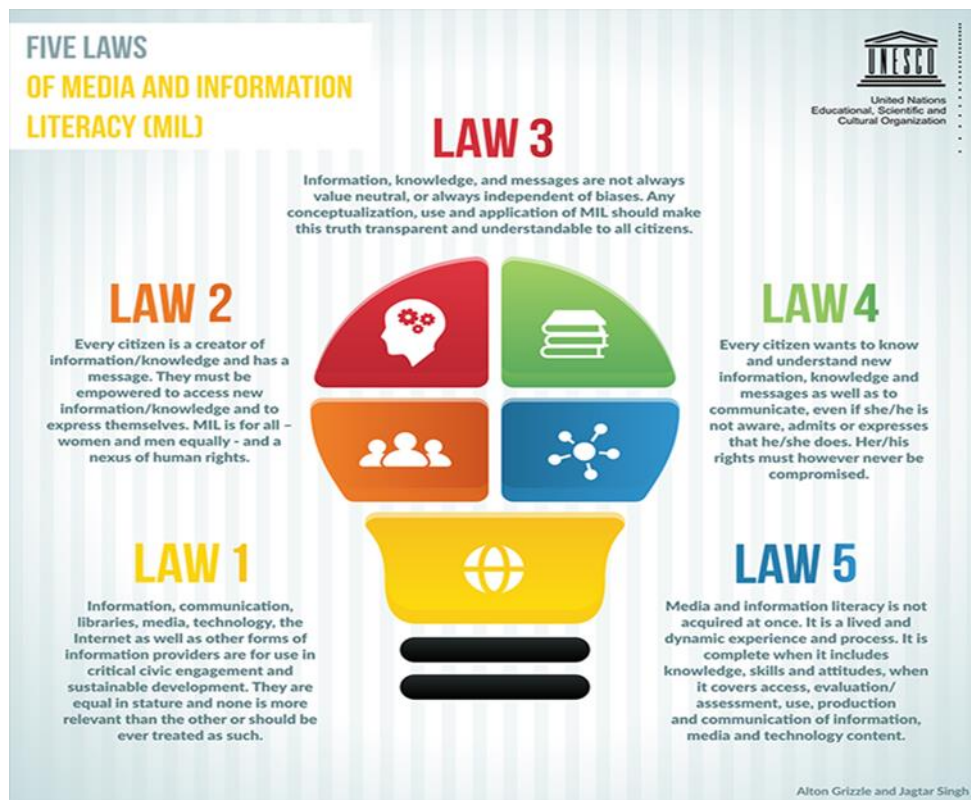
### Values of journalism

It is vital to further analyze the values that every journalist must have in order not only to be successful, but also not to cause any further problems to society.

A journalist's obligation is the truth, as the "journalistic truth" is a process that begins with assembling and verifying facts, and then trying to convey a reliable account of their meaning. Secondly, a journalist must always respect the citizens, and thus should not only respect their privacy, but also make sure that they are as transparent as possible, so as to avoid any possible conflicts, and of course give the audience the opportunity to make their own assessment of their information. Having said that, impartiality must always be kept.

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<sup>2</sup>UNESCO document, journalism, fake news and disinformation



This image is an exact guide proposed by UNESCO, that shows what exactly is journalistic responsibility

### Free expression/journalism

Free expression is strongly related to the free will of individuals since they are free to express themselves without any undue restriction. They are not obliged to say the truth, nor do they have to take into consideration the opinion of other people, as offensiveness can exist in their speech. Having said that, they are not required to be accountable for their actions, as free expression is part of democracy.

On the contrary, journalists must express themselves in a certain framework of values, and thus should always remain on that specific ethical framework. They should not indulge themselves in spiteful lies, while they should be accountable for any mistakes, and make sure they are not promoting hate speech, but instead be as impartial as possible. Therefore, abiding to these values is what makes a journalist a venerable member of the journalistic community.

### Rights and Duties

#### Privileges

- Freedom of the Press
- Freedom of speech (e.g. protection of sources)
- Access to information, people, spaces
- Access to gateways and distribution
- Journalism 'privilege'

#### Responsibilities

- Observe ethical codes
- Respect rights of others
- Serve a watchdog role?
- Provide information for the public
- Journalism ethics

*this image further clarifies that journalists cannot express themselves freely, but they must act according to a rule of responsibilities*

## Group polarization

As it has been mentioned above, group polarization is a phenomenon wherein the decisions and opinions of people in a group setting become more extreme than their actual, privately held beliefs. The above has been verified through many experiments, but still is a threat to the digital world. The tendency of group polarization is being endorsed online and according to “Sunstein”, it gradually takes the form of cybercrime. That being said, digital platforms work for many as an “extremist kennel”, because it gives to the user the possibility to filter what they are searching for. Unfortunately, he is only exposed to news of his interest. Hence, the ones that agree on one side of an issue can communicate with greater ease and frequency. This phenomenon is what makes the web the greatest mean to spread disinformation. Otherwise, when you reach the point where you result only in websites that endorse your prejudice, there is no point in checking the other side of the issue.

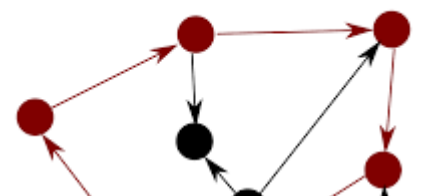
## Inhibition

The will to prevent disinformation through law, such as the criminalization of invalid information in Malaysia or the building of “the biggest prison for journalists” in Egypt is more than obvious everywhere, while all around the world journalists lose their job for submitting non-credible events unintentionally. Therefore, the question is raised as to how journalists cannot be victims of misinformation, so as to avoid the legal punishment a country has implemented? First and foremost, they should first be acquainted with the issue, in order to identify invalid information online with ease. For instance, regarding the hurricane on 2016 in Texas, although the internet was cramped with fake news if a journalist had further acknowledged the issue, they could have realized what was credible and what was not.

On the same level, their sources should be familiar and hence, they should be able to differentiate an “anonymous source” from “a law enforcement official”. Lastly, it is vital to compare news from multiple sites, since that way they can simultaneously promote untrue material and subjectivisms, as the source could derive from a person aiming to spread political propaganda. That being said, misinformation could be minimized to a great extent, as long as the right precautions are taken.

## Impact

As it has been aforementioned, the falsehood of information is usually related to politics in the form of propaganda, where either government promotes itself in public through digital platforms or strives to demote their political enemies. However, on many occasions, certain countries, especially superpowers end up demoting other countries, with which they have conflicts, through fake news. In other words,



*In this picture you can understand how a piece of information, that has been submitted by a third part, can be confused and considered as real. Thus, fake news tends to appear on more than one site, which makes it even more confusing to identify what is valid.*

foreign countries want to influence public opinion through disinformation with the intention of their benefit.

On the other hand, fake news can be spread for financial reasons, when it is usually related to the economies between companies. Each one aims for a high submission of news in the shortest period of time, so as to achieve maximum profit. Nevertheless, the desire for quick news, which is not only wanted from companies but also from citizens, is often contradictory to answers with validity. Moreover, similarly to the political aspect, many companies may venture to devalue their rivals, so as to always remain on the top of the charts. Thus, they result in circular reporting, through which they could relegate any threat. Furthermore, on many occasions, healthcare is affected in forms of misinformation. Such a distinct example is the report regarding vaccines and their likelihood to cause disorders such as autism. This was originated in 1998 in a form of a pseudoscientific article which led to a massive social outrage as to whether they should be used or not.

### **Summary**

All in all, incorrect material can be spread in forms of disinformation usually for political or financial matters, in order to downsize the importance of any conceivable peril, or to sponsor a country's government. In addition, misinformation can also be found, and although it is not intentional, it can have its own negative impact on society. It will be even more difficult to deal with it as laws cannot be easily implemented to combat it. Last but not least, online disinformation is admittedly presented mostly online, due to the abrupt technological evolution.

## **MAJOR COUNTRIES AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED**

### **India**

India has temporarily or permanently (regarding the area) cancelled government accreditation of journalists found to be spreading fake news. Specific new legislation has been proposed, according to which people who are found responsible for posting fake news and altered photographs with the intent of causing fear or alarm among the public or pledge an offence against the state or against public tranquility in West Bengal are being prosecuted, and thus sanctions are being implemented. Nevertheless, they have emphasized the difference between misinformation and disinformation, with the the laws being lenient or strict respectively. That being said, India has inspired other nearby countries to act in a similar way.

### **United Kingdom (UK)**

As a major European country and a member of the P5, UK has set up a strict board of inquiry, aiming to counter the issue, as this made a massive impact on previous elections. Specifically, the English parliament proposed the publication of a

report on 29<sup>th</sup> July 2018, in which they redefined the term “fake news” and enhanced media regulations to further research how misinformation spreads.

### **France**

France has submitted an article mentioning a definition of fake news and has recognized dissemination of fake news as a criminal offence by punishable law, while Emmanuel Macron has passed legislation and is ready to take any actions. The legislation gives authorities the power to remove fake content spread through social media and ultimately block the sites that publish it, as well as enforce more financial transparency for backed content, in the three months before election periods. That builds upon an 1881 law that bans the diffusion of “false news.”

### **Russia**

Over the years, the Russian federation has been accused for the spread of political propaganda for Russia’s benefit. Specifically, long-standing campaigns have been launched by the Russian Government to affect UK elections and referenda, and similar evidence of distant interference is being investigated by the US Congress regarding the 2016 US Presidential Election. The results highlighted that during the Presidential Election, the Russians made over 3,000 adverts on Facebook and Instagram to endorse 120 Facebook pages in a movement that reached 126 million Americans.

## **RELEVANT RESOLUTIONS, TREATIES AND EVENTS**

### **Deliberate Online Falsehoods**

On the 14<sup>th</sup> March, a deliberation was held in Singapore, trying to combat the spread of incorrect information online. After they realized the difficulty of defining false information, they discussed whether it can be considered as an international threat and if countermeasures will stifle free speech, implementing laws and ensuring there are no gaps. Lastly, after taking care of the backfire effect, they included non-legislative measures.

### **Fake news laws around the world**

Many countries are strongly interested in taking measures to deal with the issue. Specifically, Malaysia and Philippines have taken some preliminary action whereas in Germany the law has been already implemented, imposing sanctions (50.000€) and legal punishment (6-year imprisonment).

### **United Nations approach**

The United Nations, as well as the OHCHR, realized that fake news has emerged as an international topic of concern and there is a possibility that efforts to combat it could lead to censorship, limitation of critical thinking and other actions contrary to human rights law. “State actors should not make, sponsor, encourage or

further disseminate statements which they know or reasonably should know to be false (disinformation) or which demonstrate a reckless disregard for verifiable information (propaganda),”<sup>3</sup> was the declaration of David Kayle. Furthermore, the declaration recognizes applicable human rights standards and encourages the promotion of diversity in the media. More importantly, it stresses the roles played by digital intermediaries, in addition to journalists and media outlets, and notes that they should consider critical coverage of disinformation and propaganda as part of their news services in line with their position in society, particularly during elections and debates on matters of civic interest.

### PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS TO SOLVE THE ISSUE

As it has been mentioned, Europe is very eager to combat the issue, and thus the European External Action Service has decided to apply some measures. To begin with, they have proposed ways to strengthen the Strategic Communications Task Force (SCTF) through additional staff and new tools which are necessary to analyze, detect and expose disinformation activities. Additionally, the High Representative reviewed the mandates of the SCTF in the western Balkans and south Europe, so as to enable them to address disinformation effectively in these regions. Lastly, they have proposed the implementation of a new method, the “Code of Practice”, and have suggested the commission’s close and constant monitoring to make sure it is being followed. However, they have clarified the need to provide surveillance in the European elections of 2019, as propaganda will surely rise.

Similar actions have been taken by the UN along with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Organization of American States (OAS), and the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR). In this committee, which was held in August 2014, they suggested providing independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world.

In the European Union, further efforts have been made in order to remedy the issue. Initially, from Italy and then to France, Croatia, Germany and later on spread throughout Europe, an online portal has been set up in which citizens could report misinformation to the police. This department will further analyze the facts provided on a certain site and will take legal action. A notable example is the imprisonment of a man for 9 months for posting untrue information on TripAdvisor regarding numerous restaurants and hotels.

### TIMELINE OF EVENTS

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<sup>3</sup> Joint declaration issued by UN rapporteur (on freedom of opinion and expression) on the UN and OHCHR



1881	Article 27/ gives definition of fake news and makes its dissemination a criminal offense punishing it by law (also known as “Press law”).
1919 (World War I)	Philadelphia publish stating the following “In periods of great public excitement, and especially when a nation is convulsed by the apprehension of war with all its countless horrors, the public press has an exceptionally responsible duty to perform. It should resolutely print the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.” <sup>4</sup>
1998	Wakefield’s single pseudoscientific article claiming that vaccines cause autism resulted in social outbreak.
10 <sup>th</sup> March 2017	Declaration by David Kayle (UN rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression) on the UN and OHCHR
30 <sup>th</sup> June 2017	Germany became the first country to take measures upon the issue, by implementing a law regarding fake news.
4 <sup>th</sup> October 2017	Spread of false information relating school shooting in Las Vegas, blames innocent man.
3 <sup>rd</sup> January 2018	France and Malaysia have expressed their hopes to implement laws regarding falsehood of information online.
29 <sup>th</sup> July 2018	Redefinition of the term “fake news” and enhanced media regulations to further research how misinformation spreads by the UK

<sup>4</sup> Daily Inter Lake, tactics of Heart and Pulitzer and fake news

14 <sup>th</sup> March 2018	Deliberation of online falsehoods takes place in Singapore.
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### POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Since this is an issue that can be separated into many aspects, you should focus on how UNESCO can help to prevent the spread of false information online, as well as the ways journalistic responsibility could be emphasized. Having said that, the measures that should be taken may be categorized in two main parts: deterrence and prevention.

To begin with, as far as the legal aspect is concerned, you need to remember that UNESCO has no right to impose any laws, but instead could propose some. Instead, you should focus on how education could be conducive so that children are less susceptible to propaganda and that they can develop self-reliance in the future when being under pressure. That being said, guidelines and other methods of instruction should be imposed in order to eradicate the issue. Furthermore, media platforms should gain independence from financial or political centers of authority to ensure the junction of any information to reduce their falsehood. Apart from the above, each company must ensure that its journalists have the necessary values, knowledge and verbal capabilities, combined with passion about their career and solidarity towards their colleagues.

On the other hand, it is essential to propose measures to prevent the issue from reemerging, and thus focus on long-term solutions. Such solutions could be introduced in schools, which could take the necessary steps in order to help students acquire critical thinking so as to distinguish false information online and not be victims of such incidents, and to ensure that moral values are maintained for all civilians. Nevertheless, since one of UNESCO's main influence is on education, it is vital you further analyze new methods to be proposed, and thus introduce students to journalism through the creation of school newspapers and magazines.

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