International Student Summit on Information and Democracy
Background Briefing Paper

"The global communication and information space is a common good of humankind and should be protected as such. Access to knowledge rooted in truth and reality, is a fundamental [human] right."
- Preamble, International Declaration on Information and Democracy, Reporters without Borders

Defining the Problem

Over the past fifteen years, how we choose to communicate with one another and gather news information from the **global communication and information space** has changed dramatically. Prior to the **Information Age**, people around the world received their information through interpersonal interactions with one another, or through

legacy media channels, like TV, radio, or print. The traditional media networks that produced news content had guidelines in place that let them serve as a **gatekeeper** for public information. Although these guidelines were far from a perfect system, there was a universal understanding of how this system worked, which established a familiarity with how information travelled. The genesis of the information age has since spurred global events such as political protests, election campaigns, and social movements, and example of all three being the **Arab Spring**. Today, the world is more connected than it has ever been with more than four billion people engaged online and 3.5 billion on social media. According to the Pew Research Center (Pew), internet usage has even increased among **emerging and developing economies**.[1]

In Vietnam, about half of adults say social media is at least somewhat important for keeping up with political news and other developments. Above, Vietnamese activist La Viet Dung has alleged Facebook may be helping to suppress online dissent.
(Photo: AFP/Getty Images)

The rapid accessibility of mobile devices and the rise of social media platforms and automation software (Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, SnapChat, and others) have presented new challenges with regard to manufacturing consensus, automating suppression, and determining the authenticity of news stories, sources, and facts. **Disinformation** (false information spread with an intent to deceive) and **misinformation** (false

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[1] Mobile Technology and its Social Impact Survey. Pew Research Center (2018).

information spread without intent) have begun to deeply influence modern communications with sometimes serious repercussions. As fast as a person can make the decision, from the comfort of his or her couch, to share a seemingly real video or news article to their social media networks, they can just as quickly create divisions within a given society, thus risking incremental and lasting damage to **democratic ideals and institutions**. [2] Reflecting on this critical issue, author David Patrikarakos[3] remarked, "Modern misinformation does not function like traditional **propaganda**. It tries to muddy the waters. It tries to sow as much confusion and as much misinformation as possible, so that when people see the truth, they find it harder to recognize."

Article 19 of the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** states that everyone has the right to seek and receive news and express opinions.   As disinformation has the ability to undermine the shared truth and objective facts upon which democracies are built, this fundamental problem has threatened both rising and established democracies who are struggling with the consequences of damaging misinformation. In fact, exposure to false or incorrect information is a key concern for people in 11 emerging economies, according to a recent Pew survey. Journalists, social media entities, governments, companies, and ordinary citizens are increasingly threatened by widespread misinformation and antagonistic foreign and domestic actors. But what exactly are the various types of mis- and dis-information and just how dangerous can they be for societies as a whole? How can we educate ourselves to spot disinformation using contemporary issues and current events as a benchmark? And most importantly, what's next for the global community and everyday citizens in the

"Everyone has the rights to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to see, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

Article 19. [United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights](.). Signed December 10, 1948

fight against this borderless phenomenon? This background briefing paper aims to provide student participants of the **2019 International Student Summit** with the foundation to begin seeking answers to these vital questions.

Recent History of the Problem

According to UNESCO, the spread of misinformation and disinformation designed to weaken or cause divisions within a society is an age-old story that is currently being fueled by modern technology. Experts agree that disinformation – specifically, disinformation from foreign governments aimed at undermining democracy – became a global buzzword in light of revelations that Russia interfered in a "sweeping and systematic fashion"[4] during the 2016 American presidential election.   However, it is important to note that the modern-day **weaponization of social media** is not just a Russian tactic aimed at undermining the American political process. Evidence shows that numerous domestic and foreign actors the world over have been manipulating the information space and utilizing new technology to influence elections, catalyze controversy, disrupt legitimate online social movements, and beyond. It is reported that Facebook and Twitter have recently attributed foreign

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[2] [Disinformation in Democracies: Strengthening Digital Resilience in Latin America](.)
[3] Author of the book [War in 140 Characters](.), titled after the original maximum length of a Twitter post
[4] [Report on The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election](.)

influence operations to seven countries (China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela) that have used these platforms to influence global audiences.[5] Critics say that antagonists in the "**global information war**" benefit by using one of democracy's strongest tenants – free and open debate – as a target.

In 2018, the **Committee to Protect Journalists** quantified the issue when it alerted the global community that the number of journalists killed in retaliation for their work effectively doubled in comparison to 2017.[6] The statistic was so glaring that Time magazine named a group of journalists it called "The Guardians" as their 2018 Person of the Year, referring to individuals "who have taken great risks in pursuit of greater truths." Capturing the breadth of the issue's global scale, slain journalist Jamal Khashoggi was among several individuals named in the award, along with Filipina journalist Maria Ressa and Reuters' Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo. *The Capital Gazette*, the American media company that lost five staffers to a mass shooting in June 2018, also was included in the honor.[7]

In November 2018, spurred together by the inaction of the global community to these alarming trends, and exactly seventy years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted in Paris, various **actors of global governance** met under one roof for an international conference. The newly formed group, called the **Information and Democracy Commission** and led by the global NGO **Reporters Without Borders** (known by the

Time Magazine covers display the 2018 Time Person of the Year: The Guardians of the Truth
(Photo: Time Magazine)

French acronym **RSF**), met at the Paris Peace Forum under the guidance of French President Emmanuel Macron in order to attempt to develop solutions to these international challenges. Their groundbreaking project, called the 'International Declaration on Information and Democracy,'[8] set out to be the first of its kind to establish basic principles for the new global information and communication space. At the UN General Assembly meeting in September 2019, the United Kingdom, Australia, France, South Korea, Canada, Tunisia, and 24 other countries signed the **International Partnership on Information and Democracy** and made the commitment to implement the principles from this intergovernmental agreement.

Continuing the international process launched by RSF in 2018, the **Forum on Information and Democracy** was created in November 2019 with the purpose of implementing the principles laid out in the International

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[5] University of Oxford

[6] The New York-based organization found that at least 34 journalists were targeted and killed for their work as of Dec. 14. In all, at least 53 died while doing dangerous work. That compares with 18 retaliation killings out of 47 deaths documented by the committee in 2017.

[7] Person of the Year 2018: The Guardians

[8] International Declaration on Information and Democracy. Reporters Without Borders (2018).

Declaration on Information and Democracy. The forum is an independent international organization that seeks to gather nation-States, civil society, media and digital platforms to discuss, through regulation and self-regulation, solutions to ensure democratic safeguards in the digital era. While the progress made at the international level over the last year is a historic leap forward in terms of addressing this issue, it remains to be seen how effective the Forum will be at tackling this crisis head-on, especially with so little preliminary support from the global community.

Potential Solutions

Given the severe repercussions that the spread of mis-information and dis-information can have, countries and media entities all around the world have ramped up their own efforts to combat this international phenomenon. Countries have gone so far as to introduce a social media tax[9] to shutting down the internet completely[10]. The following are a few examples where countries have taken steps to reverse or halt the spread of mis- and disinformation.

Brazil (Focus: *Election Interference*)

In anticipation of their 2018 general election, the Federal Police of Brazil announced in early 2018 the creation of a special task force to "identify and punish the authors of '**fake news**'.[11] Penalties ranged from fines starting at $400 to up to eight years in prison. Crimes could range from using social media to spread fake news stories to publishing inaccurate articles. The government also worked with Facebook and Google to create an agreement that pledged to "combat disinformation generated by third parties".

Nigeria (Focus: *Media Literacy and Misinformation*)

In response to concerns related to the spread of misinformation, Nigeria launched a campaign aimed at making people more critical news consumers. Government officials planned to collaborate with digital and print media outlets to educate Nigerians on how to tell what's real and fake online. In addition, the Nigerian army set up hotlines for citizens to report misinformation, and police officers have gone to lengths such as using their personal Facebook pages to debunk false information.

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9 https://www.wired.com/story/uganda-social-media-tax-stays-for-now/
10 https://www.wired.co.uk/article/whatsapp-web-internet-shutdown-india-turn-off
11 https://gizmodo.com/brazil-s-federal-police-says-it-will-punish-creators-of-1821945912

Conclusion

Misinformation and disinformation are not new, but it is clear that the changes in how people consume information has catalyzed their production. The spread of false information at particularly alarming rates – facilitated by politicians, non-state actors, and even our own families and friends – is more effective than ever. As global challenges by their very nature, disinformation and misinformation must be addressed through the collective efforts of governments, technology companies, organizations, civil society, the media, and beyond.

The **2019 International Student Summit on Information and Democracy** (ISS) will simulate a meeting of international advocates for free speech, quality journalism, and a free and independent press. This meeting will take place under the collective pretense that rising instances of pervasive disinformation, the suppression of free press, and a growing influence of antidemocratic regimes, is posing a major threat to the integrity and security of journalists, global freedom, civil harmony, and world peace. Students, representing advocates from countries that rank on either end of the World Press Freedom Index, will be assigned a committee group where they will debate and discuss specific issues confronting the global community. As the issues related to disinformation and misinformation transcend traditional borders, solutions will inevitably go beyond the capacity of any single country's government. Using their assigned country as a case study, students will shine a light on current tactics and highlight specific opportunities and challenges surrounding the global communication and information space by creating a series of proposals that present creative solutions to a sudden global crisis.

Keeping their student assignment in mind, and using the principles set out in the 'International Declaration on Information and Democracy' as a benchmark, students will ultimately craft an International Pledge among advocates that responds to contemporary challenges, renews commitment toward the right to exercise freedom of opinion and expression, and defines a collective set of objectives to be pursued for the purpose of building a more resilient society, capable of bolstering democratic values into the future.

Quick Facts

- There are **4.39 billion** internet users in 2019, an increase of 366 million (9 percent) versus January 2018.
  Source: We Are Social & Hootsuite
- There are **3.48 billion** social media users in 2019, with the worldwide total growing by 288 million (9 percent) since this time last year.
  Source: We Are Social & Hootsuite
- **3.26 billion** people used social media on mobile devices in January 2019, with a growth of 297 million new users representing a year-on-year increase of more than 10 percent.
  Source: We Are Social & Hootsuite
- **Facebook, Twitter,** and **Google** are just a handful of companies that have more power than most countries when it comes to the dissemination of information. Despite there being more social networking platforms than ever, **Facebook** remains the platform of choice for social media manipulation.
  Source: University of Oxford
- Social media has become co-opted by many authoritarian regimes. In **26 countries**, computational propaganda is being used as a tool of information control in three distinct ways: **to suppress fundamental human rights, discredit political opponents,** and **drown out dissenting opinions**.
  Source: University of Oxford

Questions to Consider

1) How do individuals in your assigned country receive the news and communicate information? What percent of the population has access to the internet or uses social media to obtain their news and why might there be any barriers to accessing the internet or using social media for certain demographics of people?

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2) Using your country profile, summarize your assigned country in terms of its government, media environment, and media issues. If your country isn't a democracy, what **democratic values**, **ideals**, or institutions might be important for citizens in your assigned country?

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3) Where does your assigned country rank on the **2019 World Press Freedom Index** and what is their score? How does this compare to the overall list (high, low, or in the middle) and what recent actions have contributed to this score (i.e. journalistic safety and security, press freedom, etc.)?

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4) Out of the '10 Types of Mis- and Disinformation' found in the infographic on Page 4, what types are the most prevalent in your assigned country? Provide a few recent examples.

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5) Has your assigned country taken any **recent action against online misinformation** or disinformation? Use the hyperlinked resource or any additional resources you can find.

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6) What is the role of journalists in your assigned country? In your opinion, how safe is it to be a journalist in your assigned country and are there any examples of danger against journalists?

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7) What is the role of self-regulation of the media industry and to what extent can it contribute to resolving the problem of the lack of public confidence in media today?

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8) What has your assigned country's head of state, politicians, civil society, etc. said about this topic?

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9) How should governments, civil society, journalists, and media organizations collaborate to end the spread of **disinformation**?

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10) Prepare a short statement that addresses the topic of advocating for information and democracy, using your assigned country as a case study.

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Glossary of Terms

Term	Description
Actors of global governance	In this instance, actors of global governance refers to states, international organizations, local governments, NGOs and foundations, companies, experts, journalists, and citizens.
Arab Spring	The Arab Spring was a series of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions that spread across much of the Islamic world in the early 2010s. Social media played a significant role in facilitating communication and interaction amongst participants and political protests. It began in response to oppressive regimes and a low standard of living, starting with protests in Tunisia.
Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)	CPJ is an American independent, non-profit **NGO** based in New York City that promotes press freedom worldwide and defends the right of journalists to report the news safely and without fear of reprisal. CPJ protects the free flow of news and commentary by taking action wherever journalists are under threat.
Democratic ideals and institutions	Institutions and ideals that adhere to democratic principles such as majority rule by vote, representative government, free and fair elections, freedom of speech, respect for human rights, checks and balances, civil rights exercised by citizens, etc.
Disinformation	Wrong information spread with intent to deceive, confuse, and blur the lines, so that people don't know what to believe anymore. To prove that a particular incident counts as disinformation, it is necessary to prove both that the information was false and that the source spread it deliberately.
Emerging and developing Economies	Relatively poor, usually agricultural, countries that are seeking to become more advanced economically and socially; Geographical regions for where emerging and developing economies are located are: Africa, East Asia, South Asia, Western Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean.
'Fake News'	Fake news—this term has become so debased that most people decide it should not be used all together. Fake news can refer to something as simple as something that someone disagree with. For that reason, it doesn't deal with facts or misinformation. The terms 'misinformation' and 'disinformation' are better substitutes.
Foreign interference	An attempt to adversely affect, or undermine confidence in, any political, governmental, or democratic process, or prevent the exercise of human or democratic rights, through coercion, corruption, or the use of covert, malicious, or deceptive means, acting from abroad.
Forum on Information and Democracy (RSF)	An independent international organization which will gather States, civil society, media and digital platforms to discuss through regulation and self-regulation solutions to ensure democratic safeguards in the digital era. It is part of the International Initiative on Information & Democracy led by Reporters Without Borders (RSF).
Gatekeeper	An individual or group that controls access to something; bodies that decide whether a given message will be distributed by a mass medium usually through various media technologies (i.e. social media, radio, television, and print).
Global information and communication space	The environment by which information flows between sources in order to reach its respective audience without scrutiny, limitation, or punishment; deemed a "common good of humankind that should be protected as such" by Reporters without Borders.
Information and Democracy Commission (RSF)	A commission comprised of several Nobel laureates gathered by Reporters without Borders in order to address and potentially confront the political control and private influence of information in a globalized public era.
International Partnership on Information and Democracy (RSF)	A historical governmental accord in which 31 UN member states have signed to promote democratic principles in the online public arena.
Khashoggi, Jamal (journalist)	Khashoggi, a leading journalist in Saudi Arabia for decades before fleeing to the U.S. in 2017, wrote for the Washington Post. In his columns, he criticized Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's quest for total

	power and suppression of free speech. On Oct. 2, 2018 Khashoggi was murdered by agents of the kingdom inside its Instanbul consulate, while his fiancée waited for him outside.
Legacy media/information age	Old media, traditional media, or legacy media includes the mass media institutions that predominated prior to the Information Age; particularly print media, film studios, music studios, advertising agencies, radio broadcasting and television. The defining telecommunications network of the Information Age is the Internet.
Misinformation	False information spread with intent that cannot be determined, or which can be shown not to be deliberate (e.g., if the source subsequently corrected itself).
Non-governmental organizations (NGOs)	Non-profit, citizen-based groups or international organizations that are independent of governments. NGOs are typically active in humanitarian, educational, healthcare, public policy, social, human rights, environmental, and other areas to make changes according to their objectives.
Reporters Without Borders (RSF)	An international non-governmental, non-profit organization with a recognized public interest function that has consultative status with the United Nations, UNESCO, the Council of Europe, the International Organization of the Francophonie and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.
Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)	A famous document adopted by the UN in 1948 that established a common standard of rights that belong to all individuals and nations.
Weaponization of Social Media	The utilization of social media to distribute information that could potentially cause harm or destruction.

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