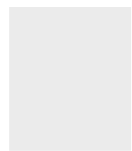


# 109

## ISSUE DESCRIPTION



COMMITTEE International Telecommunication Union  
ISSUE Combating the Spread of False Information on the Internet  
SUBMITTED BY Bence Wang, Chair of the International Telecommunication Union  
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## Introduction

Information is the factor which has the ability to influence the process of decision making by portraying the information we receive as important, as it can influence an individual's informed choices. Information can enable communication and it also drives development of science and education.

The internet has assured communication in the modern world by providing a platform where people are able to gain access to information readily across the globe. However, this transformation has also given a chance for false claims to spread. It is pivotal, as this can cause long term impact on society and bring consequences for public health and political stability. From conspiracy theories about vaccination to disinformation campaigns to mislead more and more people, false information undermines trust in institutions and affects the basis of critical thinking and decision making.

Historically, propaganda and misinformation were generally used as a tool for manipulation, but the internet had brought this to a new hierarchy. As a recent event, the COVID-19 pandemic is a great example where false information was greatly spread around the globe. It underscored the urgency of addressing this issue as it prompted efforts to combat false information, including international agreements, technological solutions and public awareness.

## Definition of Key Terms

Disinformation - False information shared intentionally, which is created to manipulate.

Fake News - News which contains fabricated content, often for political or financial gains.

Deepfakes - AI generated content (image, video, audio) designed to impersonate certain individuals, which makes it hard to authenticate one and is thus extremely dangerous.

Echo Chamber - An environment where there are only people who support one's ideas, but the information's authenticity is neglected in these chambers. It is oftentimes harmful, as one stuck in such a chamber only receives information which reinforces their own beliefs.

Algorithmic Application - On social media, the algorithm finds a pattern from the content consumed, and from then it provides more and more related content on the internet.

Infodemic - Too much information is presented on the topic, both true and false, making it hard for people to think critically.

Fact-Checking Organisations - Entities for verifying and authenticating the accuracy of information.

## General Overview

The internet has become our simplest tool which we can use for global communication. However, this gave chance to individuals to spread false information on the internet, with long term effects for the community including public health, political stability, social stability, and economic systems. Its speed of spreading makes it one of the greatest challenges of the digital age. Disinformation is used continuously and unconsciously, as people tend to believe first-hand information more than second-hand information. Furthermore, information which is negative tends to be more eye-catching and more memorable than positive information, thus from this, it is possible to conclude that disinformation in the current period is way easier than it may be expected to be.

## THE SCALE OF IMPACT OF FALSE INFORMATION

False health claims during the COVID-19 pandemic caused hesitations about the consumption of vaccines. Posts on Facebook targeting older generations can cause chain reactions in their decision making. Some parents did not allow their kids to receive their vaccination or neglected the usage of face masks, which were originally intended to affect the efforts of slowing down the spread of the virus. This concluded in delayed global recovery efforts, which increased the number of deaths which could have been prevented. There was similar misinformation about diseases such as HIV and Ebola. False information can lead to distrust in authorities. In the USA, it was popular to advertise that HIV was only contagious between men, while the truth is that HIV could be spread in multiple ways. To prevent this misleading information from

continuing to spread, authorities started to enhance people's general knowledge about HIV which could ensure better general knowledge about the disease.

In the political field, disinformation campaigns have been used to reach more votes in elections. For instance, the interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the Brexit referendum showcased the influence of false narratives in manipulating voting procedures. Through such means, the governance may be destabilized, and elections may be rigged, which can cause third parties to benefit from it. To manipulate public opinion, governments have used disinformation as a weapon through this, generating wealth or support from the people. Slowly, people are unaware of the fact where gathering legit information may be done, as the authorities might spread misleading information as well, which highlights the urge to address the topic at hand.

The social impact of misinformation is equally dangerous, as social media in our days is accessible by anyone at any time. Social media platforms are unable to cope with the huge amount of false information due to the enormous number of accounts registered online, who help the spread of fake news either by sharing content on the platforms or simply by believing a false piece of information and passing it on to another person. Nowadays, platforms are applying artificial algorithms to engage people with content that they are interested in, basing the assumptions on someone's beliefs. Misinformation, however, is at a greater risk, as similar content may be displayed more often. This might further worsen the situation, as it creates a stronger belief in the false information which is conveyed on the platform.

Economically, business targeted disinformation campaigns can cause private sector companies or governments to suffer severe financial and reputational damage. False information on the internet can generate multiple negative factors for a country's economy, and it can be used as a weapon as well to weaken a target country or firm. Loss of confidence can be experienced in the business market as there is more and more false information out there and people tend to hesitate if the information is not confidential.

## KEY DRIVERS OF FALSE INFORMATION

There are several factors present that contribute to the spread of disinformation. Economic incentives are key as to why people spread fake news on the internet, as they are able to gain significant revenue from advertising this false information. The prioritization of profit motivates people to continue conducting these crimes.

Technological factors also play a significant role. Social media algorithms, designed to maximize user engagement, often enlarge sensational content - much of which is misleading or false. Advances in Artificial Intelligence and Deepfake technology further complicate the issue by enabling the creation of highly convincing fabricated media, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish authentic content from falsehood.

Geopolitical agendas add another dimension to the challenge. State actors use disinformation as a tool for information warfare, targeting both domestic populations and international rivals to destabilize governments, influence elections, and manipulate global opinion.

Human psychology is part of the spread of false information as well. Cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias, lead individuals to consume and share information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs. Emotionally charged content, especially that which incites fear or anger, spreads faster than factual or neutral information, creating fertile ground for misinformation to thrive.

## TECHNOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

The fight against false information is facing several technological challenges, as current algorithms and AI tools are yet inefficient and not mature enough to detect fake content and AI does not know either whether the information it has is confidential, unless it is verified. Also, these algorithms might affect the freedom of speech at times, which goes against human rights, and thus increasing the technological challenges more than envisaged.

Furthermore, encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram exist as well, which makes it hard to detect the person who is spreading the false information. This is slowing down the work of the authorities, as there are more barriers present.

This overview highlights the nature of the misinformation crisis. Addressing this issue requires coordinated efforts between governments, private sectors and the civil society, along with the enhancement of technology with a commitment of having a digital literacy worldwide.

## Major Parties Involved

**United States of America:** To effectively counter the pervasive spread of disinformation, the United States has instituted a range of proactive measures, especially during the critical

periods of political campaigning. Central to this strategy is the commitment to ensuring transparency and building public confidence in political and public advertisements by clearly disclosing their sponsors. The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) is pivotal in this initiative, actively working to reduce, counter, and correct disinformation when it arises. This emphasis on transparency is crucial, as disinformation threatens to undermine the integrity of electoral processes.

**People's Republic of China and the European Union:** In comparison, the Chinese government has established a formidable network of agencies and companies to manage information flow and combat disinformation online. However, it has also been implicated in orchestrating its own disinformation campaigns on a global scale. Meanwhile, the European Union has emerged as a leader in the fight against the spread of fake information around the world. Noteworthy efforts like the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the Code of Practice on Disinformation set high standards for the accountability and transparency of online platforms. The EU further collaborates with member states to combat the disinformation threat, bolstering fact-checking initiatives and thereby enhancing the collective capacity of the union to mitigate the risks of misinformation in its communities.

**Private sector:** The private sector plays a pivotal role in combating disinformation on the internet. With social media platforms and tech companies combined, they are striving to find solutions to prevent and stop the spread of fake news. Platforms, such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Youtube have introduced stricter moderation policies, which includes real-time moderation of content posted on these platforms. Fact-checking partnerships and content-labelling is used to identify and stop disinformation. Algorithms are adjusted to check the content with credible sources, while collaborating with the government and organising public campaigns for raising awareness about the presence of false information. Transparency records can be taken for being aware of the accountability of the information that is conveyed. Meanwhile, tech giants, including Google and Microsoft, for instance, are developing AI to detect manipulated content, identify bots and verify authenticity.

Beyond these measures, advertising on platforms requires strict ad policies, while greatly supporting credible journalisms through fundraising programs. However, the private sector is facing challenges of having free speech as well as a healthy online world without fake information. Despite these factors, it boosts the innovation in technology, while reducing the global spread of fake news.

## Timeline of Events

**1990s** - The creation of the internet and early online scams

**2004** - Launch of Facebook, enabling the rapid spread of information alongside misinformation

**2016** - Russian interference in the U.S. Presidential Elections, highlighting that disinformation can be a global threat for the world

**2020** - COVID-19 pandemic gives rise to a global "infodemic" of health misinformation by producing doubts about the consumption of vaccines.

**2022** - EU's Digital Services Act introduces strict accountability for online platforms.

## Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

Byte Dance (Chinese firm which owns TikTok) has introduced a "real name system" meaning that everyone who wants to post content on the Chinese TikTok will have to use the app to verify their identity. This was a risky, but an effective step for the Chinese government to impose such regulation in the online world. Through the usage of the real name system, the rate of false information spread through online platforms has been significantly reduced, as the individual is required to provide personal identification. However, this has raised some dissatisfaction towards the government, since due to privacy reasons, not all people are willing to share their personal information to a company, as there is a risk of data leakage. Furthermore, some people are attempting to spread disinformation via impersonating someone who actually never committed the crime. It is possible to conclude that this attempt was a milestone which the Chinese government has achieved alongside the tech company Byte Dance.

Another attempt which is worth mentioning could be the World Health Organisation's past steps in the matter. For instance, the WHO partnered up with tech companies to prevent the spread of fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognizing the dangers of misinformation, the WHO took action in order to prevent the spread of fake news about the virus. This is often referred to as the fight against the "infodemic" whose primary goal is to provide scientifically approved information.

The main reason for the cooperation of platforms with the international organization was to promote verified health guidance, flagging misinformation and direct users to reliable sources

such as government official websites and WHO updates. Moreover fact-checking companies are able to detect such misleading information and shut it down before reaching the public. This highlights the importance of efficient communication between international organizations and private sector entities.

## Possible Solutions and Approaches

### STRENGTHENING REGULATORY FRAMEWORKS

A crucial approach to stopping the dissemination of fake news might be to enhance the regulatory frameworks for platforms. These involve implementing content moderation policies, which help eliminate misleading information from the internet. Moreover, following previous attempts seen, for instance in the case of Byte Dance, mandating that users of platforms submit personal details, like an ID or passport, would cause individuals who deliberately disseminate false information to reconsider before sharing inaccurate content online. Nonetheless, certain individuals might oppose this notion since personal data can be exposed. Furthermore, excessively strict moderation can result in censorship, potentially sparking discussions regarding free speech.

Another solution to the issue could be motivating search engines and social media platforms to adjust their algorithms to favour verified and credible sources that can greatly decrease the dissemination of misinformation. Governments and international bodies can work together with technology firms to establish transparency initiatives, making sure that trustworthy sources appear more prominently in search results and news feeds, while less reliable sources are given lower priority.

### THIRD PARTY FACT CHECKING ORGANISATIONS

Promoting independent, unbiased fact-checking organizations can also assist in confirming the truthfulness of online information. These organizations may collaborate with social media platforms to identify misleading posts, offer context, and alert users about potentially false information. Moreover, platforms might establish systems that verify disputed information before it is broadly shared.

### INTRODUCING PENALTIES AND FINES

Authorities and regulatory agencies might levy fines or other sanctions on technology firms that do not implement sufficient actions against misinformation. This may involve imposing financial



penalties on platforms that knowingly permit the dissemination of false content or neglect to promptly remove flagged misinformation. These regulations would encourage businesses to closely track and hinder the dissemination of inaccurate information. Moreover, introducing fines on individuals who are caught spreading misinformation is another possible path to set onto, however, it has its setbacks as well. Oftentimes, some information is generally accepted to be true, and thus regulations would need thorough planning and consideration of indeliberate sharing of misinformation.

## ENHANCING DIGITAL LITERACY

Teaching individuals to critically evaluate online content is essential in fighting against misinformation. Educational institutions and workplaces can implement digital literacy initiatives that instruct individuals on how to distinguish reliable sources from unreliable ones, identify manipulation strategies, and verify information prior to distributing it. Once the population is cultivated on such topics, it is likely that one may be able to see a significant decrease in false information, as education is always key in such situations.

Authorities, non-profit and non-governmental organisations, and global institutions can initiate extensive awareness initiatives to inform the public about critical thinking and responsible conduct online. Such campaigns may feature advertisements, workshops, and online materials that highlight the significance of confirming information prior to accepting or disseminating it.

## COLLABORATING WITH ONLINE FIGURES AND LEADERS

Social media personalities, celebrities, and local figures possess considerable influence and effect on public perception. Collaborating with them to raise awareness about misinformation and encourage fact-checking efforts can assist in reaching wider audiences. Utilizing their trustworthiness, misleading stories can be addressed with accurate information in an interesting and relatable way. However, it is crucial to consider whether the authoritative figure is reliable or not, and discussion on the verification of such figures is a topic for debate as well.

Through introducing some, if not all of these steps, it may be possible to significantly reduce the spread of disinformation globally, thus reducing the crime rates in the whole world as well.

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