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UNESCO: Topic #2- Media and the Spread of Misinformation

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Misinformation (the unintentional spread of false media and information) and disinformation (the deliberate spread of false media or information) have emerged as two of the primary threats to democracy, education, and human rights. Fueled by social media algorithms, declining trust in journalism, and political manipulation, mis/disinformation spreads faster than truth and is often weaponized by state and non-state actors. According to MIT's Library of Social Machines, misinformation and disinformation spreads up to six times faster than accurate verifiable news.<sup>1</sup> A 2025 Pew Research poll reported that 72% of adults surveyed in twenty five countries view misinformation as "a major threat to their country."<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the World Economic Forum's Global Risk Report, released every year to catalogue the greatest risks to global stability and progress, ranked misinformation and disinformation as the greatest short term risks to the world today. Their potential to pose a "persistent threat to societal cohesion and governance by eroding trust and exacerbating divisions within and between nations" earned a higher threat classification than other notable crises such as economic downturn, societal polarization, and cyber-espionage and warfare.<sup>3</sup>

Experts estimate that up to 62% of global online content is false, exposing 86% of the global population to fake news. Social media serves as an amplifying force for this threat, with almost half of the world's youth relying on social media as a news source, and over 40% of the content shared on social media is patently false.<sup>4</sup> This threat proved itself to be deadly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Between December 31, 2019 and April 5, 2020, the time when there was the least amount of clarity about the disease's origins, over 82% of the 2,311 COVID-19 related claims were later proven to be definitively false. Over 1,580 hospitalizations and 800 deaths occurred due to mis/disinformation

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<sup>1</sup> [news.mit.edu/2018/study-twitter-false-news-travels-faster-true-stories-0308](https://news.mit.edu/2018/study-twitter-false-news-travels-faster-true-stories-0308).

<sup>2</sup> [Global views of false information online as a threat | Pew Research Center](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Global Risks Report 2025: Conflict, Environment and Disinformation Top Threats > Press releases | World Economic Forum](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Global Prevalence of Misinformation: Statistical Projections for 2025 | DISA](#)



about COVID-19.<sup>5</sup> The truth as we know it is at risk, and the world is fighting a war against our greatest tool, the internet, for safety and stability.

Aside from the clear and present danger posed by mis/disinformation, its constant presence and pervasive effects undermine UNESCO's mandate to build peaceful informed societies through access to reliable information. It also works against UNESCO's Global Citizen Education initiative, which aims to "build a sense of belonging to a common humanity and help learners become responsible and active global citizens."<sup>6</sup> This pressing issue must be addressed by the international community so that reliable verified media can be available for all. However, freedom of speech is also a fundamental right of expression and must be preserved. Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights<sup>7</sup> protects the right to seek, receive, and impart information. However, it also restricts expression that would damage reputations, public order, public health, national security, and general morality.

Some guiding questions to focus on include:

- How can UNESCO promote media literacy without infringing on freedom of speech?
- What role should governments and tech platforms play in regulating disinformation?
- How can UNESCO support independent journalism in regions vulnerable to propaganda?
- How can UNESCO address the problem of state sponsored mis/disinformation?
- What can be done to stem the flow of misinformation being generated by AI?
- How can UNESCO restore trust in global media?

Plagiarism of any kind will not be tolerated and will result in instant disqualification from awards.

**This includes any and all generative AI.** Please put in genuine work and be careful to cite sources.

Feel free to reach out to [aharow@mail.yu.edu](mailto:aharow@mail.yu.edu) with any questions or concerns!

Best,

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*Chair, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization*

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<sup>5</sup> [www.ajtmh.org/view/journals/tpmd/103/4/article-p1621.xml?tab\\_body=fulltext](http://www.ajtmh.org/view/journals/tpmd/103/4/article-p1621.xml?tab_body=fulltext).

<sup>6</sup> [Global Citizenship Education | United Nations](#)

<sup>7</sup> [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights | OHCHR](#)