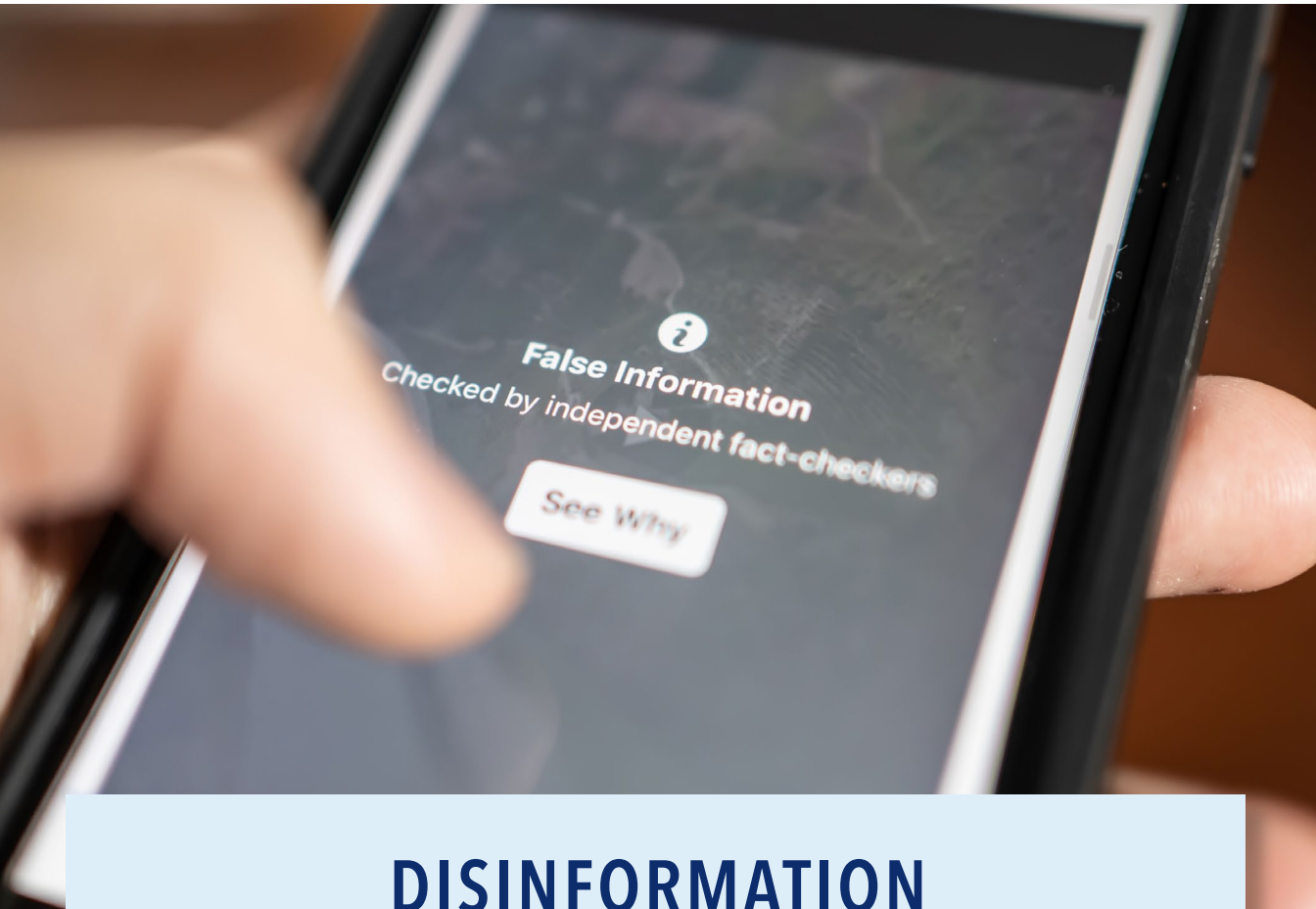


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DISINFORMATION

Reliable Information Is Essential For Democratic Stability



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DISINFORMATION:

RELIABLE INFORMATION IS ESSENTIAL FOR DEMOCRATIC STABILITY

William McKenzie, Senior Editorial Advisor

Chris Walsh, Director, Freedom and Democracy

Global instability, including the weakening of democracies, has grown more apparent over the last few years. Events from Russia's invasion of Ukraine to understanding the facts about the latest COVID-19 developments to trusting the results of elections in the United States and elsewhere illustrate this growing concern.

EXPLAINED IN THIS PAPER:

- Combating disinformation
- Freedom of the press
- Preserving local journalism

Propaganda and other forms of false information have long been a means to undermine opponents, deceive publics, and prey upon emotions. What's different today about the use of both disinformation and misinformation is the creation and rapid evolution of social media platforms and various digital tools. (**Disinformation** is intentionally spreading lies. **Misinformation** is unintentionally or unknowingly sharing falsehoods.) The growth in social media use and new platforms allows for accurate and inaccurate information alike to spread instantly across virtual global highways.

A recent strange example is how [fake reports](#) about an alleged coup in China blasted this fall across Twitter. To their credit, news organizations sniffed out the chicanery and reported the truth or did not repeat the falsehood about an overthrow of Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Another pressure point on the flow of reliable information is how autocrats, some of whom are popularly elected by their citizens, are limiting – as well as ending – the freedom of journalists in their countries. Leaders like Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán continue to make it difficult for independent journalists to report and provide information to their readers and viewers. They stifle press freedoms, put independent media operations out of business, and help cronies own major news outlets – all in the name of national and cultural solidarity.

A third disturbing pressure point is how the integration of the internet into our daily lives, along with other economic changes, has upended the financial model of news organizations. Many media outlets haven't adequately adapted to consumers accessing information online. This has led to the closure or diminution of local newspapers here and around the world. The spread of "news deserts" means communities lack access to reliable news about their cities. That includes how their governments operate.

As a result, citizens of both democracies and nondemocracies may not possess the facts they need to make informed decisions. A lack of transparency and truthfulness complicates the

duty of holding leaders accountable. An interruption in the flow of reliable information can create confusion and sow mistrust. These realities undermine the stability of nations.

Combating disinformation

The Department of Homeland Security, the State Department, the Federal Communications Commission, and the National Security Agency are key to countering malevolent foreign leaders' use of cyberattacks, the work of trolls and bots to spread false information, or the spread of disinformation through social media and other digital means.

Fortunately, cyberattacks didn't [play](#) as big a role in the 2020 U.S. elections as expected. Still, Congress must sufficiently fund the Department of Homeland Security so it can remain vigilant against cyberattacks on the U.S. government and private sector. Iranian and Russian efforts to subvert our 2020 election through various hacking attempts serve as a warning that cyberwarfare remains a real threat to democratic stability.

Such threats may even emanate from what we believe to be reputable companies. Various outlets have [reported](#) on TikTok's vulnerability to Beijing. Most disturbing is whether TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, can be compelled to supply user data, including on U.S. citizens, to the Chinese government. Conceivably, such data could be used in influence campaigns targeting Americans.

Relatedly, Congress must continue to adequately fund the State Department's Global Engagement Center so it can help counter the proliferation of bots, trolls, and other disinformation sources. The State Department, and consequently the Biden Administration, must also continue refining how the center combats disinformation, as a [recent](#) internal inspection of its work indicated. This should include formally appointing a coordinator to lead this vital work. The center can play a pivotal role in combating foreign disinformation campaigns from Russia, China, and elsewhere. Beijing increasingly relies upon this tactic, including amplifying distorted Russian messages.

As China steps forward in the information realm, the White House and democratic leaders need to work diligently in global forums to make sure China and authoritarian nations like Russia and Iran don't rewrite the rules of the internet. Authoritarians want to shape those rules so the standards protect their regimes from criticism for human rights abuses, Freedom House's Adrian Shahbaz explained during a 2022 Bush Institute [Democracy Talks](#) interview. The United States must work with European nations and others to ensure new technologies are used to connect people, not limit their individual liberties.

Here in the United States, Facebook has taken steps to limit its platform's spread of false information. There is more to do, but the organization's creation of the Facebook Oversight Board is a positive, first-step response from the private sector to a public problem.

The oversight [panel](#) has final authority to restore any material that has been taken down. And the board can recommend changes in Facebook's community standards and practices. Facebook should take these recommendations seriously and not use the board as window dressing.

Responsible action by Facebook and other private organizations is as important as any government response to the emerging complexities of the virtual world. That includes being more transparent about how social media companies moderate content, develop customer usage guidelines, and customize content for individual users.

Congress, however, should continue searching for a sweet spot that encourages the use

of social media while recognizing the platforms are now a major source of information across the world. Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act of 1996 appropriately didn't hold the relatively new internet to the same liability standards that guide legacy media operations. But the world of communications has changed many times since then. Finding fair, limited ways to hold social media companies responsible for the content on their website will require them to act more like traditional publishers, many of whom say the current playing field favors their new competitors.

For their part, states have been passing laws to encourage media literacy instruction in K-12 classrooms. We support the continued adoption of such laws. Schools must be responsible for how they teach their students to understand the truthfulness of what they are reading. Credible organizations like the [News Literacy Project](#) have developed reliable curricula that can help students discern fact from fiction. This will help young Americans as they become leaders of our democracy.

Organizations like [News Guard](#) can also help alert consumers to false information. Using a network of trained journalists, the organization rates information that appears on social media sites and traditional news organizations for truthfulness. It's another example of how the private sector can combat disinformation.

To be sure, social media has made the world more open by allowing people to communicate more directly with each other. And while some foreign actors promote extreme views online, some of the extremism originates with individuals acting irresponsibly. So we as individuals also have a role to play in controlling the flow of false information. The resilience of any nation depends upon the truth.

Freedom of the press

The White House especially must speak out during international forums and diplomatic meetings about the impact violence against journalists has upon a country. The Biden Administration has done so at moments like the annual World Press Freedom Day. But looking for opportunities to explain how active media enhance democratic stability will keep this cause in the minds of international leaders. For its part, Congress should consider Global Magnitsky-like legislation that imposes financial penalties and travel restrictions on individuals and entities who have targeted or harmed journalists.

Congress also has a responsibility to fund the U.S. Agency for Global Media's (USAGM) network of information providers, such as Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Lawmakers also must keep these news operations free from political influence so they can provide factual reports to citizens in nations where leaders distort or suppress information about their countries.

Similarly, lawmakers should adequately support organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy and the U.S. Agency for International Development. Their democracy-building work includes growing a free press around the world. In turn, that nurtures the foundations of free expression in a nation and enhances citizens' personal liberties.

These actions must be part of a comprehensive foreign policy that makes the United States, its citizens, and the world more secure. President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine has led to many casualties, including the cause of responsible journalism in Russia. Shortly after the invasion began, Russia suspended the last remaining independent media. A major loss for Russians searching for more than their own government's propaganda was the folding of *Novaya Gazeta*, the respected newspaper that Nobel Peace Prize-winning journalist Dmitry Muratov led, and the Ekho Moskvy radio station.

Autocrats also are brazenly silencing foreign journalists and even members of the media working outside these countries. One example of the former is the Burma junta's jailing of American Danny Fenster for his reporting following the military-led coup in February 2021. He was sentenced to 11 years before the United States secured his release. A prominent example of the latter is the case of the U.S.-based columnist Jamal Khashoggi, whose ghoulish execution, orchestrated by Saudi Arabia's leadership, was carried out in Turkey in 2018.

Disturbingly, the Committee to Protect Journalists reported that [65 journalists were killed](#) last year, while [363 were in prison](#) by the end of 2022, the highest number ever. In Mexico alone, 13 journalists were killed in 2022.

Preserving local journalism

Congress can help bolster local news reporting in several ways. First, consider granting individuals tax deductions for their newspaper subscriptions, as is permitted for public broadcasting contributions. Second, consider granting news organizations a temporary antitrust exemption so the news industry can negotiate payment from social media platforms for the news content the latter organizations post for free. Social media organizations may need a tax break as an incentive to negotiate an arrangement. But creating this opportunity could help traditional media receive payment for their original reporting. Third, consider new tax laws that would make it easier for interested newspapers to become nonprofit institutions.

These challenges are pressing. A fifth of Americans live in a community that lacks a local news source or is at risk of losing one, according to Northwestern University's Medill School for Journalism, Media & Integrated Marketing Communications. "News deserts" have expanded over the last few decades as the internet has become a first-stop source of information for many news consumers. An [average](#) of more than two newspapers a week close their doors.

Along with other economic pressures, many traditional news operations have struggled to stay afloat. One significant casualty is that fewer trained journalists are covering stories about their communities, statehouses, and their state's congressional delegations.

As a result, citizens may lack sufficient information about their local, state, and Federal governments. Or they may turn to one national source of news that doesn't cover their hometown or may only confirm their own biases.

Encouragingly, private-sector initiatives have emerged in response. The American Journalism Project, for example, is helping seed and grow local nonprofit news organizations. Similarly, new sites like the *Fort Worth Report*, *Vermont Digger*, and the Oklahoma Media Center are filling in gaps in local and state information. What's more, private philanthropy is financing independent coverage by traditional news organizations on topics like education and affordable housing. The Solutions Journalism Network is one good example of new, privately funded reporting.

Whether combating disinformation globally or domestically, extolling freedom of the press, or strengthening local journalism, elected officials as well as private sector leaders are instrumental in providing citizens a reliable flow of information here and abroad. Individuals need this information and should push for it. Meeting this challenge can help communities and the Nation alike create a shared culture. In turn, those stronger bonds can strengthen our democracy.



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2943 SMU Boulevard | Dallas, Texas 75205