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The New Digital Divide: Disinformation and Media Literacy in the U.S.

ABSTRACT

This research addresses the impact of disinformation and media illiteracy on civil discourse and informed societal activity in the United States. The research provides analysis of the conditions surrounding disinformation and media illiteracy, as well one proposed solution for the problem: a media literacy educational program for both digital and non-digital natives via an international alliance of experts. Initially, the „Digital Divide“ of the early 21st century referenced individuals unable to access digital information with the same efficiency as those individuals in a household with a personal computer. In 2007, the introduction of smart phone technology transformed some of the Digital Divide population by providing information previously restricted to individuals with PC access to anyone who owned a phone. However, frequency of use is not the equivalent of mastery or thorough understanding. In 2016, the disinformation campaigns surrounding the U.S. presidential election, and later popular culture campaigns such as supposed controversy surrounding Disney’s *The Last Jedi*, emerged as foreign interference with American culture exploiting cultural divides. This research addresses two things: (1) Recognition of a caveat to the Knowledge Gap Theory in 21st century media interaction; and (2) Creation of a media literacy educational program via an international coalition for the sole purpose of combating disinformation..

KEY WORDS

Media literacy. Disinformation. Knowledge Gap Theory. Propaganda. Digital Divide.

1. Introduction

In February 2019, the New Knowledge cyber security company released „The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency“ a report on Russian online interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, to the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence (SSCI).¹ The New Knowledge report provided background on the IRA, which originated in mid-2013 in St. Petersburg and operated „like a sophisticated marketing agency in a centralized office environment“.² The analysts who prepared the New Knowledge report arrived at three forms of Russian interference in the U.S. presidential election of 2016:

1. Attempts to hack online voting systems (as detailed by a U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence report).
2. A cyber-attack targeting the Democratic National Committee, executed by the Russian Main Intelligence Directorate, or GRU, which led to a controlled leak via Wikileaks of email data related to the Clinton presidential campaign.
3. A sweeping and sustained social influence operation consisting of various coordinated disinformation tactics aimed directly at U.S. citizens, designed to exert political influence and exacerbate social divisions in U.S. culture.³

The same week of the New Knowledge report issuance, The New Yorker reported on Americans' unwillingness to understand that propaganda is not always something clear-cut and easily identified with a specific agenda. Often, propaganda's purpose is to „remove the public's ability to perceive reality.“⁴ The article concluded with the cynical observation that the goal of the propaganda was proliferation of *noise* – creating a reality in which nothing is sincere or insincere – just noise.⁵

Additionally, disinformation and Americans' general lack of ability and desire to analyze, interpret and evaluate messaging, particularly on social media, is not confined to foreign interference. A 2018 study of U.S. election-specific ads titled „The Stealth Media? Groups and Targets behind Divisive Issue Campaigns on Facebook“ found groups that spread divisive disinformation aimed at voters fell into several categories within the United States, including nonprofits: *astroturf groups*, a category for grassroots-based groups composed of citizens or coalitions primarily created and funded by corporations, industry trade associations, political operatives or PR firms, as well as unidentifiable foreign entities.⁶ Real-time analysis of user-based digital and tracking tools targeting patterns for 5 million paid ads on Facebook found only one of six of the groups was Russian. Kim et al. point out that anonymous issue campaigns by U.S. non-profits are increasing, and that most of the groups behind issue campaigns online did not report to the U.S. Federal Election Commission (FEC). They observed that half of these groups were in their „suspicious“ category, stating, „the majority of groups behind issue campaigns on Facebook are ‘anonymous’ groups whose true identity is little known to the public“.⁷

¹ PINEDA, CH.: *The Tactics and Tropes of the Internet Research Agency*. [online]. [2019-02-22]. Available at: <<https://www.hsdl.org/c/tactics-and-tropes-of-the-internet-research-agency/>>.

² Ibidem.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ GESSEN, M.: Why the Russian Influence Campaign Remains So Hard to Understand. In *The New Yorker*. Released 22nd February 2019. [online]. [2019-02-22]. Available at: <<https://www.newyorker.com/news/ourcolumnists/why-the-russian-influence-campaign-remains-so-hard-to-understand>>.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ KIM, Y. M. et al.: The Stealth Media? Groups and Targets Behind Divisive Issue Campaigns on Facebook. In *Political Communication*, 2018, Vol. 35, No. 4, p. 518.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 531.

For people who eschewed politics in favor of popular culture, another kind of Russian meddling emerged in a supposed hate campaign against the Disney release, *The Last Jedi*. Bay analyzed the fan rhetoric surrounding the release of *The Last Jedi* and observed that the film inspired more conservative audiences to see the themes of gender, race, and class equality in the film as a leftist takeover of the franchise: „*The Last Jedi fan conflict is not just an interesting case because it is a microcosm of the overall political discourse on social media in the Trump era, but also because it is possible to identify organized and deliberate attempts at right-wing political persuasion and/or defense of conservative values, as well as sexism, racism and homophobia in the social media discussions about the film...it appears political activists have used bots and sock puppet accounts to troll left-wing fans, and there is even evidence that Russian influence operators have inserted themselves into the debate to exploit and exacerbate the conflict, thereby securing more media attention to the conflict, which again helps spread the perception that America is divided and in chaos*“.⁸ The author offered that identity-based political values combined with traditional party politics and issue-based politics created a polarization of Star Wars fan critique found in more than half of the study.⁹

This explosion of disinformation campaigning and its intersection with social media dialogues in both the political and popular culture arenas reveals a need for increased media literacy in the U.S. about the origins and execution of propaganda and disinformation. This research addresses two things: (1) Recognition of a caveat to the Knowledge Gap Theory in 21st century media interaction; and (2) Creation of a media literacy educational program combating the spread of disinformation among the population targeted at both the consumers and content producers, such as journalists.

2. Literature Review: Disinformation and Propaganda

Disinformation

Bennett and Livingston explored the origins of democratic and disinformation disruption, cautioning against becoming immersed in examination of „fake news“ and failing to acknowledge the other disruptive patterns of civil, democratic societies that are challenged.¹⁰

Fallis proposed „necessary and jointly sufficient“ conditions for disinformation and constructed a conceptual analysis for effective diagnosis of disinformation, finally concluding that its prevalence created a need for immediate identification as a preventative measure.¹¹ Fallis re-visited the topic in 2015 and added the concept of disinformation's *function* of misleading people as lies or propaganda, or as conspiracy theories and fake alarm calls.¹²

Fried and Polyakova authored a document suggesting the following possible actions for countering disinformation in the U.S. and Europe: the role of governments, the role of civil society, the role of the private sector, and tools for long-term resistance, including formation of Counter-Disinformation Coalition composed of U.S. and European like-minded individuals from the public and private sector.¹³ Kumar and Geethakumari proposed an algorithm for detection of false information which would enable users to make informed decisions about what information

⁸ BAY, M.: Weaponizing the Haters: The Last Jedi and the Strategic Politicization of Pop Culture through Social Media Manipulation. In *First Monday*, 2018, Vol. 23, No. 11. p. 6.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

¹⁰ BENNETT, W. L., LIVINGSTON, S.: The Disinformation Order: Disruptive Communication and the Decline of Democratic Institutions. In *European Journal of Communication*, 2018, Vol. 33, No. 2, p. 135.

¹¹ FALLIS, D.: A Conceptual Analysis of Disinformation. In *iConference 2009 Papers*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina : Illinois Digital Environment for Access to Learning and Scholarship, 2009, p. 2-7. [online]. [2019-02-28]. Available at: <<http://hdl.handle.net/2142/15205>>.

¹² FALLIS, D.: What is Disinformation? In *Library Trends*, 2015, Vol. 63, No. 3, p. 413.

¹³ FRIED, D., POLYAKOVA, A.: *Democratic Defense Against Disinformation*. Washington, DC : Atlantic Council, 2019, p. 5-12.

to spread throughout social networks, labelling it a „prevention rather than a cure“ for the spread of false information in social networks.¹⁴ Kumar, West, and Leskovec explored so-called „hoax articles“ on Wikipedia, including their real-world impact, frequency of reference in web documents, and the success of humans versus artificial/automated intelligence in determining hoax articles; humans were less successful at spotting a hoax.¹⁵ Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook observed the abundance of misinformation’s adverse influence on society, arguing that successful study of misinformation must include analysis within the larger political, technological, and societal context.¹⁶ McGeehan offered counter-measures against Russian disinformation campaigns, such as using Artificial Intelligence to detect and divert disinformation from further dissemination, containment of disinformation stories by social media and other media, education on the nature and process of disinformation, as well as a role for the military.¹⁷ Morgan provided a set of conditions that created the current climate of disinformation and „fake news,“ such as the deliberate spread of disinformation, resultant financial gain from advertising on social media, and a loss of credibility for established information sources and institutions.¹⁸ Posetti and Matthews provided a „learning module for journalists and journalism educators“ from the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) for educating students on disinformation, including a „selected timeline of ‘Information Disorder’ through the ages“, learning module aims and outcomes, module format, and both theoretical and practical applications of the material in online and in-classroom learning environments.¹⁹ Swire, et al., investigated the cognitive processing of true and false political information, concluding, „*the real-world consequences of this study suggest politicians can seemingly spread misinformation without dramatic negative consequences of losing supporters – the results of the 2016 election are consistent with this interpretation*“.²⁰ Tucker et al. authored a report for the Hewlett Foundation „to provide a comprehensive overview of the scholarly literature on the relationship between three factors that may be undermining the quality of democracy: (1) social media usage; (2) political polarization; and (3) the prevalence of disinformation.“²¹ Zhang, et al. offered that defense against misinformation had to be holistic in nature, including initiatives such as reputation systems, fact-checking, increased media literacy, revenue models, and public feedback working together for an improved system. The authors proposed a shared vocabulary for representing credibility by creating a defined set of indicators of credibility – content indicators and context indicators.²²

¹⁴ KUMAR, K. K., GEETHAKUMARI, G.: Detecting Misinformation in Online Social Networks Using Cognitive Psychology. In *Human-Centric Computing and Information Sciences*, 2014, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 14. [online]. [2019-02-22]. Available at: <<https://doi.org/10.1186/s13673-014-0014-x>>.

¹⁵ KUMAR, S., WEST, R., LESKOVEC, J.: Disinformation on the Web: Impact, Characteristics, and Detection of Wikipedia Hoaxes. In BOURDEAU, J., HENDLER, J. A. (eds.): *Proceedings of the 25th International Conference on World Wide Web*. Montreal, Canada : International World Wide Web Conferences Steering Committee, 2016, p. 600.

¹⁶ LEWANDOWSKY, S., ECKER, U. K., COOK, J.: Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and Coping with the „Post-Truth“ Era. In *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 2017, Vol. 6, No. 4, p. 365.

¹⁷ MCGEEHAN, T. P.: Countering Russian Disinformation. In *Parameters*, 2018, Vol. 48, No. 1, p. 53-56.

¹⁸ MORGAN, S.: Fake News, Disinformation, Manipulation and Online Tactics to Undermine Democracy. In *Journal of Cyber Policy*, 2018, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 40.

¹⁹ POSETTI, J., MATTHEWS, A.: A Short Guide to the History of Fake News' and Disinformation. *International Center for Journalists*. [online]. [2019-03-25]. Available at: <[https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/A%20Short, 20](https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2018-07/A%20Short%20)>.

²⁰ SWIRE, B., et al.: Processing Political Misinformation: Comprehending the Trump Phenomenon. In *Royal Society Open Science*, 2017, Vol. 4, No. 3, p. 18. [online]. [2019-02-22]. Available at: <<https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/pdf/10.1098/rsos.160802>>.

²¹ TUCKER, J. et al.: *Social Media, Political Polarization, and Political Disinformation: A Review of the Scientific Literature*. New York : William & Flora Hewlett Foundation, 2018, p. 4.

²² ZHANG, A. X. et al.: A Structured Response to Misinformation: Defining and Annotating Credibility Indicators in News Articles. In GANDON, F., CHAMPIN, P. A. (eds.): *Companion of the Web Conference 2018 on The Web Conference 2018*. Lyon, France : International World Wide Web Conferences Steering Committee, 2018, p. 603-604.

Propaganda

Lee, an American sociologist who worked regularly with the Institute for Propaganda Analysis (1937 – 1942), outlined five interrelated approaches to effective propaganda analysis: (1) societal – recognizing propaganda's emergence from social tensions and struggles within a culture; (2) social-psychological – acknowledging the propagandist's understanding of what will stimulate or provoke the audience's consciousness; (3) communicatory – recognizing the need for analysis of the character of the communicator and medium used; (4) psychological – observes the psychological traits of the propagandist, as well as the propagandist's communicatory gifts of persuasion and audience analysis; and (5) technical – using the propaganda devices in a more thorough analysis than merely labeling each device.²³ Fawkes & Moloney labelled public relations as „weak propaganda“, arguing for a European IPA staffed by field experts and ethicists to establish criteria for ethical behavior and messaging in PR.²⁴

The Knowledge Gap Hypothesis

When addressing the problematic nature of disinformation and propaganda, researchers always reference another key issue/factor – an educated or knowledgeable public. Currently, the American public is somewhat aware of disinformation and propaganda events, although their attitude would not be labeled „vigilant“. Instead, there is a sense of distanced disregard for the alarm surrounding disinformation or propaganda, a kind of „Knowledge Gap“. The Knowledge Gap hypothesis, authored by Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien in 1970, states: „*As the infusion of mass media information into a social system increases, segments of the population with higher socioeconomic status tend to acquire this information at a faster rate than lower social segments, so that the gap in knowledge between these segments tends to increase rather than decrease. This „knowledge gap“ hypothesis does not hold that the lower status population segments remain completely uninformed (or that the poor in knowledge get poorer in an absolute sense). Instead, the proposition is that the growth of knowledge is relatively greater among the higher status segments*“.²⁵ In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Knowledge Gap Hypothesis became the „Digital Divide“ – a separation of individuals who were more schooled in computer technology and terminology was contrasted with individuals who were not able to access computers. By 2007, Apple's iPhone and its „smartphone“ technology bridged the Digital Divide enormously. However, the smartphone phenomenon could only extend knowledge as far as the users' abilities to critically consider information.

3. Discussion

A Proposed Caveat to the Knowledge Gap: Media Literacy

Media literacy should be a part of the Knowledge Gap hypothesis, with the „gap“ referencing degrees of media literacy within the population. In the following pages, this research presents a plan that supports media literacy within the population. For purposes of this research, media literacy should include the following factors: (1) An understanding of how media products are created, including both the technology and the different professional positions associated with media production; (2) Knowledge of how to critique and analyze media products from a critical-cultural perspective; (3) Awareness of different media delivery models; and (4) Knowledge of media history and its place in the history of a culture.

²³ LEE, A. M.: The Analysis of Propaganda: A Clinical Summary. In *American Journal of Sociology*, 1945, Vol. 51, No. 2, p. 128.

²⁴ FAWKES, J., MOLONEY, K.: Does the European Union (EU) Need a Propaganda Watchdog Like the US Institute of Propaganda Analysis to Strengthen Its Democratic Civil Society and Free Markets? In *Public Relations Review*, 2008, Vol. 34, No. 3, p. 212.

²⁵ TICHENOR, P. J., DONOHUE, G. A., OLIEN, C. N.: Mass Media Flow and Differential Growth in Knowledge. In *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1970, Vol. 34, No. 2, p. 159-160.

3.1 Understanding Media Production

Audiences/media consumers should be aware of the nature of production. Such knowledge demystifies the process; a media consumer must understand the use of framing and filters and film/video editing techniques; a media consumer must understand post-production visual effects that drastically alter the final product, from digitally erasing imperfections (or entire people) to completely creating visual „performances“ by editing existing sounds or dialogue and digitally animating participants. A media literate consumer develops a critical eye for content/message construction and is less vulnerable to media „tricks of the trade“.

3.2 Critique and Analysis of Media Products from a Critical-Cultural Perspective

Audiences/media consumers should be educated in propaganda analysis and disinformation analysis. If they are aware of embedded cultural ideologies, they can better discern whether or not they choose to agree with the proposed message. For example, the message for U.S. consumers each Christmas and Valentine’s Day that expensive jewelry is proof of affection is distinctly a capitalist-consumer message. A media literate consumer is less vulnerable to embedded ideological messages.

3.3 Awareness of Different Media Delivery Models

Audiences/media consumers should understand the role of economics in media production and be knowledgeable about different media delivery systems. They should know whether media is subsidized or directly accessed and understand the difference between state-owned media and corporate media. Media outlets in the United States, in recent years, have come under increased centralized corporate ownership. They should also be aware that sponsorships and subsidies often create ethical issues, depending on the goal of the media project. A media literate consumer recognizes economic forces being reflected in media messages, including corporate ownership, product placement, and script content.

3.4 Knowledge of Media History and Its Relationship to the History of a Culture

Finally, audiences/media consumers should be aware of media history within their own culture, as well as other cultures. U.S. citizens should acknowledge that the freedom of the press concept emerged from colonial American experiences in which the British government interfered with early newspaper content. They should be aware of radio and television’s role in bringing historical events into the American living room, or the film industry’s role in raising morale for Depression-era audiences or providing wartime propaganda during World War II. The media literate consumer places media history adjacent to cultural history and cultural expression.

Establishment of a Coalition

The idea of organizational oversight in combating disinformation was frequent in research accessed for preparing this article. This research proposes establishment of an international organization to monitor both propaganda and counter disinformation. Our proposed name could be The International Alliance for Truth and Ethics in Communication, with the mission of overseeing propaganda (like Fawkes and Moloney’s suggestion for a European IPA) and

exposing lie(s) in disinformation campaigns. The IATEC's message would be „The seeds of democracy flourish in the light of truth and ethical utterances“. The organization would be an ideological version of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization; instead of a military collective defense, the organization would be an ideological collective defense against disinformation and propaganda. IATEC would serve as a consolidation point, supporting efforts of already-existing organizations combating disinformation and promoting media literacy educational programs.

Rationale

In the United States, the success of the Institute of Propaganda Analysis, as well as the success of the American counter-disinformation group, the Active Measures Working Group in the 1980s through 1992, suggests success for such an organization. Although the Active Measures Working Group was created within the U.S. State Department and later attached to the United States Information Agency, a counter-disinformation organization should exist without governmental attachment. Research for this article from organizations such as the Atlantic Council, the Hewlett Foundation, or the cyber security firm New Knowledge were not government agencies, yet they provided thorough analyses and counter measures to disinformation campaigns. Ideally, the organization would mimic IPA in terms of employing experts from a variety of backgrounds: social scientists, educators, historians, journalists, opinion leaders, and ethicists. The staff would include experts from media production who could spot fakery, and psychologists to crack the „disinformation code“ and decipher its root appeal for audiences. Within the organization, groups would be assigned to disinformation campaigns on every social media platform, both print and broadcast formats, and other possible information outlets. The staff would begin dismantling each disinformation campaign by publicly fact-checking and publicizing the lie(s). This approach of publicly denouncing disinformation was profiled on HBO's *Vice News Tonight* in May of 2017. The *Vice News Tonight* crew visited Kiev, where the show *Stop Fake News* was uploaded online in both English and Russian. The show also had a website and published 100 copies of their newsletter each month, which was hand-delivered to Ukrainian-held territory in the eastern part of the country. Most of *Stop Fake News* staff were volunteers who worked out of the journalism school in Kiev; the *Vice News* reporter noted that a staff of 29 volunteers were battling the Russian disinformation machine. Unfortunately, the fallout from disinformation campaigns like the one Russia waged against Ukraine was a lapse of trust in journalists, and that inspired the *Stop Fake News* crew to reintroduce the trust in their profession.²⁶

In 2018 in the Czech Republic, university students developed a game for teaching teenagers at the secondary school level how to distinguish between reliable sources and disinformation. The game, Fakescape, was played at schools across the country as part of a counter measure to disinformation. In December 2018, the Czech Republic experienced a new pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign to undermine democracy, a reminder that efforts like Fakescape must remain in action.²⁷

The interactive museum of news, Newseum, in Washington, D.C., opened in 2008 with a mission to promote the importance of a free press and the First Amendment in the United States. Newseum additionally created an online educational repository, NewseumEd, dedicated to media literacy instruction material for students grades 3 through college. This media literacy material includes lesson plans, primary multimedia sources, artifacts, workshops and various interactive learning tools. Two sections of NewseumEd focus exclusively on analyzing and identifying misinformation, as well as on the role of the individual in assessing the veracity of information on digital platforms and overall in digital information.²⁸

²⁶ HASSAN, H. (Reporter): *Navajo Coal & Ukraine's War on Fake News: Vice News Tonight*. Broadcast on 11th May 2017. HBO New York: New York, 2017.

²⁷ *Fakescape: Czech Game Fights 'Fake News'*. [online]. [2018-11-12]. Available at: <https://youtu.be/E7_LOUwJB2U>.

²⁸ *NewseumED*. [online]. [2019-02-22]. Available at: <<http://www.newseum.org/>>.

Perhaps most notable is the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organizations' 2018 warning about the public's lack of media literacy and publication of educational solutions. UNESCO reports, „*Political, technological, economic and social transformations are inexorably reshaping the communications landscape and raising many questions about the quality, impact and credibility of journalism,*” and this is happening at the intersection of groups launching „*orchestrated campaigns to spread untruths via disinformation.*”²⁹ UNESCO targets *disinformation*, which is „*false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country*“, *misinformation*, which „*is false but not created with the intention of causing harm*“ and *mal-information*, which is „*based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, social group, organisation or country.*”³⁰ The international cooperative's open-access online *Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education Training*, combined with its seven downloadable teaching modules could serve as a centerpiece for collective efforts aimed at the general public.

A proposed central organization would create and disseminate media literacy materials in the tradition of IPA's campaigns at engaging citizens to critically think about both propaganda and disinformation. The Fakescape game is a solid example of the kind of material that could effectively engage students to critically approach a communication message. Media literacy materials would be on social media platforms, supported by young opinion leaders for further dissemination. In the tradition of Public Service Announcements (PSA's), opinion leaders could advise followers to fact-check and consider media messages before sharing them.

The organization would create materials and learning modules similar to those supplied by the ICFJ and NewseumEd to assist journalism educators in countering disinformation. Such learning materials would regularly be updated for continued relevance and application in the classroom. The organization would need a repository for materials such as fact sheets to support the ongoing counter-disinformation campaign. An accompanying website similar to that of www.propagandacritic.com would allow visitors to retrieve information for propaganda analysis. For example, the Propaganda Critic site was inspired by the work of the IPA, and features information on topics such as „Social Media and Fake News“, „Bots“, „Sock Puppets“, and „Sleeper Effect“ on the home page, allowing visitors to learn more about those topics. Housing deployable materials for combating disinformation and propaganda within the umbrella of a single organization would increase accessibility for media content producers, educators and the general public, allowing easier access to this information. Combating disinformation requires assaults on multiple fronts. A centralized coalition would serve as an avenue for organizing the division of labor, as well as assessing and disseminating various types of counter-disinformation materials.

Organizational Structure:

1. *Leadership* – composed of journalists, social scientists, educators, historians, ethicists, opinion leaders, psychologists, and media production. This collection of experts is a crucial point: online activity has produced *pseudo experts* – individuals who tout obscure/false credentials supporting their online activity. These individuals are the 21st century version of the traveling salesman with a „magic tonic“. The expert panel representing the proposed organization must have a counter-disinformation campaign focused on debunking „fake expert status“.
2. *Creation of organizational website for online publication of mission, FAQ's, distribution of materials, and contact information for appropriate staff members to report disinformation or propaganda* – self explanatory.

²⁹ *Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education Training*. [online]. [2018-11-15]. Available at: <<https://en.unesco.org/fightfakenews>>.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

3. *Establishment of a communication code of ethics* – the organization must draft a set of standards for communication and create a list of questions for media consumers to ask about every news report, broadcast, social media post, or any other communication outlet ensuring veracity before sharing content. Promotion of the questions should become a ubiquitous campaign, reminding the public to ask if the message meets the organizational standards. One of the key questions should be to check if the originator of a message has previously been flagged for sharing/promoting fake information. Organizations such as Reuters, the BBC, the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ), the Radio Television Digital News Association (RTDNA), and the National Press Photographers Association could be key stake holders in developing frameworks for news standards.
4. *Continued refinement of algorithms for discerning fake information* – algorithms, proven to be helpful in determining „fake“ content, should be used in conjunction with human review; algorithms would need to be routinely modified to keep up with the disinformation campaigns.
5. *Creation of regional offices for exposing fake news in different parts of the world, focusing on stories in the immediate area* - the local arms of the counter-disinformation coalition would receive reports, track stories, and focus on debunking local and regional stories.
6. *Creation of educational content for widespread use by educators and employers, and recruitment and alignment with universities and colleges at local levels* - local universities could create content such as the Fakescape game created by Czech Republic students.
7. *Request adoption/adherence to the organization’s algorithms, principles, and code of standards, and at least one organizational representative be at the headquarters of every social media platform* - the Silicon Valley „marketplace of ideas“ exhibits a naivete about the threat level of disinformation to democracy, and that must end. The organization could express support for passage of the Honest Ads Act, a bipartisan measure proposed by Senators Amy Klobucher, Mark Warner, and the late John McCain (Fried and Polyakova, 2018). The measure would extend disclosure requirements to social media, matching the standards of other media; television political ads, print political ads, and radio political ads are required to disclose who paid for the ad under the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, but social media ads are not currently required to disclose. The bill would amend the law to make „reasonable efforts“ to ensure the ads are not purchased „directly or indirectly“ by foreign countries. The bill would require companies to disclose how advertisements were targeted, and how much the ads cost. There is a companion bill in the House of Representatives (HR 4077) sponsored by Representative Derek Kilmer.³¹
8. *Request partnerships with Non-Government Organizations to support the cause of counter-disinformation* – finding support among other organizations allows for increased visibility and promotion of democratic principles.
9. *Headquarters for the counter-disinformation organization* should be in a location that best serves the global public and may be determined by members of the organization.

4. Conclusions

While this analysis and corresponding suggested practical actions have focused primarily on disinformation campaigns targeting political issues, there are other areas of disinformation that must be addressed by counter-disinformation misinformation campaigns. Although not discussed in this research, targeted disinformation and diffuse misinformation occur in other narratives and debate surrounding divisive issues such as vaccine/disease control narratives, environmental science narratives, and in the U.S., racial tensions and corresponding narratives.

³¹ *The Honest Ads Act*. [online]. [2019-03-25]. Available at: <<https://www.warner.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/the-honest-ads-act>>.

The other factor for consideration in the U.S. is the general arrogance surrounding disinformation. Currently, the public sphere dismisses the idea that they were victims of disinformation campaigns, though the data reveals the opposite is true. The public must lose the denial perspective. One important tactic for deployment should be widespread publication of the New Knowledge report, the Hewlett Foundation report, the Atlantic Council report, and the October 2018 discussion paper, „The Fight Against Dis-information in the U.S.: A Landscape Analysis“, by Legg and Kerwin. The authors characterize disinformation as a by-product of the mass and speed of information and the rise of the „Attention Economy“, observing that the digital age has brought new challenges. They quote BuzzFeed media editor Craig Silverman, who offered that society has never before been deluged by the barrage of biases and misinformation at such scale and speed.³² They referenced the „collapse of local journalism“ world-wide as enabling disinformation to spread and dominate narratives in important issues. Legg and Kerwin advocate for building up media literacy, applying platform pressure and disrupting nefarious actors.³³

The development of an organized alliance to effectively consolidate fragmented efforts of combating the spread of disinformation and promoting continued efforts to teach media literacy to the general public, as well as in formal education settings, would provide a way for those cataloged in Legg and Kerwin’s report to coordinate efforts and resources. The solution is more local journalism, more circumspect narrative journalism – not a reactionary shift to compete for entertainment regardless of the veracity of its message, or for short attention spans. The efforts described in this paper would support endeavors to this end and additionally provide an alternative avenue for media consumers seeking thoughtful and well-constructed news narratives, as well as the guidance and ability to discern truth from disinformation in the age of digital disruption, chaos, and polarization. This would allow more of the American public to become astute, media literate consumers who recognize disinformation and propaganda. It would also address a related issue, the rise of the pseudo-expert. The pseudo experts must be debunked and dismantled. The pseudo-expert noise must be eliminated – whether it is found in debate about politics, disease control, environmental science, or other narratives where logical fallacies are introduced.

Both consumers and practitioners must work to minimize the effects of the spread of disinformation and misinformation. Accurate and transparent disclosure must become a requirement on social media platforms as self-governance has failed and the „marketplace of ideas“ has become the marketplace of dissent. Disinformation is a serious problem, and media literacy for both content creators and the consumer public is the first line of defense. The need for increased media literacy is not a hopeful vision for a better future – it is crucial for the future of democratic process. All of the research material recognized the need for recognition of disinformation as a threat to democracy, and the need for addressing the social context driving the messages. Failure to do so is not an option.

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³² LEGG, H., KERWIN, J.: *The Fight Against Disinformation in the U.S.: A Landscape Analysis*. [online]. [2018-11-28]. Available at: <<https://shorensteincenter.org/the-fight-againstdisinformation-in-the-u-s-a-landscape-analysis/>>.

³³ Ibidem.

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