The International Chapter on Misinformation
An institutional solution within UNESCO

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Abstract

For the ‘Global Challenges Competition’ at the University of St Andrews, we were asked to formulate a solution that tackles the recent phenomenon of “fake news”. In the absence of a centralised, international effort which can coordinate other efforts and set guidelines, we advocate an institutional solution which operates at the international level. More specifically, we propose the creation of a departmental chapter on misinformation that is placed within the existing structure of the Global Alliance for Media and Information Literacy (GAPMIL), itself a subpart of UNESCO. This report arrives at this conclusion by an analysis of the problem and its importance in Section I, followed by a brief examination of already existing solutions and their respective deficiencies in Section II. With this background in mind, Section III presents our solution and situates it within GAPMIL (UNESCO), while Section IV provides an outline of how this solution would look. This proposal was created in active consultation with GAPMIL, including a meeting at their Paris office, elevating our proposal from being a purely theoretical exercise towards a feasible, concrete, and practical solution presently under full consideration by UNESCO.
Part I: The Problem of Misinformation

Defining Misinformation

“Fake news” is a term which has only recently developed currency. In particular, it is a term of abuse to demean and cast aspersions on the free press (Berger, 2017). The problem of misinformation in contrast, is separated from this highly politicised definition and is a real problem for citizens around the world, because it refers to legitimate trends polluting the information ecosystem. This research will focus on misinformation to avoid the connotations involved with “Fake News” and better orient itself to addressing the problem in a non-partisan way. To this end, we use the definition of misinformation given in the 2018 report of the Directorate-General for Communication Networks, Content and Technology of the European Commission in defining misinformation as “all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit” (EU, 2018: 3).

Misinformation which arises in the media ecosystem can be separated into four broad categories. This paper subdivides them into satires, media mills, conspiracy theories, and organised propaganda campaigns. The first, naturally, is not a problem for the free press. Rather, it stems from a lack of context and the tongue in cheek nature of satirical newspapers which encourages them to convey their information in a way that matches that of legitimate purveyors of news. Solutions to this are not readily available without discouraging the dissemination of information which is vital to a free press, although a more strenuous effort on the part of media purveyors to ensure that such articles are disseminated with adequate context could be helpful.

Media mills are a more recent phenomenon. These are forms of misinformation which arise due to the financial incentives which drive many online news platforms. Online web platforms are incentivised to maximise traffic in order to generate ad revenue. Ad companies, in turn, have little oversight or interest in determining where this traffic comes from, or the veracity of the information they provide on the platform that puts them in contact with potential customers. The result is a system in which web platforms often become informal news platforms which host dubious or sensational stories in order to increase their traffic and therefore their ad revenue (Tambini, 2017). While some recent steps have been made to
combat this phenomenon, the checks on these commercially based sources of misinformation remain critically underdeveloped. Working with regulators to provide a more robust degree of due diligence on the part of the advertisers which sponsor online platforms is therefore of the utmost importance.

Conspiracy theories are a natural beneficiary of this internet-based business model. Trucking in narratives which explicitly rely upon the presupposition that the press is in a conspiratorial relationship with those in power to suppress the truth, these forms of misinformation seek to discourage citizens from relying upon fact-checked sources of information, and instead to rely upon narrow providers of conspiracy theories seeking to advance an agenda. Groups operating along these lines explicitly seek to gain credibility for their work on the basis of the fact that it is not accepted within mainstream news circles and peer-reviewed academic scholarship. More generally, these campaigns rely upon the confirmation bias of its audience, difficulty of reviewing sources and the ease of dissemination enabled by the internet to reach a larger audience than would otherwise be possible.

But the tactics of misinformation campaigns are available to those with capabilities far beyond those of conspiracy theorists. Organised propaganda campaigns, often using the same political tools, generalise their tactics to the benefit of powerful entrenched interests. Often the formula is remarkably simple: produce a novel but damaging attack on the opposition, often linked to public perceptions and stereotypes already available to increase its credibility, and circulate it widely as quickly as possible to maximise impact and avoid censorship.

**Misinformation in Action**

The aforementioned tactic is dangerously effective. In the largest ever survey of misinformation campaigns on social media yet produced, it was found that false claims playing upon popular presuppositions were consistently more original than their truthful counterparts, and thus penetrated deeper into and further across social media networks at a rate six times faster than truthful stories (Vosoughi, Roy, Aral, 2018). Propaganda campaigns remain a strategy available to powerful but highly insular political parties which wish to ride popular discontent into state power, and grow more plausible in the context of “echo chambers” which often surround social media users interacting with the internet through platforms customised to provide news stories and analysis from angles they prefer (Flaxman,
Goel, Rao, 2017). This form of misinformation, and the difficulty of verifying sources endemic to the internet, constitutes a potent form of misinformation because it gains strength in an atmosphere of declining trust in public institutions and the press.

These conjoint factors are now widely recognised as amongst the most important threats to political systems across the world. World Economic Forum’s 2018 “Global Risks Report” listing fast moving media misinformation campaigns as amongst the top ten causes of “global uncertainty and strengthening discontent with the existing political and economic order” (WEF, 2018: 6). Thus, a vicious cycle in which a lack of political responsiveness erodes faith in public institutions, which in turn become less reliably able to respond to the needs of the electorate, playing a potent role in explaining the rising appeal of all forms of targeted misinformation campaigns. The rise of these misinformation campaigns, and the destabilising effect they have on political systems also help explain why politicians ruling increasingly unstable political coalitions become forced to deflect criticisms of their often narrow agendas through labelling criticisms levelled at them by the press “fake news”.

Ultimately, misinformation, and more recently, its politically weaponised calling card “fake news”, constitutes a constant threat to the health of any political system. Institutional actors have been correct in stressing the difference between the two so as to not play into the hands of those attacking the free press, but they are equally right to be concerned about forms of misinformation that are deliberate, widespread, and malicious. Today, countries around the world are facing important challenges which demand the ability of the public to receive actionable information in a timely fashion. At the same time, many countries are facing declining faith in public institutions which further encourages the receptiveness of the public to the tactics of misinformation campaigns. It thus remains the task of media producers and disseminators alongside the international community of states to produce a media environment in which those sources of information which are accurate are privileged in public circles so that the right of private judgement is best able to exercise itself. In this report, we stress the necessity of having an institutional, coordinated effort to combat media misinformation, by suggesting the creation of an International Chapter on Misinformation under the Global Alliance for Partnerships on Media and Information Literacy (GAPMIL) of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). This project
receives validation from the various deficiencies of previous and ongoing initiatives that tackle misinformation, analysed in the following section.

**Part II: Existing Solutions and Their Limitations**

Throughout our extensive research, we encountered many ongoing efforts and approaches towards addressing the problem of misinformation; albeit none capable of conclusive and entirely effective results. In an online report titled, “Design Solutions for Fake News” created by Upworthy founder Eli Pariser, technologists, academics and media experts compiled every problem and approach that has been or is currently being worked on with regards to the problem of misinformation. Pariser noted that much of this work and the ideas behind it “have significant flaws” and that misinformation is not “a simple problem to solve” (Pariser et al., 2016: 5). Below, we have outlined the benefits and limitations of three main types of approaches: technological, policy-based and pedagogical.

**Technological Approaches**

Technological approaches include fact-checking and algorithms to prevent the creation and distribution of misinformation by technological means.

**Fact-checking**

Fact-checking websites such as Politifact and Snopes aim at flagging or countering misinformation by employing fact-checkers to identify, verify and correct it with explanatory and analytical judgments. Elizabeth Losh (College of William & Mary) criticises the reliance on fact-checking rather than a pursuit of veracity, claiming that there is a lack of authentic verification in such websites: trust in them is unstable, and they are vulnerable to accusations of political bias (Losh, 2018). According to *The Science of Fake News* (Lazer, 2018), the efficacy of fact-checking websites may even be counterproductive, as research conducted on recalling information and familiarity bias revealed that when fact-checking sites repeat false information, even if to denounce it, they “may increase an individual's likelihood of accepting it [the misinformation] as true” (Ibid: 1095).
**Algorithms**

Algorithms detect, remove or make sources of misinformation less accessible. Facebook, Twitter and Google rely on monetising shares, clicks, likes, and tweets through advertising, thus showing how AI can work through complex algorithms designed to predict and further user engagement. Therefore, it is plausible to expect that these social media platforms could systematically work to promote activity which avoids automated computer software (bots) often used to spread misinformation.

Facebook already announced its intention to change its algorithm for “quality”, but there is a lack in information provided by such platforms for objective evaluation by third-parties, and little monetary incentive for social media companies to curtail the problem given that every like, share or tweet yields financial reward. The problem with such algorithmic solutions will be a common struggle seen in anti-cyber-warfare efforts, where inevitably countermeasures are quickly and effectively developed. Recently, the Computational Propaganda Research Project (COMPROP) based in the Oxford Internet Institute, analysed the interaction between algorithms, automation and politics showing evidence that “complex algorithms and bots… seek to do constructive public service, though their overall impact is uncertain” (Woolley & Howard, 2017). Ultimately, another concern might also be how we define misinformation for such algorithms and bots. Algorithms lack a capacity for critical judgement, making them limited tools in addressing concentrated misinformation campaigns.

**Policy Approaches**

Policy approaches aim to employ expertise in relevant fields, and apply a principle of action.

*EU High-Level Expert Group Commission*

The EU High-Level Expert Group Commission was established in January 2018, with 39 appointed representatives from social media platforms, journalists and academics (EU Commission, 2018). The aim of the group is to advise policy-makers in the EU regarding the rise in misinformation. In early March 2018 a final report was delivered, affirming the value of a multi-stakeholder approach, yet without prescribing an overarching solution. In an interview we conducted with Dr. Guy Berger, Director for Freedom of Expression & Media Development at UNESCO, Berger shared our reservation with establishing an effectively “regional” commission (Berger, 2018). He pointed to the inevitably exclusionary connotations
of a project that ultimately relies on political motivations as well. In the context of the EU High-Level Expert Group Commission, heavy political bias targeting misinformation from the Russian Federation in particular hampers its multilateral effectiveness.

**Legislative Approaches**

Legislative approaches involve the introduction of regulatory laws, fines and potential jail sentences to reduce the incentive of spreading misinformation. In January 2018, the French President Emmanuel Macron proposed rules for social media that would reveal the sources of news content, “as well as [set] limits on how much could be spent on sponsored news material” (BBC, 2018a), whilst Malaysia has already introduced an act through parliament making publishing misinformation worthy of a fine of more than “$100,000 and up to six years in jail” (Quartz, 2018). An example already in effect is from Germany, which introduced a fine-based approach with the Netzwerkduchsetzungsgesetz (NetzDG) law in June 2017. As of October 2017, social media sites neglecting to remove “obviously illegal” (BBC, 2018b) posts are subject to 50 million Euro fines after 24 hours. Such legislation targets the monetisation of misinformation, but faces doubt from organisations like Human Rights Watch who commented, “[this law] can lead to unaccountable, overbroad censorship” (Human Rights Watch, 2018). We find that a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach would be more effective since the nature of misinformation transgresses borders, while censorship issues require a neutral platform to be discussed, where regulating the supply of information is balanced with freedom of speech.

**Pedagogical Approaches**

Pedagogical approaches involve a focus on educating individuals and groups on critical thinking. This can include government curricula or public campaigns.

**Government Education Programs**

Governments around the world seek to implement critical thinking courses into their national educational curricula. One example is the ‘Commission into Fake News and the Teaching of Critical Literacy Skills’ by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy and the National Literacy Trust in the UK. The group will provide a series of recommendations to the UK government for implementation sometime in 2018. This commission came to light alongside a recent report by the National Literacy Trust in UK revealing that 20% of children surveyed
between eight and fifteen, “believe everything they read online is true” (Longfield, Children’s Commissioner, 2017), whilst 35% of UK teachers claim that students have cited misinformation in their schoolwork (National Literacy Trust, 2017: 8).

**MIL CLICKS**

Furthermore, available on social media is the initiative MIL CLICKS (Critical thinking and creativity, Literacy, Intercultural, Citizenship, Knowledge and Sustainability) by UNESCO. The aim of this approach is to use social media as a tool for educating individuals on critical thinking, for their daily use of the internet. In regards to the project, Grizzle notes, “We want to integrate learning, creating and engaging, so that people click critically and wisely” (UNESCO, 2016). MIL CLICKS currently spreads resources, suggestions and short tips on media literacy information and skills. Through the social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, MIL CLICKS encourages people to develop media and information literacy skills and teaches how to analyse and identify credible sources.

One significant problem with pedagogical approaches is that they only address misinformation once it has arisen, not at its source. This is problematic, as the greatest obstacle individuals face with misinformation is the psychological predisposition to trust available content no matter its source, something which critical pedagogical training cannot entirely surpass (Gilbert, Tafarodi, & Malone, 1993). The findings of the digital creative agency ISL through their app “Fake News: The Game” reveal a psychological weakness to misinformation so strong that “roughly half of all users on their first play failed to identify fake news from real [news]” (ISL, 2017). That is why, alongside promoting critical thinking programs for individuals, we nonetheless believe a balance towards focusing on policies which reduce the incentive to circulate misinformation is necessary.
Towards a Unified Approach

The single greatest weakness of existing approaches consists in the fact that they are not unified into a single framework of action. The technological approaches are limited due to the monetary incentives to spread misinformation and the swift counter-measures developed to technological solutions. Policy approaches are also problematic as they are not cohesive, but instead remain nationally or regionally focused. Finally, pedagogical approaches only address the demand-side of the problem, leaving the supply of misinformation unaffected.

Therefore, our proposal will call for a coordinated effort that is non-partisan, non-regional, international and which addresses supply-side policies as much as demand-side policies. We stress the importance of a unified approach that will collect, track, evaluate and bring together the existing efforts. This would increase effectiveness whilst remaining a non-partisan, international platform.

PART III: An Institutional Solution within UNESCO

In order to avoid the described shortcomings, we believe an international and institutional approach is needed. Therefore, we propose the creation of a Chapter on misinformation subordinated to GAPMIL (UNESCO) that operates internationally. Throughout the development of this project we remained in close exchange with GAPMIL to ensure the viability of our project.

UNESCO & GAPMIL

As an international organisation, “advised by hundreds of affiliated NGOs, with many national and regional centres and institutions and national commissions in many nations”, UNESCO is the ideal space for the implementation of our proposal for several reasons (Seeger, 2015: 269). First, being a specialised agency of the United Nations (UN), UNESCO carries a non-partisan authority which is of crucial importance when it comes to addressing often partisan misinformation campaigns. The aim of our proposal to limit the harmful consequences of misinformation also resonates in UNESCO’s constitution, which believes in the “full and equal opportunities for education for all, in the unrestricted pursuit of objective truth, and in the free exchange of ideas and knowledge” (UNESCO, 2018a). Furthermore,
UNESCO has a long history of working on media education and information literacy. For example, the 2007 Paris Agenda, following the initial Grünwald Declaration in 1982, reinforced a sense of urgency for an international mobilisation of scaling up the importance of media education (Paris Agenda, 2007).

More specifically, our proposal fits under the parameters of GAPMIL. Placed under the Communication and Information Sector of UNESCO, GAPMIL defines itself as a “groundbreaking effort to promote international cooperation to ensure that all citizens have access to media and information competencies” (See Figure 1) (GAPMIL, 2018).

Figure 1. (UNESCO, 2018b)
By this definition, GAPMIL was specifically created for instances like the implementation of our proposal. Since its creation in 2013, GAPMIL has done significant work on Media and Information Literacy (MIL) which is highly relevant and provides a useful framework for any solution aimed at tackling misinformation. For instance, GAPMIL has released strategy and policy guidelines for member states, a curriculum for teachers, guidelines for broadcasters and initiated public campaigns such as the earlier mentioned MIL CLICKS. At the same time, GAPMIL has the connections and resources without which a project like this is extremely difficult to implement. The International Steering Committee (ISC), which consists of representatives from the core group of partners engaged in GAPMIL, coordinates the overall implementation of GAPMIL activities in consultation with international agencies including UNAOC, UNICEF, the Open Society Foundation, IREX and the European Commission (International Steering Committee, 2018). Moreover, GAPMIL has a research arm (MILID Network) which aims to maximise the contributions of its members at both policy and operational levels in order “to ensure that the collective knowledge and expertise are not only shared, but are also reflected in the elaboration of strategic projects at national, regional and international levels“ (MILID Network, 2018).

Our Chapter in Context

Although GAPMIL provides the ideal institutional framework to implement our project, we believe it is necessary to go beyond its existing structures. Put simply, GAPMIL wants to increase access to information and educate on MIL, while we want to protect that access to information, further the educational part in light of the most recent developments in misinformation, and provide a cohesive approach that unifies existing solutions to account for the severe challenge that misinformation poses to our societies. Therefore, we propose the creation of a specific Chapter on misinformation, which operates internationally, and is subordinated to GAPMIL (UNESCO). Within the formal structure of GAPMIL, it will be situated alongside the regional chapters, but with a remit to coordinate responses between them so as to ensure a truly global response (See Figure 2).
Figure 2. Suggested placement of our chapter within GAPMIL

The decision to formally embed our *Chapter* as a parallel chapter to the regional ones, resulted from a discussion of our initial proposal at the GAPMIL office located in UNESCO Headquarters in Paris on 29 March 2018 with Xu Jing. Yet, we are open to discuss and, if necessary, to modify our proposal should GAPMIL and the International Steering Committee believe that our aim is best accomplished through an alternative institutional blueprint. Following the advice of Dr Berger, our main focus is that our *Chapter* will not be limited to a purely regional remit, that it be given a permanent remit so as to be able to ensure long-term collaboration, and that its operation be sufficiently specialised so as to ensure that it can meaningfully serve to coordinate the international response to misinformation.

**PART IV: The Structure of Our Chapter**

Our *Chapter* would be a standing body within GAPMIL, empowered to call upon relevant members of national governments and the private sector. At the same time, it would be responsible for encouraging proactive responses to sources of misinformation, and discouraging those which risk endangering the public interest. The *Chapter* would be modelled
after UNESCO/UNAOC’s MILID by consisting of three sections: Research, Education, and Participation (See Figure 3).

**Research Section**

The Research section is responsible for investigating how misinformation campaigns evolve, and evaluating the social consequences of policies proposed to address misinformation. In general, it is responsible for setting the agenda of the *Chapter* and providing constructive criticism of initiatives being considered by NGOs, national governments, and transnational institutions.

The original section proposed was meant to have a subdivision focused upon investigating potential solutions to the problem of misinformation through recourse to technological means, along the lines of automatic fact-checking and AI-based solutions mentioned above. However, this proposal was modified following recommendations made by the aforementioned Mr. Xu of GAPMIL, who pointed out the infeasibility of an in-house technological subsection, while stressing the comparative strength of UNESCO in working alongside relevant technological specialists from the perspective of recommending public policy solutions. As a result, it would fall to the Research section to evaluate, not produce, technological solutions produced by collaborators with the *Chapter*.

Another important priority for the research section involves working with policymakers from social media websites and national governments to change the financial incentives which
permeate news disseminators and encourage the rapid transfer of dubious information. At present, the structural incentives of advertisers seeking a captive audience, publishers seeking revenue for personal gain, and online platforms seeking to draw in traffic all benefit from the present method of news trafficking and all align in an atmosphere in which there exist minimal regulations on the content of publishers (Tambini, 2017). Unless this relationship is problematised, it is difficult to imagine the information available to citizens will have the same fidelity to conventional journalistic ethics as in drawing in consumers with various forms of confirmation bias and yellow journalism.

Ultimately, however, the Research section will have to concern itself with the fundamental legal and ethical questions involved in combatting misinformation that at times reflect the genuinely held beliefs of the disseminator. Defending the right to spread misinformation is, at some level, a defence of freedom of speech, and demarcating the borders between a legally defensible right to free speech and threats to public safety, libel, and the like will form an important block of considerations which the Research section will have to robustly address when evaluating proposals, particularly of a legislative nature, attempting to address the problem of widespread misinformation.

**Education section**

The education section aims to increase awareness about misinformation. Its main three tasks include the publishing of information and educational guidelines, advice and consulting for member states and NGOs, as well as the initiation of public campaigns. In this way, the education section will closely cooperate and benefit from already existing structures within GAPMIL. Similar to reports such as *Media and Information Literacy: Policy and Strategy Guidelines* it would publish information and policy guidelines on misinformation. If this proposal is implemented, a first step would be to write a report that analyses and informs about the problem of misinformation. Misinformation can also be easily incorporated in ongoing efforts of GAPMIL. For instance, one could add a chapter on misinformation to the *MIL Curriculum for Teachers*. Besides providing educational guidelines, the education sector would also advise and cooperate with member states, international organisations and NGOs with respect to the challenge of misinformation and possible solutions. Finally, the education sector would oversee the implementation of and cooperation with public campaigns such as the aforementioned MIL CLICKS.
Participation Section
The Participation section would provide a platform for dialogue between the authorities of different states as much as promoting public discourse in member states. Annual meetings with government representatives on policy advice, and reports following the implementation of policies would be overseen by this section. With respect to fostering dialogue between states, it would, for instance, bring representatives from countries that desire to introduce policies to combat misinformation in close contact with those who already have them. With the aim to support public discourse, this department further aims to assist communicative exchanges between academia, the public and different social groups. This is to be done by publishing magazines or social media presence, where academic discourse and authoritative information is translated into accessible language. Furthermore, this section will promote actions that encourage the participation of citizens and different stakeholders through the organisation of conferences and cooperating with ongoing initiatives at MIL. For example, this section would have a strong presence in initiatives such as the Global Initiative Network (GIN) held on February 8th at UNESCO headquarters in Paris to discuss how the internet can support electoral integrity and address the misinformation problem that compromises the trust of voters.

Feasibility and Realisation of the Proposal
Support for the institutional solution outlined above has been, among others, already attested to us in person by Dr. Guy Berger, Director of the Division of Freedom of Expression and Media Development at UNESCO as well as media theorist and digital rhetoric scholar Dr. Liz Losh (William & Mary University). Perhaps more importantly, we have already proposed our initiative at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris to GAPMIL Programme Specialist Alton Grizzle and Consultant Xu Jing. Grizzle and Jing were sympathetic to our project and have supported our ideas. In fact, upon expressing interest in our project, Grizzle and Jing wish to pass this report onto the International Steering Committee to discuss its implementation. This shows that our proposal is fully in line with the requirements of the Global Challenges competition, whilst already contributing to ongoing strategies to counter the phenomenon of misinformation. We highly appreciate the mentorship of Dr. Filippo Costa Buranelli and his guidance throughout our project and hope to have the continuing support of the University of St Andrews for its implementation.
Conclusion

The phenomenon described by the Global Challenges competition as “fake news” hinders the freedom of judgement and verifiable information crucial for free societies and democratic structures. At the same time, attempts to address these forms of misinformation must be acutely conscious of the difficulties involved in attempting to exert regulatory control over the right of expression. Finding a solution which balances this right of private individuals to exercise their freedom of speech with the public interest of structuring communications system to privilege verifiable information information is therefore both a legally knotty question and a vital one. In this report, we provided an outline of the problem, a review of existing solutions, and advanced our own contribution to this ongoing debate.

Existing solutions include technological, legislative and pedagogical approaches. Yet, all of them are limited by being either one-dimensional, partisan, regional, or uncoordinated to have an effective impact on tackling misinformation. Thus, there is a strong need for an institutional solution which unifies and coordinates already existing efforts within a single framework of action. To that end, we proposed the creation of a departmental Chapter on misinformation that is subsumed under the existing structure of the Global Alliance for Media and Information Literacy (GAPMIL), a subpart to UNESCO. This Chapter would be organised in Research, Education and Participation sections to account for the complexity of the problem. The Research section provides strategy guidelines, policy recommendations, and social and legal analysis of existing proposals and initiatives. Next, the Education section increases awareness about misinformation by publishing educational guidelines, offering advice to interested stakeholders and by initiating public campaigns. Finally, the Participation section provides a platform for dialogue and exchange between all stakeholders.

Our proposal is to be presented to the International Steering Committee of GAPMIL for its eventual implementation in May 2018. We look forward to their feedback, and to further collaboration with the Committee in producing a truly international solution.
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