# General Assembly

BCNMUN VII

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Fake News: setting standards to balance the media's right to expression and the public's right to truthful news

# Table of Contents


| | |
|---|---|
| Table of Contents | 2 |
| Introduction | 3 |
| Definition of Key Terms | 4 |
| Background Information | 5 |
| Important Events | 6 |
| Major Countries and Organizations Involved | 7 |
| Timeline of Events | 9 |
| Relevant UN Treaties and Organization | 10 |
| Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue | 11 |
| Possible Solutions | 12 |
| Bibliography | 13 |

**Topic:** 3

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## Introduction

Fake news (also known as junk news or pseudo-news), is a type of journalism or propaganda that consists of purposeful disinformation spread via traditional news media (print and broadcast) or social media. Fake news are generally written and published with one of three common purposes: financial gain (to attract internet traffic and/or advertising income) personal (to harm an individual, agency or party reputation); or political interests (to influence the public's viewpoint/ideology). These stories can look convincing by copying the look of trusted websites or using similar names and web addresses as reputable organisations. The phenomena of fake news is now common all around the globe, in a significant way, and it constitutes a large threat to democracy and freedom of speech. The cause is personal benefit, but the consequence is global and can affect many; not only the targets of these lies, but also the truthful journalists. The use of fake news makes it harder for people to access reliable and factual news, slowly losing trust in the media industry. As a consequence, the real precise journalists do not get credit nor are they rewarded for their labor.

Other serious repercussions that make the problem imminent and alarming is that across the globe, it has caused shifts in voters' stances, leading from the severe manipulation of citizens to causing violence amongst ethnic groups. These circumstances have existed since long before the creation of the internet. However, traditional media outlets were required to follow strict codes of practice. The internet has enabled a quicker and less-regulated way to publish information. For example, "As well as being a favourite term of Donald Trump, it was also named 2017's word of the year, raising tensions between nations, and may lead to regulation of social media"(Carson). Debate globally on this topic is also regarding what the term "fake news" means to every nation state and to what extent is it a crime. Some nation states categorize fake news as misinformation with purposefully bad intention but what about fake hoaxes that were published with good intentions? It is crucial to discuss fake news on a global scale due to the large scale impact it has, especially the internet, which is a broad international platform, that states should work to moderate together.

Some states have already taken action that has lead to a backlash by the population such as in India, that has started to monitor, intercept, and trace messages such as on Whatsapp. Other platforms such as Wikipedia also expressed concerned and revealed that if such law would affect them, they would shut down access in India due to limitations. This plan has evolved as a response to an explosion of fake news that has caused mob violence and lynchings, leading to more than 40 deaths in 2017 and 2018. Regardless, India is just one case. It is critical to find a viable solution to this international threat as a committee.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Misinformation

Incorrect/Misleading information spread with the purpose of misinforming.

### Disinformation

Information that is false and/or inaccurate that is created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country, subcategory of misinformation.

### Yellow journalism

Journalism and press that presents little or no legitimate well-researched news and instead uses eye-catching headlines, exaggerations and manipulations of events for increased sales.

### Fake news (also known as junk news or pseudo-news)

A type of yellow journalism or propaganda that consists of purposeful disinformation spread via traditional news media (print and broadcast) or social media.

### Checkbook Journalism

The unethical practice of reporters paying sources for stories.

## Background Information

Fake news became popular and spread quickly globally in the 1900s with the high demand of media like newspapers, magazines and propaganda because of the rise of technology. When the Internet was first made accessible for public use in the 1990s, its main purpose was for the spread and access of information. For media outlets, the attraction of readers is crucial to generate advertising revenue. According to various studies, false content made to be entertaining is most likely to attract users, benefitting media outlets and advertisers, as well as improving ratings. For this specific reason, an MIT experiment was conducted, in which the Twitter platform was examined for any possible invalid information, and the results presented that 85% of the posts, in fact, spread false news. Perpetrators, people looking to manipulate or hurt other parties, are hard to punish under the law, and therefore stop, due to various factors such as freedom of the press and if they are small lies.

Freedom of the press is the main reason why solving this prominent issue is hard because the party being sued for spread of misinformation could argue that the government is punishing them for what they are saying, regardless if it is true or not. The other point is that daily far too many lies, that are not that relevant as others, are being published and spread, to be able to be caught. The extent that misinformation has come to is far beyond the capability of state governments currently, so new solutions are necessary as soon as possible, especially through international cooperation since the internet and social media are the issue of more than just one nation. In the continuation there is more information about how perpetrators spread their lies, for what purposes and how nation states currently fight those crimes.

## Important Events

### 2016 U.S. Presidential Election

Fake news played a crucial role in the 2016 US Presidential election. During the campaign period, stories began to circulate, mainly through social media, that were usually false and designed to damage the campaigns of both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Studies concluded that fake news clearly played a role in the outcome of the election. Research carried out by the FBI, traced stories to Russia and to a fake news industry that had been established in the city of Veles, Macedonia, where stories favouring Republican leader Trump were being published. In 2018, Princeton University, Dartmouth College, and the University of Exeter examined the consumption of fake news during the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign. They concluded that Republican candidate Donald Trumps' supporters were much more likely to consume fake news, with a 6.2% consuming such media, while only 0.8% of Hillary Clinton's devotees read such outlets. Additionally, Donald Trump inappropriately called media outlets that he did not like, "fake news", falsely accusing media outlets. In some press briefings, he refused to answer questions from various media outlets he categorized as "fake news".

### Brexit Referendum, United Kingdom

The Brexit vote was largely affected by disinformation. Different kinds of "fake news" claims and stories caused a portion of the population to vote in favor of leaving the European Union. One poster that was widely popular leading up to the vote claimed that Turkey was entering the EU. Using that data, one of the Defence Ministers of the British Government claimed that the UK would not be able to stop Turkish criminals from entering the UK or to veto Turkey's EU accession, and hence should leave this union. Both of these statements were exaggerated and false. The inability of the media to prove these claims wrong caused a portion of the population to vote in favor of leaving. Also, false information about the economic concerns about the UK paying for other countries in the EU to develop their societies and maintain their defence compounded, and hence causing the UK to economically decline, also caused a lot of voters to vote in favor of Brexit. This evidence turned out to be false; in fact, the UK had a financial surplus from its involvement in the European Union, actually owing the EU money.

### Rhoghinya Scandal, Myanmar, Facebook

In the midst of centuries of tension between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar, the military of Burma was held under questioning for setting up fake accounts on Facebook to spread false information about Muslims in the country, inciting violence against the Rohingya minority, that

have lately been prosecuted, causing millions to flee the country. “A recent study found that 38 percent of Facebook users in Burma got most of, if not all, of their news on the site” (Gowen et al.), making the problem more worrying as many of the news on the platform foment hatred.

## Major Countries and Organisations Involved

### Russian Federation

In March 2019, the Russian government passed a new bill that does not only ban websites from spreading false information, but also specifically punishes any sources that offend or go against the state, or other political figures, with a punishment of up to 15 years of jail. This law is accused of going beyond punishing fake news, but also banning information that mostly threaten those in power.

### Belgium

Fake news reached significant levels in 2006, when the broadcaster RTBF showed a news report that Belgium's Flemish Region had proclaimed independence, alongside fictional footage of the royal family evacuating and the Belgian flag being lowered from a pole. Towards the end of the article, it read “fiction”. This article caused chaos and misinformation along the country’s citizens.

### Indonesia

Fake news became an alarming problem in Indonesia during the country’s presidential elections in 2014, where Jokowi, one of the candidates, was a constant target of a false campaign. Fake news claimed that he was the child of Indonesian Communist Party members, of Chinese descent, and a Christian, which led to a lot of conflict within the country, since such traits are of dishonor in the nation. To validate his descent, he was forced to show his birth and marriage certificate publicly. ce. As fake news attacked happened, the government, watchdog groups and even religious organizations took preventive steps. The Communications Ministry blocked 11 websites, mostly for spreading hatred and misinformation and the Press Council implemented measures to censor fake news.

### Politifact

As a response to the fake news crisis, the website Politifact was created, and it is dedicated to fact-checking news stories and rating them on a scale depending on how accurate and true they are. This is mainly focused on the United States.

## European Union

The EU launched a project in the beginning of 2019 against disinformation, ahead of the European Parliament elections of May 26. In December 2018, "the European Commission announced more funds and prevention measures, including a rapid-alert system to help member states recognize and deal with disinformation campaigns". Also, the EU's unit against disinformation, created in 2015 and focusing mostly on campaigns coming from Russia, has already debunked 5,014 falsehoods, 1,166 in the last year alone, according to the database available on Euvsdisinfo.eu.

## Spain

Polls show that the Spanish society is concerned about disinformation. 8/10 Spanish citizens view it as a problem for Spain and democracies overall. One of Spain's most famous newspapers, that is both available physically and online, El País began expanding its fact-checking efforts. They hired new reporters and started a blog called "Hechos," or "facts" in Spanish, to debunk false reports online. They do not only debunk political news; in fact, their first post was about soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo and false accusations about him. The Spanish government is also active on the matter and stated that, "For now there are no computer tools that can guarantee the detection of fake news. We are asking high-level companies to work on detection programs, but it is not easy"(Abellán).

## France

This nation has also suffered, and continues to do so due to fake media. The 2015 Paris terrorist attacks were also subject to conspiracy theories and distortions, including reports this summer that the gunmen who killed 90 people at a rock gig at the Bataclan last November had mutilated their victims. Officials denied that any mutilation took place, and stated that partially the evidence was false. There has also been doubt about fake information regarding abortion in France. "The lower house of the French parliament has approved government plans to ban fake abortion information websites which masquerade as neutral" (Conolly et al) .

## Taiwan

The Taiwanese government, after several threats from Chinese media, has reformed its policy on education and it will include developing critical thinking skills as part of developing "media literacy" as part of the school curriculum for students. This new implementation, is to ensure the freedom of the press and democracy, meanwhile also teaching citizens how to identify such false information.

### United States of America

According to Swift, Americans' trust in the mass media "to report the news fully, accurately and fairly" has dropped to its lowest level in Gallup polling history, with 32% saying they have a great deal or fair amount of trust in the media in , compared to the 72% that expressed their trust in 1976, during the Vietnam War and Watergate scandals ("Americans' Trust in Mass Media Sinks to New Low").

## Timeline of Events

| Date | Description of event |
|---|---|
| 1475 | **Fake stories in Franciscan church:** Franciscan preacher Bernardino da Feltre falsely accused the Jewish community for a missing infant. Fifteen people were falsely accused, called guilty and tortured, contributing to anti-Semitism. |
| 1700s | **The invention of the printing press:** The invention of the printing press, led to these verbally spread lies, to now be written and spread. |
| 1782 | **Lies during American Revolution:** Benjamin Franklin created a fake issue of the Boston Newspaper to build sympathy for the American Revolution. The paper falsely argued that the British used Native Americans to scalp civilians and soldiers. The false information spread and increased public unfriendliness towards Native Americans. |
| 1924 - 1953 | **Use by Communist leaders:** Communist leaders viewed lying as an effective war tactic to discredit enemies. Disinformation was used as a weapon, that also falsely accused civilians, which resulted in many innocent deaths during these communist regimes, such as Stalin's. |
| 1933-1945 | **Spread by Nazi leaders:** One of Hitler's close allies and a powerful actor in German media, Joseph Goebbels founded a newspaper called "The Attack" to serve his propaganda messages, by using lies and disinformation to influence the public to support the Nazi regime. |

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| 1983 | **Fake spread of AIDS Scandal:**<br>The Patriot newspaper published the article "AIDS may invade India: Mystery disease caused by US experiments." The information was quickly spread in around 50 countries around the world, showing an anonymous American scientist's research that showed a "deadly new disease had been created by the Pentagon in a bid to develop new biological weapons." |
| 2016 | **Victimization of Hillary Clinton:**<br>Rumors falsely accused Hillary Clinton of being at the center of a child trafficking ring. |
| 2017 | **Barack Obama Scandal:**<br>A website called The Boston Tribune reported that Barack Obama's mother-in-law would receive money from the government for taking care of her grandchildren. The story spread, but quickly was shut down, as well as the site, as it had no evidence and was completely false. |

## Relevant UN Treaties and Resolutions

### Joint declaration on freedom of expression and "fake news" disinformation and propaganda (2017)

This declaration made by the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression on the 3rd of March 2017 set guidelines as to how the issue of fake news must be dealt with without threatening freedom of speech.

### International Convention concerning the Use of Broadcasting in the Cause of Peace

The International Convention concerning the Use of Broadcasting in the Cause of Peace is a treaty created by the League of Nations in 1936, where the member states agreed to prohibit the use of broadcasting for propaganda or the spreading of false news. It was the first international treaty to bind states to "restrict expression which constituted a threat to international peace and security". At the start of WW2, there were 22 parties to the Convention. The effect of the Convention was severely limited by the fact that Germany, Italy, and Japan, countries which extensively used propaganda campaigns throughout the 1930s and World War II, were not parties to the Convention. Due to that, China, the United States, and the Soviet Union also chose not to ratify the Convention. The U.S. decided not to, since it argued it would violate the First Amendment.

## Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) published a summary in diagram form to assist people in recognizing fake news.

Its main points are:

- Consider the source (to be aware of its purpose)
- Read beyond the headline (to understand the whole story)
- Check the authors (to ensure they are real and credible)
- Assess the supporting sources (to see if they support the claims)
- Check the date of publication (to see if the story is relevant and up to date)
- Ask if it is a joke (to determine if it is meant to be satire)
- Review your own biases (to see if they are affecting your judgement)
- Ask experts (to get confirmation from independent people with knowledge).

In addition, countries such as Taiwan and Finland have decided to use education as a tool to make the population aware, since it teaches the public how to identify fake news, without limiting freedom of expression. For example, in 2014, Finland implemented a course aimed at teaching residents, students, journalists and politicians how to counter false information designed to harm. This initiative is a good approach to prepare citizens of all ages for the complex digital world of today and tomorrow. On the other side, France is trying to solve the problem through legislation. President Macron passed a law to not allow fake news during times of election, even after the French Senate rejected it twice. The law even permits the French television authority to limit foreign channels due to suspicion of false accusations during the elections. However, many French are not happy with this law, arguing that, if there is no rigorous control, the law might end up causing a lot of censorship.

Lastly, non-state actors such as social media companies like Facebook and Twitter have also changed their policies after being heavily criticized for acting like a platform for these crimes. Measures include suspending accounts, rejecting payments to promote content from users spreading hoaxes, warning users of false content and partnering with fact-checking companies to verify the accuracy of information.

## Possible Solutions

Many solutions have been thought of but are not in effect, even with some being implemented but suspended due to poor management. For example, in May 2018 the President of Kenya, Uhuru Kenyatta signed a law to combat cyber-abuse and the spread of fake news. The punishment for those crimes included up to 2 years in prison or up to $50,000 in fines. This lead to criticism among citizens, especially journalists that claimed that authorities could censor many critics came out, most of them journalists, who argued that the authorities could censor any medium that they deemed harmful to them, naming it “fake”. The law did not last a month, until the Supreme Court suspended it indefinitely. The Kenyan approach could be further developed, with specific requirements to claim that information is “false” to punish offenders through jurisdiction. Different factors to be taken into account by nations is the right of freedom of speech, inaccurate & biased censorship and increasing media literacy skills through improved and fair legislation. Other solutions that have already been implemented could be further developed by delegates to achieve success.

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