Combating Disinformation and Protecting Freedom of Expression

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I.   Introduction to the Agenda

Disinformation – false or misleading information spread intentionally – has emerged as a major challenge in the digital age. False narratives can undermine public trust, distort democratic processes, and even endanger lives (e.g. false medical advice during pandemics). At the same time, efforts to combat disinformation risk infringing on freedom of expression, a core human right enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in UNESCO's constitution. Delegates must therefore balance the fight against falsehoods with the safeguarding of open, pluralistic discourse. UNESCO, whose mandate includes promoting freedom of expression and the free flow of ideas, has become a focal point for this issue. Under this agenda, delegates will consider how to preserve a free, independent media and informed citizenry while countering harmful propaganda and false content.

II.   Key Terms and Definitions

- **Disinformation:** Deliberately false or misleading information created and shared to deceive or cause harm (often for political, financial or social ends). Unlike simple rumors, disinformation is crafted with intent to mislead.

- **Misinformation:** Inaccurate information that is spread without malicious intent – for example, a mistaken news report or an unverified rumor.

- **Misinformation:** Genuine information used out of context to mislead (for example, private facts released to embarrass someone, or true data spun to misrepresent a situation).

- **Propaganda:** Biased or misleading messages used to influence public opinion, often by governments or organized groups. Propaganda may blend facts and falsehoods to advance an agenda.

- **Fake News:** A popular term (not a formal definition) often used to describe news articles or reports that are intentionally false, and sometimes used pejoratively by people to dismiss unfavourable but accurate news. Delegates should use more precise terms like "disinformation."

- **Hate Speech:** Public speech that expresses hatred or encourages violence toward a group. While distinct from disinformation, hate speech can be intertwined (false claims about a group may accompany hate speech).

- **Freedom of Expression:** The right of individuals and media to seek, receive and impart information and ideas without interference. This includes press freedom and the right to access information. It is both a human right and central to UNESCO's mandate.

- **Censorship:** Suppression or control of information by an authority. Delegates must distinguish between legitimate content moderation (against harmful lies) and censorship that unduly restricts free speech.

- **Media and Information Literacy (MIL):** Skills and competencies that enable people to critically analyze media and digital information, discern truth, and use information responsibly. UNESCO promotes MIL as a key defense against disinformation.

- **Algorithmic Transparency:** The principle that online platforms should provide clarity about how their recommendation and ranking systems work, as these algorithms can amplify or dampen certain information. Transparency is advocated to build trust and accountability.

III.   Historical Background and Evolution of the Issue

Manipulative information campaigns have a long history. Governments and political groups have used propaganda for centuries – from ancient rulers controlling narratives to elaborate state media in the 20th century (e.g. World War II propaganda, Cold War "information warfare"). However, traditional checks (fact-based journalism, slower news cycles) kept many falsehoods in check.

The internet age dramatically changed the landscape. With the rise of 24/7 news cycles, social media and instant messaging, false information can now spread at unprecedented speed and scale. By the early 2000s, blogs and online forums became vectors for rumour, and social networks accelerated that trend. A watershed moment came in the mid-2010s: the term "fake news" entered public discourse during events like elections in the United States (2016) and Europe (Brexit), when viral misinformation campaigns were found to have significant influence. This period also saw the emergence of sophisticated "bot" networks and troll farms that could amplify divisive content.

International concern has grown in step with these developments. In 2019 UNESCO's General Conference noted a "global rise in disinformation, misinformation, hate speech and online harassment" undermining peace and development, leading it to establish a Global Media and Information Literacy Week to promote critical thinking and media literacy. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 further highlighted the issue: false medical claims (the "infodemic") cost lives, underlining that bad information is not a victimless problem. In recent years, new technology has added complexity. The advent of "deepfake" video and audio, powered by artificial intelligence, makes fabricating realistic false events easier than ever. Major tech firms introduced fact-checking partnerships and content labels around 2018–2020, but critics note that policies often lag behind new tactics.

UNESCO and the broader UN system have increasingly taken up the challenge. Starting with its foundational values of press freedom (e.g. the 1991 Windhoek Declaration on Promoting an Independent Press), UNESCO's focus shifted to digital-age issues. By the early 2020s, global institutions (UN, EU, Council of Europe, OSCE) began formal initiatives: commissioning studies, adopting resolutions, and convening experts. Today delegates will build on decades of evolving strategy: from recognizing the historical role of free press in democracy, to crafting nuanced policies for the internet era.

IV.   International and Regional Frameworks

Several international and regional instruments shape responses to disinformation and protect freedom of expression:

- **United Nations Human Rights Law:** Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights guarantees freedom of opinion and expression. UN Human Rights bodies have repeatedly stressed that any restrictions (including in the name of countering disinformation) must be lawful, necessary and proportionate, and should not undercut the essence of this right. In 2021 the UN General Assembly adopted Resolution 76/227 on "Countering Disinformation for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights," requesting a Secretary-General report (A/77/287) that emphasized rights-based approaches. The Human Rights Council has also held panel discussions and issued guidance on the human rights implications of digital technologies and misinformation.

- **UNESCO Mandates and Declarations:** UNESCO's mandate explicitly includes "maintaining, increasing and diffusing knowledge," with a special emphasis on freedom of expression and press. Over time UNESCO has developed numerous norms. For example, the **Global Alliance for Partnerships on Media and Information Literacy (GAPMIL)** and the **Beijing Declaration (2018)** reaffirm the need for media literacy in the digital era. UNESCO's 2019 General Conference proclaimed an annual **Global Media and Information Literacy Week** (24–31 October) to highlight these issues. In late 2024 UNESCO's Executive Board unanimously adopted a Pakistan-led resolution titled "Countering Disinformation for the Promotion and Protection of Freedom of Expression and Access to Information," directing UNESCO's Director-General to report on actions and reinforcing UNESCO's leadership on this issue. UNESCO has also published policy tools, such as the 2023 **Guidelines for the Governance of Digital Platforms**, which outline multi-stakeholder roles for states, platforms, media and others to ensure that digital media uphold freedom of expression and the right to information.

- **International Plans and Programs:** UNESCO co-leads the **UN Plan of Action on Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity (2012)**, which, while focused on physical safety, acknowledges that threats and online harassment of journalists (often through misinformation campaigns) are part of the problem. The plan encourages states to combat smear campaigns

against media. Additionally, WHO and UN agencies launched efforts against the COVID-19 "infodemic," supporting fact-checking and public information campaigns.

- **Regional Frameworks:**

  - The **European Union** has taken a proactive stance. The 2018 **EU Code of Practice on Disinformation** is a self-regulatory framework in which tech companies voluntarily committed to measures like demonetizing disinformation, improving transparency of political ads, and combating fake accounts. In 2022 this Code was strengthened and integrated into the **Digital Services Act (DSA)**. Under the DSA, very large online platforms must assess and mitigate disinformation risks, and face heavy fines for non-compliance. EU Member States also passed various laws targeting hate speech and online harms while reaffirming free expression (e.g. Germany's NetzDG, France's law on online hate speech).

  - **African Union:** While still developing its approach, the AU's **African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2007)** and various declarations stress free expression as a democratic pillar. In 2023 the AU adopted "Principles on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information," which address misinformation as a global challenge. Several African countries have launched MIL initiatives and convened media coalitions to counter election disinformation.

  - **Inter-American System:** The **American Convention on Human Rights (OAS)** upholds freedom of thought and expression. Though specific instruments on disinformation are emerging (e.g. a 2018 joint declaration on media freedom by OAS bodies), Latin American countries often address disinformation via national election laws and support for fact-checking networks.

  - **Asia-Pacific:** The **ASEAN Human Rights Declaration** includes freedom of expression, but many ASEAN states prefer emphasizing community harmony over individual liberties, occasionally enacting broad "fake news" laws. However, networks like the Asia-Pacific Outreach Group (APF) engage with UNESCO on MIL and FOE.

Throughout, a common theme is that counter-disinformation policies should "comply with international standards on freedom of expression". UNESCO and UN documents repeatedly stress that measures must be carefully calibrated to avoid abuse.

V.   Stakeholder Analysis

- **States and Governments:** Governments play a dual role. They are sovereign actors responsible for protecting citizens from harm (e.g. preventing election subversion or violence incited by lies) but also custodians of press freedom. Democratic states often fund media literacy programs and cooperate with platforms on transparency (e.g. by mandating political ad disclosures). Authoritarian governments, by contrast, may frame dissenting information as "disinformation" and crack down on independent media. In practice, many states fall between these poles: they may seek legislation to curb malicious falsehoods (libel laws, cybercrime laws) while claiming to respect rights, but civil society often fears such laws can be misused for censorship. Elections are a flashpoint: election commissions may monitor online content, and security agencies may track foreign influence campaigns. Moreover, developing countries may lack the capacity to effectively counter cross-border disinformation.

- **Media and Journalists:** News media and journalists are primary targets of disinformation (through smear campaigns, harassment, violence) and are also frontline responders. Reputable media organizations employ editors and fact-checkers to counter false stories. However, traditional media face financial strains, leading some audiences to turn instead to social media or partisan outlets, where misinformation can flourish. Public broadcasters and press councils often collaborate internationally (e.g. through UNESCO networks) to promote verification

and ethical standards. Journalists require safe reporting conditions; UNESCO's "Safety of Journalists" programs emphasize that disinformation attacks on reporters constitute a violation of press freedom. Independent media have also innovated by creating fact-checking units and jointly debunking viral hoaxes.

- **Digital Platforms and Technology Companies:** Internet companies (social media networks, search engines, messaging apps) are major conduits for information. Platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter), YouTube, TikTok and WhatsApp have unmatched reach and influence. These companies face immense stakeholder pressure to moderate content: they develop community standards, use automated tools to remove hate speech and obvious hoaxes, and label or downgrade suspect content. Some invest in third-party fact-checking partnerships. However, platforms also wield significant power over what is seen or suppressed. They cite freedom of expression as a core value, yet their terms of service give them broad discretion. Tech giants have joined initiatives like the EU Code of Practice, agreeing to demonetize disinformation and increase ad transparency. Many governments now demand greater "algorithmic accountability," urging platforms to share data (subject to privacy laws) and allow external audits. Smaller platforms and encrypted apps (e.g. Telegram, Signal, WhatsApp) are harder to regulate; misinformation often spreads unchecked in private groups. Delegates must consider how to involve these corporate actors in solutions.

- **Civil Society and Academia:** Non-governmental organizations, advocacy groups, and educational institutions are crucial. Digital rights NGOs (e.g. Article 19, Access Now) monitor government overreach and educate the public on online rights. Fact-checking organizations (e.g. IFCN signatories) debunk viral myths in multiple languages. Civil society campaigns raise awareness of critical thinking and media literacy at grassroots level. Academic researchers analyze disinformation trends, guiding evidence-based policies (for instance, studies on social media usage and belief in false stories). Religions and community leaders also influence public opinion and have roles in countering harmful rumors. Importantly, civil society often represents marginalized voices; their inclusion helps ensure countermeasures do not silence minorities or dissenters. UNESCO encourages multi-stakeholder forums where governments, tech firms, media and civil society jointly develop standards (reflecting its "Internet for Trust" initiative).

- **International Organizations:** Besides UNESCO, other UN agencies (OHCHR, WHO, UNDP) engage on aspects of the problem: WHO on health misinformation; OHCHR on legal/human rights dimensions; the UN Department of Global Communications on internal and external information integrity. Intergovernmental bodies like the Internet Governance Forum, as well as regional bodies (EU, AU, OAS, ASEAN), provide platforms for policy dialogue. The **Freedom Online Coalition** (a group of democratic states) meets annually to discuss Internet freedom issues, including disinformation. UNESCO's partnership with the EU (the "Global MIL Alliance") illustrates cooperation between international bodies and regional organizations.

Each of these stakeholders has different incentives and limitations. States have the power to set laws and norms but risk bias; tech companies have reach but must heed profit motives and user backlash; media seek credibility but face disruption; civil society is agile but often under-resourced; international bodies can guide but rely on member support. A successful strategy typically requires all stakeholders coordinating under shared principles.

VI.   Current Challenges and Trends

The information environment continues to evolve rapidly. **New Technologies:** Artificial intelligence (AI) is a game-changer. Sophisticated AI tools can now generate realistic text, images and videos ("deepfakes") that are hard to distinguish from truth. For example, AI-generated voices can impersonate public figures, enabling large-scale automated hoaxes. This accelerates disinformation creation: a single actor (state or non-state) can produce and disseminate vast volumes of tailor-made

propaganda cheaply. Regulators and platforms are scrambling to adapt; UNESCO's 2021 Recommendation on the Ethics of AI highlights the need for safeguards against AI-driven deceit.

Media Literacy and Public Awareness: UNESCO surveys report that a large majority of people worry about online disinformation. Yet many users lack the skills to critically evaluate content. UNESCO and partners have scaled up media and information literacy (MIL) programs worldwide (including massive open online courses and school curricula) to empower citizens. These programs emphasize fact-checking, understanding algorithms, and cross-referencing sources. The trend is toward integrating MIL into education systems, but progress is uneven across countries.

Platform Governance and Regulation: Different regions have taken diverging approaches. The European Union leads with stringent rules: its Digital Services Act imposes detailed transparency obligations on very large platforms (e.g. requiring monthly public reports on content moderation). The EU also mandates labelling political advertisements and disclosing funding sources. The UK is moving ahead with an Online Safety Bill that will legally compel platforms to curb certain harmful content (including some falsehoods deemed very harmful). By contrast, the United States has traditionally been more hesitant to regulate content, citing the First Amendment; recent proposals have focused instead on encouraging platform self-regulation or enhancing digital literacy. Around the world, dozens of governments are debating "fake news" laws; critics warn these could chill debate if poorly worded. Finding the right balance – promoting transparency and accountability without censorship – is a major current struggle.

Business Models and Misinformation: The "attention economy" incentivizes sensational and divisive content, since clicks drive ad revenue. Online platforms have introduced demonetization policies to deprive purveyors of disinformation of ad income (a key commitment in the EU Code. There is increasing pressure on advertisers and ad networks to avoid funding sites that traffic in falsehoods. Some major advertisers have even boycotted social media platforms unless they improve moderation. At the same time, subscription models and paywalls have grown for reputable news, but this limits audience reach.

Social and Political Factors: Polarized societies are more susceptible to targeted disinformation campaigns, as people tend to believe false claims that confirm their biases. Foreign interference via disinformation has become a prominent theme: examples include manipulative content by hostile states intended to sway elections or deepen societal rifts abroad. On the other hand, disinformation within countries – such as health myths or extremist propaganda – can fuel local conflicts and undermine public policy. Civil unrest driven by viral rumors (spread through social media and encrypted messaging) has been reported in various regions, leading some governments to temporarily shut down internet access, which raises its own freedom of expression concerns.

Emerging Global Issues: Misinformation around topics like climate change, science, and public health is a growing focus. The recent wars in Ukraine and the Middle East have also seen intensive information battles, with false casualty figures and narratives weaponized online (for example, fictitious atrocity stories). In response, news organizations and platforms have created new verification projects; international bodies stress cross-border information-sharing among fact-checkers.

In sum, the current trends show an arms race between disinformation techniques and countermeasures. Progress includes better media literacy, stronger journalistic and regulatory efforts, and new norms for platforms. Challenges remain ensuring these measures respect privacy and expression, and keeping pace with fast-changing technologies.

VII.   Case Studies

Russia–Ukraine Conflict:
This ongoing conflict provides a stark example of disinformation at state and civil society levels. Russian government media and online networks have repeatedly circulated false narratives about Ukraine (such as fabricated attacks or demonizing Ukraine's leaders). At the same time, Ukrainian authorities control domestic information tightly and have created lists of "internal enemies," raising free speech concerns. International observers note that both sides accuse each other of propaganda. The Russian government frequently labels negative Western or Ukrainian coverage as "fake news," and has enacted domestic laws criminalizing "false information" about its armed forces (especially regarding Ukraine) to suppress dissent. Meanwhile, Ukraine has accused foreign actors of using misinformation to influence its society. The UN and UNESCO have expressed alarm at the threats to journalists in the war (scores of media workers have been killed or harassed) and emphasized the need to counter wrongful censorship. This case highlights how war-time narratives intensify the disinformation challenge, and that preserving independent media in conflict zones is crucial.

Myanmar:
In the aftermath of the February 2021 military coup, Myanmar's generals aggressively used disinformation and censorship tools. They imposed repeated internet blackouts and shutdowns, disrupted social media, and broadcast manipulated footage to justify their crackdown on protesters. State-controlled media spread propaganda blaming democratic activists for violence. Independent journalists faced arrests and violent attacks, including killings, often under spurious charges like defaming the military. UNESCO condemned the violence and has noted the parallel epidemic of falsehoods in social platforms fueling ethnic conflict. For instance, unverified claims about incidents in ethnic regions have fanned communal tensions. Attempts to counter this have included international fact-checking efforts and UN statements, but the military's control of telecommunications makes enforcement extremely difficult. The Myanmar example illustrates how authoritarian regimes weaponize disinformation at home and reject international criticism by branding it as biased.

Brazil's Elections and Social Media:
Brazil has experienced significant challenges with election-related disinformation. In the 2018 presidential election, large volumes of false political messages were spread via WhatsApp chains and social networks. Fact-checking organizations, along with the Superior Electoral Court, tried to curb this by flagging lies and ordering platforms to remove content (though enforcement was complicated by WhatsApp's encryption). In early 2021, Brazil's Supreme Court even attempted to regulate misinformation by requiring tech platforms to police political content before elections, but this was later abandoned amid debate over overreach. Recognizing the threat, Brazilian authorities passed legislation banning deepfakes in campaigns and required election ads to be explicitly labeled. UNESCO's engagement includes inviting Brazil's electoral justice leaders to discuss these issues (as seen in UNESCO's sessions on free expression and democracy). The Brazilian case shows how young democracies grapple with balancing innovative tech regulation and freedom of speech during politically charged periods.

European Union Code of Practice on Disinformation:
The EU's approach provides a notable example of a multi-stakeholder framework. First introduced in 2018 and strengthened in 2022, this Code is a voluntary set of commitments by tech companies (signatories include Google, Meta, Microsoft, Twitter, TikTok, and others) to curb misinformation. Key measures

include **Demonetization** (ensuring that purveyors of disinformation cannot easily earn advertising revenue) **Transparency** in political advertising (platforms must label paid political content with sponsor details and maintain accessible ad libraries), **Integrity** (efforts against fake accounts, bots, and deepfakes), and **Empowering Users** (providing tools to report false content and access credible sources). Although the Code is not legally binding, the European Commission monitors compliance and uses it alongside the DSA. Reports indicate that the Code led to some reductions in monetized disinformation and better data sharing, but also that commitments vary by platform. This case illustrates the potential and limits of industry self-regulation under governmental oversight, and delegates may draw lessons on adapting such frameworks globally.

COVID-19 "Infodemic": Early in 2020, the World Health Organization warned of an "infodemic" of false health information spreading alongside the virus. Delegates should note that within months, social media was flooded with misleading cures, conspiracy theories about vaccine purposes, and anti-science propaganda. Researchers found that thousands of people were hospitalized due to consuming false COVID treatments, and hundreds died from misinformation. In response, international initiatives emerged: UNESCO partnered with WHO and media training centers to offer courses for journalists on covering the pandemic responsibly, attracting thousands of students. This case underscores the life-or-death stakes of misinformation and the role of international cooperation (health and media sectors together) in addressing it. It also highlights a recent trend: crises (health, climate, conflict) often trigger intense bursts of disinformation requiring rapid, cross-border solutions.

VIII. Positions of Key Countries

- **United States:** The U.S. strongly affirms freedom of speech, generally opposing broad censorship. However, it has grown concerned about foreign disinformation (e.g. Russian influence in elections) and the power of tech companies. Recent U.S. debates center on whether and how to reform platform liability protections (Section 230) without violating constitutional speech rights. Officially, the U.S. favors fact-checking and platform transparency over government mandates, and it was a participant in the Global Freedom Online Coalition supporting UNESCO guidelines.

- **European Union (and major democracies like Canada, Australia):** EU countries emphasize protecting democracy through a combination of regulation and education. The EU (backed by Canada and others) stresses that any measures must be consistent with human rights. They have championed UNESCO's multistakeholder approach and the recent UNESCO resolution (co-sponsored by over 50 states). They highlight commitments such as the EU Code and DSA, focus on transparency (political ad rules) and media literacy campaigns. For example, France and Germany have proposed national strategies requiring platforms to reveal algorithms and funding fact-checking networks. These states are likely to push for international cooperation and capacity-building initiatives led by UNESCO.

- **Russia:** The Russian Federation often frames disinformation as a two-way problem and objects to being singled out. It accuses Western media of bias and maintains a narrative of victimhood, pointing to alleged harassment of Russian outlets abroad. Domestically, Russia has passed strict "fake news" laws that penalize what it defines as false criticism of the government or military (especially about Ukraine). In multilateral forums, Russia tends to support language on multi-stakeholder dialogue but is wary of terms like "hate speech" or "extremism" being used to curb speech. It may resist any outcome that it perceives as legitimizing external "truth standards."

- **China:** China's official stance emphasizes "information sovereignty" – the idea that each state has the right to govern its own cyberspace. Beijing rejects outside criticism of its internet censorship as citing "disinformation" in other countries. Chinese state media promotes the notion that uncontrolled online speech leads to chaos (often pointing to social unrest abroad). China has been known to produce its own narratives in regional conflicts (e.g. in the South

China Sea) and to clamp down on any content it deems harmful. In international settings, China calls for "equal" treatment of all countries' information issues and opposes any global norms that could limit its control over domestic information.

- **India:** India has experienced viral social media rumors linked to communal violence and political unrest. The government has responded by tightening social media regulations (e.g. the 2021 IT Rules requiring platforms to trace originators of messages and comply with content takedown notices) and by supporting digital literacy efforts. India emphasizes that misinformation jeopardizes national security (citing examples from cross-border conflicts) and frequently calls on platforms to do more. At the same time, India also defends its legislative actions as within sovereign rights. In multilateral discussions, India has typically supported UNESCO's work on MIL and disinformation, while also seeking to protect its own narratives from foreign interference.

- **Pakistan:** Pakistan has taken an active role at UNESCO, leading the recent executive board resolution on disinformation. Pakistani officials highlight that disinformation and hate speech create social unrest and impede development. They advocate for multilateral initiatives and strong national measures (in fact, Pakistan has also enacted laws against "fake news" domestically). While Pakistan's endorsement of a human-rights based approach is clear, the country's own laws and internet curbs (e.g. in response to violent protests) suggest it also views state intervention as necessary. Thus, Pakistan represents many developing countries that see misinformation as a serious problem but may favor state-led solutions under broad terms.

- **Brazil:** Brazil's experience with election misinformation has made it cautious. Judicial and electoral authorities have demanded that tech companies act promptly to remove threats to democratic discourse. Brazilian officials have generally backed UNESCO's goals of protecting voters from false information, while stressing that regulation must not be politicized. However, Brazil's new government has sometimes criticized independent media as purveyors of "fake news," raising questions about how these political pressures will shape Brazil's stance. Overall, Brazil is likely to support stronger industry accountability (consistent with its recent tech policy dialogues) but will also defend press freedom.

- **African and Other Regional Groups:** Many African states are concerned about disinformation stoking ethnic or election violence. Some (like Kenya and Mauritius) have pushed regional cooperation on cyber norms. At UNESCO and the UN, African countries often emphasize building "information resilience" through education and support for independent media, as opposed to strict censorship. The African Commission has warned that heavy-handed "fake news" laws can undermine democracy. Latin American countries (e.g. Mexico, Argentina) similarly stress solutions like fact-check networks and education campaigns, reflecting the region's recent struggles with social media misinformation.

In sum, there are broadly two streams: **protection of democratic processes through accountability and literacy** (championed by Western and many developing states), and **concerns about unequal power over "truth"** (highlighted by Russia, China and some others). All agree disinformation is a problem, but they diverge on the means of addressing it.

IX.   Past Actions and Failures

A number of initiatives have been undertaken, but results have been mixed:

- **International Resolutions and Guidelines:** Resolutions at the UN and UNESCO level (such as the GA 2021 resolution and the 2024 UNESCO Executive Board decision) have called for multi-stakeholder approaches respecting human rights. However, these are non-binding calls without enforcement mechanisms. For example, the EU Code of Practice, though pioneering, is voluntary; its 2018 implementation review found that not all platforms fully complied, and that hate-filled disinformation still circulates widely. Some UNESCO resolutions (e.g. on MIL) have raised awareness but often without follow-up funding or national action plans.

- **Legal Measures:** Dozens of countries have passed or proposed "fake news" laws and regulations. In practice, many of these laws have been criticized for being too vague or broad. For instance, laws that punish any "false information" can be used to silence journalists under the guise of combating disinformation. In some cases, countries repealed or watered down such laws after public backlash (Nepal, Kenya, and others). Conversely, the lack of an international treaty on disinformation means no universal standard.

- **Technology and Self-Regulation:** Social media companies have developed policies to remove or label false content, but enforcement can be inconsistent. Automated algorithms may fail to catch nuanced falsehoods and sometimes remove legitimate speech by mistake. Fact-checkers employed by platforms sometimes face threats, and many users do not trust these corporate labels. Efforts like demonetizing false content have had some success (false news sites lose ad revenue) but new monetization models (cryptocurrency tipping, sponsored posts) emerge. Fact-checking by news outlets has expanded, but studies show that exposure to fact-checks often does not immediately change the beliefs of the most strongly misinformed.

- **Media Literacy and Education:** Programs to train students, journalists and citizens in critical media consumption have grown. UNESCO and NGOs have created handbooks and courses (e.g., UNESCO's online courses on covering COVID-19). However, such efforts reach only a fraction of the global population. Many adults and youth still lack basic digital literacy, especially in underserved regions. The gap between advanced economies and poorer countries is a problem: disinformation can thrive where education and media infrastructures are weaker.

- **Funding and Coordination Gaps:** Some multilateral actions (like the WHO-UNESCO COVID-19 Task Force) were rapid and innovative. But long-term coordination is uneven. The UN system lacks a single, properly funded body dedicated to disinformation. In 2024 UNESCO's budget for communication and information remained modest, constraining its ability to implement wide-reaching programs. Civil society efforts often outpace government action.

- **Overall Impact:** Despite these efforts, disinformation remains widespread. Major events (elections, pandemics) still see heavy misinformation campaigns. One reason is underlying social factors: polarization, mistrust in institutions, and rapid tech change mean supply-side fixes (laws, algorithms) are not sufficient on their own. Many experts now argue that rather than eradicating all falsehoods (impossible), the goal should be to build societal resilience and transparency. UNESCO reports note that press freedom has actually declined in recent years, partly due to economic pressures on media and political hostility – a trend that disinformation both contributes to and capitalizes on. In short, while many initiatives exist, delegates should learn from their shortcomings: over-reliance on legal bans can backfire, self-regulation needs enforcement, and education requires sustained investment.

X.   Questions A Resolution Must Answer

- How can disinformation be effectively defined and addressed without infringing upon freedom of expression?
- What safeguards must be put in place to prevent the misuse of anti-disinformation laws for censorship or political suppression?
- What roles should governments, tech platforms, media, and civil society each play in combating disinformation?
- How can UNESCO and Member States support media and information literacy, especially in the Global South?
- What accountability and transparency mechanisms should platforms adopt?

- How can emerging threats such as AI-generated content and deepfakes be regulated without stifling innovation?
- How can international cooperation be strengthened to address cross-border disinformation while respecting state sovereignty?