LSE Student Union Youth Model United Nations

26-28 February 2020

Disarmament and International Security Committee

Combatting the Weaponisation of Information and Media

Chair Biographies

Deborah Geremew

Hi everyone! My name is Deborah and I am the Head Chair of GA1 for this year's YouthMUN! I am currently studying abroad at the LSE from Northeastern University in Boston, where I am majoring in International Relations. My involvement with MUN began in the 7th grade, and since then, I have attended many conferences in various countries. I was also the president of the Human Rights Committee at THIMUN 2018, and the Deputy Secretary-General of my high school's MUN. Through MUN, I learned the importance of diplomacy, negotiation, and public speaking. It played a monumental role in helping me choose my intended career path and has contributed enormously to both my personal and professional development. I enjoy watching football in my free time (@ fcbarcelona), and I love travelling, fashion, and recently developed an obsession for baking.
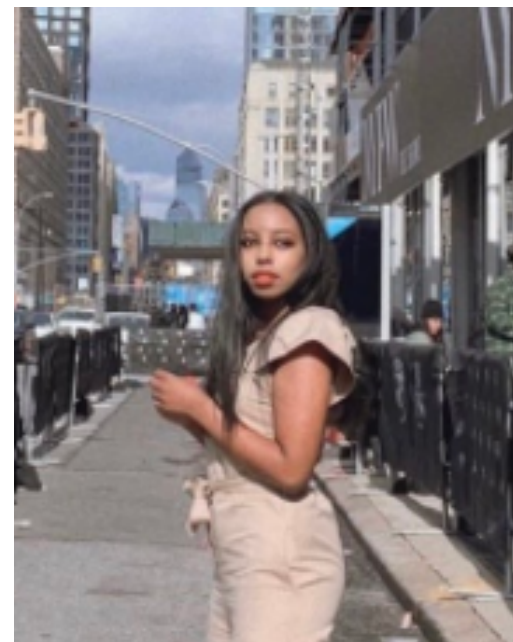
I aim to make this year's YouthMUN as constructive, fruitful and productive as possible, and I look forward to meeting all of you in February!

Sibel Dbila

Hello everyone! My name is Sibel and I am a third year Sociology student at LSE. I was first introduced to MUN by my history teacher when I was in seventh grade, which made me feel really cool, seeing as only eighth graders were allowed to join! I started off as a delegate and then transitioned to chairing, I enjoyed both immensely. I had the amazing opportunity of travelling with my team, and at my first conference ever I was forcefully signed up to be the ambassador for my school and speak at the GA, so if you ever feel anxious to take the floor, just remember little me, if I can do it then so can everyone! That being said, I do have a life outside of MUN! I was interested in acting for a while and travelled with my cast, I now enjoy photography and discovering street art! I am looking forward to working with everyone at this conference – leading a brilliant debate, producing strong resolutions and having

a laugh or two along the way! So do your research, prepare your points and don't forget to plan your smart outfits (Zoom cannot not stop us from looking fly!). See you soon!

We are immensely excited to be your chairs in the YouthMUN 2021 conference and would like to wish you a lot of luck with preparing and an exciting conference!

Sincerely,

Deborah Geremew (d.a.geremew@lse.ac.uk)

Sibel Dbila (s.dbila@lse.ac.uk)

Introduction to the Committee

The Disarmament and International Security Committee, also known as the First Committee, deals with issues surrounding challenges and threats to the international community, seeking solutions and policies that will be further implemented in the international security regime. The principles of cooperation include the maintenance of international peace and security, principles governing disarmament, the regulation of armaments and the promotion of cooperative arrangements aimed at creating global stability (UN).

With 193 member states permitted to participate in the session, the committee works in cooperation with the UNDC (United Nations Disarmament Commission) and the Conference on Disarmament based in Geneva. Although DISEC deals with global security issues, it cannot specifically mandate or inspire individual state action or armed intervention, however, recommendations are welcomed by the Security Council (UN).

The General Assembly is a major player in the funding of DISEC, which is further allocated to political affairs, international justice and law, cooperation for development, humanitarian affairs, support services and capital expenses. DISEC can promote the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals within the conference as well as in the international community. Goal number 16 is worth looking at: "Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels" (Rose, 2016).

Common topics include Fourth Generation Warfare, Nuclear Proliferation, Illicit Arms Trade, The Illegal Drug Trade, Ethics of Drones and Cyber Security and Warfare, with the last two closely relating to DISEC's YouthMUN 2021 topic. In order to be successful within the committee, delegates are encouraged to keep in mind the popular international political division (Rose, 2016).

Introduction to the Topic

The 21st century has brought with itself the ever-growing prominence of digital technologies and the cyberspace. The weaponization of information and media has therefore become a cause for increasing concern. Warfare has translated from the ground onto the internet, with informational wars and propaganda causing as much or arguably more damage than traditional combat. This issue can be found in different aspects of life, ranging from electoral manipulation to foreign disinformation, with social media at its forefront (Oates, 2020). Oates (2020) argues that the lack of regulation makes cyberspace a destructive force rather than a democratizing tool. The weaponization of information and media has the power to drive major political change, whether it be positive social change or the mobilization of terrorist groups (Deutch, 2018). In both cases it is a global force that is exponentially growing and needs stronger international and national regulation. With the introduction of different forms of Artificial Intelligence and surveillance, new resolutions and policies are an essential part of maintaining international security and stability.

Communication technologies have been employed to create misleading narratives and disinformation and challenge democracy (Ignatidou, 2019). Controlling public opinion has become a threatening trend, with technologies initially aimed at empowering, playing the role of silencing and destructing. The stages of the weaponization of media include disinformation, increasing efforts to control information flows, removing accountability and mass-scale manipulation (Ignatidou, 2019). In addition to institutional regulation, in order to defend the citizens of the world from the issue of weaponized information and media, the user's safety and knowledge must also be a priority. Action must also be directed towards increasing education about critical thinking and the understanding of information and the dangers of propaganda and fake news (Forno). Implementation in school and university curriculums about questioning sources and seeking objective and truthful information must remain a priority for meaningful change.

History and Past UN Actions

The Secretary-General has addressed the Geneva Correspondents' Association on their 70th anniversary, urging bold action to defend free press (2019). Despite the right of access to information being entrenched in the law in over 100 countries, it was noted that civic space has been shrinking and over the decade around 1000 journalists were killed, with most of the cases unsolved. Critical media is an essential part of the public sphere, forcing political systems to maintain transparency. It is therefore recognized that journal

ism plays an essential role to peace, sustainable development, human rights and justice. The Secretary-General noted that attempts to control media happen not only in authoritarian States, but also in democracies, making it a pressing issue. Imprisonment and violence towards international and local journalists stem from reporting on politics and crime rather than in conflict zones. Leaders are urged to defend free media and fight disinformation and its weaponization. UNESCO and the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations is working towards strengthening Media and Information Literacy, aiding citizens to detect disinformation. The lack of control can and will lead to implications far worse than what is happening today such as upturning of electoral campaigns intimidation of strong voices and the heightening of social and ethnic tensions. AI poses one of the largest threats of information manipulation and the reproduction of disinformation.

A key role of the UN includes setting principles and standards that guide collective action around the safe use of big data. These principles include openness, transparency, tackling the invasion and weaponization of privacy and minimizing inequality in production and access. Here are the specific recommendations of the Secretary-Generals Independent Expert Advisory Group on Data Revolution for Sustainable Development (IEAG):

1. Fostering and promoting innovation to fill data gaps

2. Mobilizing resources to overcome inequalities between developed and developing countries and between data-poor and data-rich people

3. Leadership and coordination to enable the data revolution to play its full role in realization of sustainable development

The UN Development Group has issued a general guidance on data privacy, data protection and data ethics. Furthermore, the UN World Data Forum that took place in January of 2017, gathered 1,400 data uses and producers from both private and public sectors, academia, civil society and policy makers to brainstorm ways to use the power of big data for sustainable development.

Discussion of the Topic

The safeguarding of human rights in cyberspace in the main topic of concern. With the salience of big data, problems around privacy, ethics and respect for data sovereignty arise. With the passive collection of data, there is a risk of the re-identification of individuals, this has potential harming effects (UN). Therefore, proper data protection measures are essen-

tial in preventing the misuse and weaponization of information and media. Furthermore, social exclusion in cyberspace is a growing concern, with people in poverty, conflict zones and remote areas facing a barrier in accessing information through underdeveloped infrastructure. The focus groups therefore being ethnic/racial minority groups, women and those living in the Global South. The three main actors that must be focused on in tackling the weaponization of information and media are: News, Social Media, and AI.

Bloc Positions

Americas

The United States may be the most well-known example of how information shared by the media is shaping the political realm, and people's understanding of it. There has been a proliferation of conspiracy theories and misinformation during the current administration, and political figures have weaponized social media, using it to strategically feed their supporters information that fits their narrative - some of which has led to violence. American based tech companies have become increasingly important players in the political world, and the weaponization of social media is undeniably changing politics and the way in which citizens consume information. Many even argue that the lack of regulations is making platforms such as Twitter and Facebook agents of misinformation, and thus, a potential threat to the democratic process.

The term "fake news" has been a defining aspect of Donald Trump's presidency, one that

has had tremendous implications on the trust and reliability Americans feel towards the media. A recent poll, for example, showed that only 9% of Americans trust the media to de

liver accurate and unbiased information[1].The Trump administration veers from the traditional methods that governments use to weaponize social media. Instead of using it to spread state sanctioned propaganda, President Trump has managed to erode the public's

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[1] Brenan, B. M. (2020, November 9). Americans Remain Distrustful of Mass Media. Gallup.Com. https://news.gallup.com/poll/321116/americans-remain-distrustful-mass-media.aspx

[2] Lopez, G. (2016, December 8). Pizzagate, the fake news conspiracy theory that led a gunman to DC's Comet Ping Pong, explained. Vox. https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/12/5/13842258/pizzagate-comet-ping-pong-fake-news

[3] Greenspan, R. E. (2020, November 11). QAnon conspiracy theorists have been linked to 12 alleged crimes. Here are the incidents said to be connected to the movement and its followers. Insider. https://www.insider.com/qanon-violence-crime-conspiracy-theory-us-allegation-arrest-killing-gun-2020-8

[4] Stolberg, S. G., & Weiland, N. (2020, October 22). Study Finds 'Single Largest Driver' of Coronavirus Misinformation: Trump. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/30/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-misinformation.html

trust in mainstream media, making his base reliant on him, and news organizations friendly to him, for information. The result of this is a politically polarized country with starkly different responses to national crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, police brutality and social justice, and more recently, the 2020 presidential election.

One instance where misinformation has led to violence is an incident aptly named "Pizzagate". A man, under the impression that a pizzeria in Washington DC was a false front disguising an underground child sex-trafficking ring ran by Hilary Clinton, went into the pizzeria firing shots with an assault rifle[2].Furthermore, information put out by supporters of the QAnon conspiracy theory, who believe that Donald Trump is America's savior and that many politicians secretly run sex-trafficking rings in seemingly innocuous places of business, have been associated with multiple cases of violence, kidnapping and even murder; however, believers of QAnon continue to spread highly unsubstantiated claims, and are encouraged by the praise they have received from President Trump[3].

On a less dramatic scale, we can also compare the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic between those who support the president, and those who don't. People's refusal to wear masks, socially distance themselves, and stay at home has contributed to the US's rising death toll of over 250,000 people (as of November, the highest number in the world). The politicization of the media played an enormous role in determining people's response to the pandemic. Many republicans were convinced that the media was using the pandemic as a means of undermining the president's efforts to build the economy and labelled the need for restrictive measures as "fake news." A recent study also found that President Trump was the biggest source of Coivid-19 misinformation[4]. Misleading or false information communicated by the president to his supporters is another reason why we see many people disregard the pandemic as a hoax and condemn safety guidelines as inefficient.

Finally, the weaponization of social media for political gain has had significant impacts on the American electorate system. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and National Security Administration (NSA) have all confirmed that there was Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential election; a feat that was achieved by distributing propaganda and misleading information on online platforms frequented by US voters. The weaponization of the media has also played a massive role in the public's acceptance of the 2020 presidential election results. In the US, it is customary for major media outlets to call the election based on statistical analysis, research on demographics, voter history, and current vote count. Following the election results, which announced Democratic candidate Joe Biden as the victor, President Trump refused to concede, claiming that "the fake news media" does not decide the election.

[5]Kim, C. (2020, November 13). Poll: 70 percent of Republicans don't think the election was free and fair. POLITICO. https://www.politico.com/news/2020/11/09/republicans-free-fair-elections-435

Trump's allegations of voter fraud ensued in Republican politicians' refusal to acknowledge Joe Biden's status as president-elect, until the outcome of Trump's lawsuit is known. Many are worried Trump's refusal to concede will be detrimental to the longevity of American democracy. For example, a recent poll shows that due to the president´s claims that the media is unfairly politicized and that the election was rigged, 70 percent of republicans now believe that the election was not "free and fair."[2] In addition to de-legitimizing Joe Biden of his rightful role as president-elect, the deep mistrust of the media that Trump has fostered in his supporters during his presidency has deepened the political divide, increasing resentment across party lines, and lowering the chance of a united America for years to come.

Many prominent politicians argue that the media, far from being unprejudiced, leans in favor of one political party and is used as an instrument for promoting that party's agenda. Conservatives have complained against being censored on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, arguing that such censorship violates the first amendment of the US constitution. Others claim that Donald Trump has been unfairly condemned by media outlets in the US. On the other hand, many also argue that the president and his supporters have been using their platforms to spread misinformation - and in some cases, blatant lies - in order to further their own political agenda, and that their weaponization of social media has led to more devastating outcomes, such as outright violence and more subtle, long-lasting consequences that threaten democracy.

In the months of October and November 2020, the US Senate held hearings with the

CEO's of Facebook, Twitter, and Google. They were questioned by democrats on whether their platforms were being used to combat misinformation, and by republicans on how they are censoring some platforms that have right-leaning political views. Republicans also argued to repeal Section 230, which protects these companies from liability for user content, echoing President Trump's threat to remove this protection earlier in the year. Ironically, Fox News, a right leaning network, attacked other mainstream media outlets of "censoring" the hearings for their lack of coverage.

The deep partisan divide in the Senate regarding this issue reflects a deeply divided America. The media and information distribution reveal just how deep the divide between these two different political – and ideological – standpoints run, and each side claims to be the victim of the media's prejudice and weaponization.

Moving on to Latin America, we are met with the high-profile example of Cambridge Analytica creating fake accounts to match voters on a psychological level, a strategy used to influence elections in Brazil and Mexico. Mexico's data protection body launched an investigation into local companies affiliated with Cambridge Analytica. Brazil took similar steps,

fining Facebook $1.6 million over the scandal, and opened further investigations that looked into the company's actions. Domestically, misinformation in Brazil regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, sometimes coming from elected officials, has been linked to Brazil's right-wing president.

Argentina and Panama recently held a joint workshop with top politicians and election officials from both countries. This workshop, called the "Workshop for Exchange of Experiences on Network Information Monitoring", was aimed at combatting disinformation in elections. The governments of Chile and Mexico also co-authored a statement with other countries condemning the spread of falsehoods and "fake news" with regards to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Healthcare workers in many Latin American countries are being targeted and harassed due to false rumors and misinformation concerning COVID-19. In Columbia, for example, a politician claimed that doctors were receiving higher salaries for every dead patient, and there were reports that doctors were kidnapping patients for personal gain. Doctors and nurses in Columbia claim to have been threatened and harassed by people as a result of these rumors. Finally, authoritarian states such as Venezuela are known to closely monitor and censor content on the internet, or media outlets that criticize the current government.

Middle East

Many governments in the Middle East have made use of the media and the internet to spread information that advances their political agenda. States including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and Iran have made use of social media to shape narratives advantageous to them and to undermine rivals. Journalists in Lebanon who spoke out against the government were harassed online as part of an effort to shift the attention away from the anti-corruption protests.

In fact, the government's weaponization of social media - and the false narrative they were painting in order to justify repression - is what partly caused the Arab Spring of 2011. The movement sought to put an end to the weaponization of social media by oppressive regimes. Ironically, the success of the movement can be partially attributed to social media, which played a crucial role in mobilizing people and facilitating protests. It also gave the international media direct access to the protests and allowed them to broadcast footage that may have otherwise been hard to obtain.

Finally, social media has also been weaponized by terrorist organizations to spread hateful messages and recruit new members. For example, many argue that the existence of the Islamic State (IS) would have been impossible were it not for their use of social media. This group managed to enlist over 40,000 individuals from over 100 countries to fight for their

cause by using the reach of the internet. Furthermore, a recent study found that of all the terrorist activities that take place on the internet, 90% occur through social media. [1] The growing use of social media by terrorist organizations is a problem that has concerned the international community for many years. Social media companies have regulations and technology in place that attempts to remove or block content associated with terrorism.

Governments in the Middle East have implemented measures to combat the spread of false information online. Examples include Oman's government training program, that helps security officials identify and monitor fake news online. Dubai's cyber police have also blocked thousands of fake accounts to combat online misinformation. Bahrain and Saudi Arabia have gone as far as arresting, or threatening to arrest, individuals who were accused of spreading potentially dangerous false information to the public.

Europe

There are numerous studies that suggest Russia's interference in the 2016 Brexit vote, through their weaponization of social media platforms. Furthermore, experts believe that disinformation and misleading content online influenced the results of the referendum vote to leave the EU. Donors of the Conservative Party have also been associated with Cambridge Analytica, the British company accused of influencing elections all over the world. Cambridge Analytica also stands accused of interfering in elections in Italy and the Czech Republic. Following the Cambridge Analytica scandal, the EU implemented the General Data Protection Regulation; this privacy law enforces stricter standards that requires businesses to protect consumers' information and gives individuals more control over their personal data.

In spite of administering some of the strongest data protection laws in the world, the EU have still been victims of COVID-19 misinformation. The spread of false information by Russia and China, two countries accused of being significant sources of Covid-19 misinformation by the European Commission, has led to an increase in the number of people opposing a coronavirus vaccine, and a dwindling faith in its efficacy. Conspiracy theories related to the vaccine have become widespread on social media and have included irrational claims; some assert that the vaccine is a liquid microchip while others hold fast to the outlandish belief that the vaccine alters DNA. The European Parliament has set up a special committee to specifically identify and track Covid-19 disinformation. The labor party in the UK even went as far as proposing emergency censorship laws to tackle anti-vaccine misinformation online. Many other European governments have passed laws, established task forces, and created education campaigns to tackle misinformation.

Finally, Russia has been accused - on numerous occasions - of weaponizing social media, spreading disinformation and false propaganda, both domestically and abroad. In 2017, the Russian Defense Minister admitted to an "Information Army" created for counterpropaganda. According to the Russians, information operations is one of many nonmilitary measures of warfare. [1] Following the call of the European Council, the East StratCom Task Force was created in 2015 to track and analyze disinformation coming from Russia.

Africa

In recent years, Africa's social media usage has increased significantly, and brought with it new challenges such as misinformation and weaponized information. Online strategies to manipulate election results have been seen in many African countries. For example, Cambridge Analytica helped Kenyan president Uhuru Kenyatta win his election, and also played a significant role in Nigeria's 2015 election by collecting data on the opposition party. African governments use hundreds of recruits to spread propaganda online ahead of elections and have frequently used social media to spread propaganda and information that advances their own political agendas. Furthermore, several African governments, such as Benin, Cameroon, and Côte d'Ivoire have arrested people, alleging they were spreading false information.

According to Freedom House, many African governments also monitor their citizens through social media and collect data on users, using this data to control them on several platforms, and to silence and intimidate any opposition. Zimbabwe's government has gone as far as passing legislation which gives the government power to monitor people's activities online. Egypt also passed a similar law, where any account over 5000 followers can be monitored to help curb misinformation.

Disinformation has also led to violence in Africa. In Ethiopia, hate speech and misinformation online, spread by political opponents of the government, has fueled ethnic tensions in some regions, leading to clashes that killed thousands of people. As a result, the government passed the Hate Speech and Misinformation Law, making it a crime to post content that incites violence or to broadcast hate speech. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the rampant disinformation regarding the Ebola outbreak was weaponized by foreign countries (such as Russia) to spread false claims that the US was the cause of the outbreak in the DRC, and that the outbreak was a result of their "foreign meddling" in the country.

Lastly, similar to IS in the Middle East, terrorist organizations Al Shabab and Boko Haram use social media to communicate with their followers and recruit new members. Al-Shabab also tweeted the Westgate Mall terror attack in Nairobi live in 2013, and later used the platform to celebrate and claim responsibility for the incident.

The Chinese government's weaponization of information is perhaps the most well-known example of disinformation in Asia. In addition to maintaining strong control over domestic media outlets by using them to spread state sanctioned propaganda and pro-government messages, the Chinese government has also attempted to weaponize and influence information on social media platforms abroad. Additionally, China has been linked to disinformation campaigns in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic, exploiting the public health crisis to shape narratives that benefit them politically.

In Myanmar, members of the military used social media to post hateful and violence-inciting content about Muslims. This ill-informed propaganda campaign spread lies about Rohingya Muslims, which resulted in murders, rapes, and the mass displacement of members of this community. Human Rights organizations have said that this disinformation campaign is responsible for the ethnic cleansing that took place, and Facebook has admitted that their platform helped to instigate violence against this group of people. Disinformation on social media has also aggravated ethnic tensions in countries such as Malaysia.

In India, politicians have used social media to post religiously divisive and hateful content; false rumors that spread online have been linked to instances of violence, and even murders. Furthermore, during its conflict with India in 2019, the Pakistani government weaponized social media and used it to spread false information about the magnitude of the damage done by the Indian army. Some even say they managed to sway the Indian public's opinion against their own government. Finally, Rodrigo Duterte, the president of the Philippines, has used social media platforms to spread disinformation and propaganda, silence opposition, and increase his power by asserting that facts are fluid, and only he holds the ability to shape them.

Countries such as Bangladesh and Malaysia have outlawed misinformation and made arrests based on allegations of spreading it. Singapore has also criminalized the spread of false information and has supported many media literacy campaigns. Cambodia's government has the power to block users from watching content it considers a threat to national security. Many other Asian countries are in the process of revising their laws to include measures against misinformation and false news.

Points A Resolution Should Address

1. What measures can the international community implement to penalize politicians and governments who weaponize information?

2. How can the international community cooperate to stop terrorist organizations from using social media for terrorist activities?

3. What has been learned about election interference, and how can countries cooperate to stop it from recurring?

4. How can the international community combat disinformation and fake news, while also preventing governments from using it as a means to threaten and imprison opposition?

5. What is the role of social media companies, and how can the international community work together to hold them accountable?

6. How can governments draw the line between freedom of speech and disinformation? Furthermore, how can the international community address the concerns of those who feel as though they are being censored and given the label of disinformation for expressing unpopular views?

7. Do freedom of speech laws need to be updated to be in-line with the current digital environment?

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