

THE WIDER WORLD

Countering the Disinformation Threats to Democracy

By Diane Chido
June 2024

Sex, religion, and politics are the three things we aren't supposed to talk about in polite society. Of course, in this space we will certainly talk about politics, no matter what "they" say. The problem with political discussions often arises when people talk about issues from an emotional perspective, rather than a facts-based one. But the challenge for Americans today is knowing the true facts so they can trust them. Many simply scoffed when then-U.S. Counselor to the President Kellyanne Conway uttered her now famous phrase about "alternative facts" during a January 22, 2017 "Meet the Press" interview on NBC while defending then-White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer's false statement about the number of attendees at Donald Trump's Presidential inauguration.^[i] However, this once false word combination has now become a common phrase.

One of the most ubiquitous online sources is Wikipedia. This crowdsourced mega-site includes pages on almost anything a reader can imagine from plant lifecycles, to astronomy, to democratization across history. I use it for a quick reference when encountering unfamiliar politicians, to get a quick idea of their positions and backgrounds. I will admit that I also use it somewhat obsessively while "relaxing" by watching historical dramas, to learn how well they stick to the known facts about characters and events. I also encourage my students to use the site as an initial information source on new topics, but to then conduct additional research to learn more and to find more "reputable" sources to cite in their final products. This is as much to introduce them to reliable sources as to suggest that crowdsourced material may not be the most accurate. Here's a tip.

When vetting Wikipedia articles, vet the footnoted sources listed below the article.

In April 2024, I received an email from WikiScholars, the educational arm of Wikipedia, inviting me, as a university political science instructor, to participate in a training program to learn how to fact check and add vetted content to this online encyclopedia involving the 2024 U.S. presidential election. My first grown-up job was as a fact verifier for manuscripts in publication by the Brookings Institution's Foreign Policy Program and always read with a virtual red pen at the ready. When I taught intelligence studies at Mercyhurst, our primary emphasis was on critical thinking and ensuring the credibility and reliability of source material. So, of course, I signed right up.

While Wikipedia strives to achieve “neutrality” in its entries, the organization’s concern for the upcoming election is to ensure that election misinformation and disinformation are not propagated on the site. We know this was done intentionally on other sites such as Facebook during previous elections and will likely be the case again in November.^[ii] Since the lead-up to the 2016 electoral season, there has been consistent news about Russian and other disinformation campaigns attempting to change the outcomes of various election processes in the U.S. and across Europe with their emphasis on supporting authoritarian-style leaders. In the U.S. case, the intelligence community found hard evidence linking such campaigns to Russian military intelligence agencies operating at the direction of Russian President Vladimir Putin in both 2016 and 2020.^[iii] In September 2023, I wrote an essay about Russia’s Wagner Group’s involvement in this activity in Africa.

In August 2020, the U.S. State Department Global Engagement Center (GEC) issued a report on “Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem” detailing the intentional interference strategy and tactics used to support its effort to distort and subvert democracy. The report lists “the five main pillars as: official government communications, state-funded global messaging, cultivation of proxy sources, weaponization of social media, and cyber-enabled disinformation.”^[iv]

Before we begin to despair about our upcoming elections, the State Department assures us that “a thriving counter-disinformation community composed of governments, civil society, academia, the press, the private sector, and citizens around the world who refuse to tolerate these tactics is pushing back.” Enter the WikiScholars program, as one of those on the front line.

Every Tuesday, I meet online with about two dozen political science instructors from around the country, each of whom have their own areas of specialization. We are to become a mini-army fighting falsehoods wherever we find them. It has

been a fascinating journey with an erudite group of fellow concerned citizens and over-analyzers ready to do battle with misinformation and disinformation, poor organization, and questionable sourcing.

I have come to discover that despite my extensive use as an information consumer from the online encyclopedia, I have only scratched about 5% of all the site offers. Every change from the moment a new entry is created is logged in perpetuity, every view is noted to determine the level of interest in each entry, and the process of vetting information and sourcing is extensive and deeply discussed by interested parties. All of this work is done by volunteers who simply care about ensuring the integrity of information.

The objective of sharing this Wikipedia story with you is to help us all feel a little less hopeless in the face of the onslaught of “fake news” and propaganda that seems to be growing without check. There *are* checks and there are millions of people like my fellow WikiScholars working to prevent the spread of false information to protect democratic structures all over the world, not just in the U.S.

The pandemic spawned an entirely new misinformation and propaganda ecosystem related to prevention, treatments, and especially vaccinations for Covid-19 that seeded doubt in all other vaccinations and tested health practices globally. The European Union devoted millions of euros to develop dozens of software programs and groups, as did the United Nation’s World Health Organization, which partnered with countries around the world to mitigate the effect of these influences.^[v]

Like the U.S. State Department, the European Commission developed the European Digital Media Observatory billed as “the EU’s largest interdisciplinary network to counter disinformation.” It “works to strengthen and enable collaboration among a multidisciplinary community of stakeholders tackling online disinformation. It brings together fact-checkers, media literacy experts, and academic researchers to understand and analyse [sic] disinformation, in collaboration with media organisations [sic], online platforms and media literacy practitioners,”^[vi] much like the Wikipedia effort. This effort is composed of 14 networks and additional hubs across 28 EU countries, recognizing that although effective propaganda is tailored to specific cultural attributes and issues, it does not stop at national borders.

A December 24, 2021 resolution adopted by the U.N. General Assembly “affirmed the important role that the exercise of the right to freedom of opinion and expression and full respect for the freedom to seek, receive and impart information plays in strengthening democracy, promoting pluralism and

multiculturalism, enhancing transparency and press freedom, and countering disinformation.”^[vii]

A November 2022 report from the U.N. High Commission on Human Rights stated that “one way in which states can help reduce the risks associated with disinformation is by creating the conditions for human rights, pluralism and tolerance to flourish,” further noting that states must create environments where independent public interest media can survive and thrive in order to counteract the spread of false and misleading information that can undermine democracy globally.^[viii]



Reporters Without Borders 2024 Freedom of the Press Worldwide Map

Reporters Without Borders (*Reporters sans Frontières*, *RSF* in French) produces an annual index assessing freedom of the press worldwide illustrated by the 2024 map.^[ix] The accompanying report stated that, “A growing number of governments and political authorities are not fulfilling their role as guarantors of the best possible environment for journalism and for the public's right to reliable, independent, and diverse news and information. Reporters Without Borders sees a worrying decline in support and respect for media autonomy and an increase in pressure from the state or other political actors.^[x] The report further notes that more than half the world will go to the polls in 2024, thus increasing the need for accurate reporting to ensure voters have the information they need to make sound decisions on their futures.

The trend is most worrying in the countries represented in red, indicating a “very serious situation” in terms of lack of political protection for journalists. Countries in this category include China, India, Russia, many former Soviet states and satellites, and others in the East, as well as Cuba, Haiti, Honduras,

Nicaragua in Central America, and Venezuela in South America. Countries in lighter red have “difficult situations.” Even those often considered bastions of democracy, including Argentina, Botswana, Brazil, Chile, Senegal, and perhaps most worrying of all to us, the U.S., are labeled “problematic situations.”

Looking deeper at the U.S. 2024 assessment aggregating data in various related contexts, Reporters Without Borders ranked the U.S. number 55 out of 180 countries for press freedom. Under Reporters Without Borders’ evaluation of political context, it noted, “After four years of President Donald Trump’s constant denigration of the press, his successor, President Joe Biden, declared that ‘journalism is not a crime.’” This led to an improvement in the U.S. ranking in 2020, however, the report noted that within the U.S. legal context, while there are fewer challenges at the federal level, over a dozen states and numerous local communities “have proposed or enacted laws to limit journalists’ access to public spaces, including barring them from legislative meetings and preventing them from recording the police.”

While the press in the U.S. generally operates without government interference, as opposed to some countries, the concentration of media outlets in fewer hands allows for less journalistic expression, and in the economic context, the continuing closure or downsizing of local press outlets has greatly reduced citizens’ access to local news and information. In the socio-cultural context, disinformation and denigration of the press has led to the lowest historical levels of American trust in professional journalism, leaving citizens not knowing whom to trust for their news.^[xi]

AllSides Technologies, Inc. admits on its website that “everyone is biased and that’s ok,” but the company collects news from all sources to “free people from filter bubbles so they can better understand the world – and each other.” They provide a set of ratings of political leanings of the major media outlets consumed by Americans to inform people of the likely slant of their chosen sources and offer them choice on where to get news that may not always provide information confirming people’s existing biases. It also warns which sources should not be trusted by not only providing left, right, and center leanings but also the higher up on the chart, the more reliable the sources, due to their fact-checking scores.^[xii]

AllSides Media Bias Chart™

Ratings based on online, U.S. political content only – not TV, print, or radio.

Ratings do not reflect accuracy or credibility; they reflect perspective only.



AllSides Media Bias Chart, updated 2023

Thus, AllSides considers CNN to lean left and Fox Business to lean right, with sources such as the BBC, NewsNation, and Reuters in the center. More worrying are the sites more firmly on the left, including the Huffington Post and MSNBC, and on the far right, Fox News, Brietbart, and One America News (OAN). The latter was created by right-wing tech executives at the request of AT&T top executives to intentionally promote right-wing oriented, ultra capitalist views. DirecTV dropped OAN from its offerings in 2022 due to these allegations.[xiii]

Understanding the U.S. media landscape and knowing which organizations, such as Wikipedia, are committed to providing content that is as unbiased and verifiable as possible is one important way to combat attempts to coerce Americans into believing false or misleading information. This was critically important to saving lives during the pandemic, but is also crucial to protecting our democratic processes, especially concerning elections. As Thomas Jefferson wrote in a 1798 letter from Paris to Richard Price, “wherever the people are well informed they can be trusted with their own government.”^[xiv] Can we?

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