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DISINFORMATION IN CONFLICT ENVIRONMENTS IN ASIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper examines misinformation and disinformation in five, ongoing interstate and intrastate conflict zones in Asia: Afghanistan-Pakistan, Armenia-Azerbaijan, Burma, Indonesia, and the Philippines. We used secondary sources to investigate the role of mis- and disinformation in the conflict zones and tactics used by in-country actors. Across these case studies, several patterns emerged regarding longstanding misinformation in conflict environments, causes and continuity of conflict, the role of social media, and mis- and disinformation tactics. These patterns include:

1. The content of misinformation reflects long standing social tensions among ethnic groups, religious groups, and nationalities.
2. The absence of alternative news sources in conflict zones leads to reliance on social media as a primary news source.
3. Social media allows for misinformation, disinformation, and fake news to spread quickly and unchecked in conflict zones.
4. The most common vehicle political actors use to propagate disinformation is inauthentic accounts, in which fake accounts are used to mislead people about a user's identity.
5. There are often simultaneous disinformation campaigns in a given conflict: global ones aimed at the international community to foster a particular narrative and domestic campaigns that promote messages to internal audiences.

Policy recommendations to address misinformation and disinformation in conflict zones in Asia include:

1. **Strengthening media literacy** through investment in childhood literacy, educational efforts, and digital literacy programs to combat misinformation.
2. **Supporting independent and local journalism** to vet, provide, investigate, and distribute reliable information to the public.
3. **Developing regional disinformation monitoring networks** by fostering relationships with neighboring countries, educational institutions, and NGOs to share best practices and patterns related to misinformation.
4. **Engaging with tech companies and social media platforms** to strengthen relationships and allow for the development of joint strategies so these entities can work together to identify and combat false information.

DEFINITIONS

Armed Conflict (also referred to as state-based conflict): A contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of armed force between two parties, at least one of which is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year.[1]

Non-state Conflict: Use of armed force between two organized armed groups, neither of which is the government of a state, resulting in at least 25 battle-related deaths in a year.[2]

Interstate Conflict: A conflict between two or more governments.[3]

Intrastate Conflict: A conflict between a government and a non-governmental party, with no interference from other countries.[4]

For the purposes of this research, we view **misinformation** in a hierarchical manner: it is any false information that is misleading or deceptive, with or without malicious intent.[5]

The following definitions fall under the umbrella-term of misinformation:

> **Disinformation** is false information deliberately created to mislead, harm, or manipulate a person, social group, organization, or country (for example, tampering with footage).

> **Fake News** is false or misleading information presented as news.[6]

> **Propaganda** is systematic propagation of information or ideas (can be true/accurate information or misinformation/disinformation) by an interested party in order to encourage or instill a particular attitude, response, or political view.[7]

Figure 1. Information Hierarchy Visual
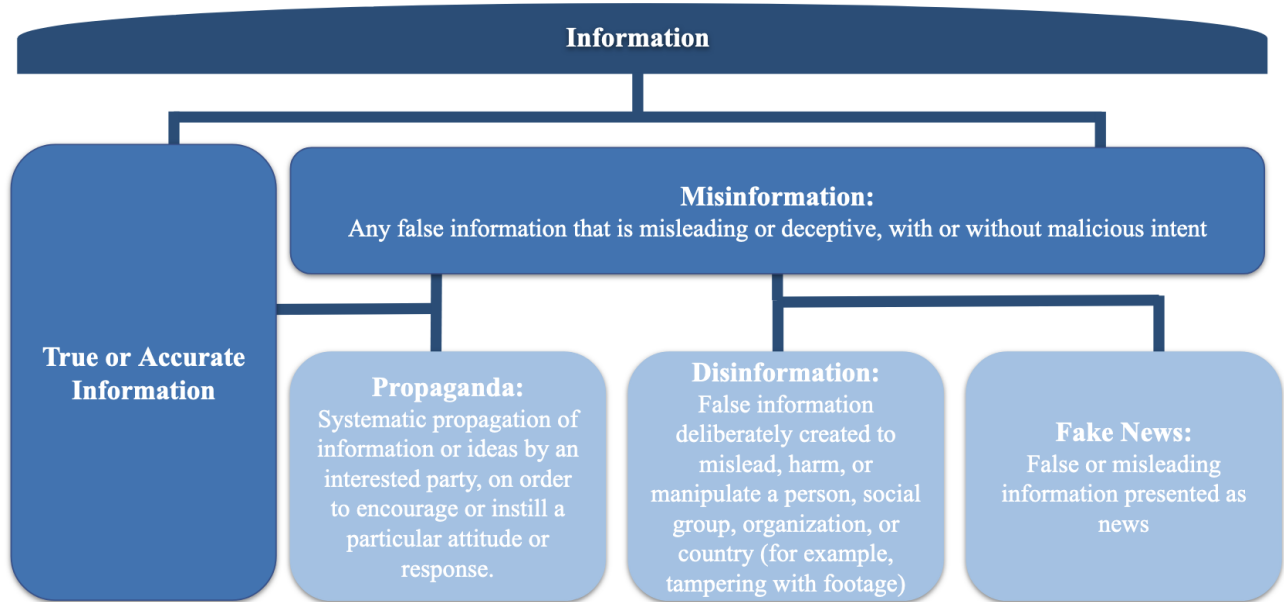
Gibbons and Carson, 2022; Horowitz, 2019; Uppsala Universitet, Department of Peace and Conflict Research; Wayne State University Library Systems

Figure 2. Pattern Prevalence Across Case Studies

Findings Across Conflicts		Case Studies				
		Afghanistan/ Pakistan	Armenia/ Azerbaijan	Burma	Indonesia	Philippines
Patterns	Long Standing Social Tensions	X	X	X	X	X
	International vs. Domestic Campaigns		X		X	X
	Social Media as Main News Source	X	X	X	X	X
	Inauthentic Accounts	X	X	X	X	X
	Zone Flooding		X	X	X	X

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

Our goal was to identify patterns of misinformation in armed conflicts in Asia. We selected five cases of armed conflicts in Asia based on considerations of regional diversity, interstate and intrastate conflicts, and territorial and other forms of disputes.

Given our lack of access to translators, we were limited in our ability to engage with non-English social media posts and news reports independently. Furthermore, we did not have sufficient research resources to make causal claims nor determine the degree to which misinformation incites or exacerbates conflict.

CASE STUDIES

I.   AFGHANISTAN-PAKISTAN BORDER

The Afghanistan-Pakistan border conflict largely revolves around the Durand line, a colonial holdover that cleaves Pashtun tribal lands in two and separates what subsequently became Afghanistan and Pakistan.[8] This division was heavily resisted by Pashtun tribal members in the region, and subsequently was rejected by Afghan governments during the 1940s.[9] Control over the region has significant tribal and ethnic ramifications, but also carries geostrategic importance: Afghan control would allow direct access to the sea for economic and military purposes.[10]

In 2017, Pakistan began installing fencing and restricting movement along the line in defense against the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).[11] This construction has led to multiple civilian and military casualties. In May 2017, Afghan border forces killed nine and injured 45 when firing on a Pakistani security detail protecting a census team. The retaliation by Pakistani forces killed two.[12] A suicide bombing—partially attributed to Afghan and Indian intelligence—killed ten Chinese laborers and three Pakistanis in August 2021.[13] Following the Afghan Taliban takeover in 2021, tensions have remained high.[14] In January 2023, a suicide attack by the TTP left over 100 people dead and over 200 injured in Peshawar.[15] In light of the Afghan Taliban's support for the TTP—a separate organization, but with shared ethnic and religious ties—Pakistan has continued strengthening its border and increasing its military buildup in the region as a means of self-defense.[16]

II.   ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN BORDER

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan both hold a longstanding dispute over the Nagorno-Karabakh region. This region has a predominantly ethnic Armenian enclave within Azerbaijan's internationally recognized borders.[17] This dispute dates back to before the collapse of the Soviet Union when both countries were part of the Soviet Empire and tensions escalated into a full-scale war in the early 1990s. The war ended with a Russian-brokered ceasefire in 1994, which left Nagorno-Karabakh and some surrounding Azerbaijani territories under the control of Armenian-backed forces.[18] [19]

Tensions increased in 2020, resulting in a 44-day war in which Azerbaijan reclaimed significant portions of the territory it had lost in the 1990s, including parts of

Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding areas.[20] In November 2020 the war ended with another Russian-brokered ceasefire, which introduced Russian peacekeeping forces into the region to maintain stability.[21] [22] Despite the ceasefire, the situation remains tense and fragile, as sporadic incidents of violence continue to occur along the border.[23] [24] The unresolved status of Nagorno-Karabakh and the deep-seated animosity between the Armenian and Azerbaijani populations continue to pose a risk for renewed conflict.

III.   BURMA

Burma gained independence from British colonial rule in 1948 and formed a bicameral parliament, but democracy lasted only until 1962, when the military led a coup d'état and abolished the federal system. In 1989, a new military junta came into power but was dissolved in 2011 when a military-dominated civilian parliament was established. In 2015, Burma held its first nationwide, multiparty elections in which Aung San Suu Kyi became the de facto head of the civilian government.[25] However, much of Burma's domestic policy, foreign policy, and security remained in control of Burma's military, the Tatmadaw.[26]

The state of conflict in Burma includes ongoing genocide and civil war. Beginning in 2016, the Tatmadaw mounted a "clearance operation" against the Rohingya—a Muslim minority group—that included burning villages, attacking and killing civilians, and sexually assaulting Rohingya women and girls.[27] On February 1, 2021, the Tatmadaw ousted the democratically elected members of Burma's ruling party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), claiming voter fraud. In response, a shadow civilian government was formed and its armed forces—along with ethnic armed organizations operating throughout the country—have regained control of 40–80% of Burma's territory.[28] The Tatmadaw are engaging in arbitrary arrests, torture, sexual violence, mass killings, and other abuses that may amount to crimes against humanity in Burma's civil war.[29]

IV.   INDONESIA

The Dutch colonized West Papua in 1828 but transferred it to the UN in 1962. The UN subsequently transferred control of West Papua to Indonesia until a referendum could be held to let the Papuans decide if they wanted independence or to remain part of Indonesia.[30] The 1969 Act of Free Choice facilitated the vote, resulting in West Papua staying part of Indonesia. However, some West Papuans view this referendum as illegitimate, claiming Papuan voters were pressured by the Indonesian government to vote against independence.[31] Since then, Indonesia has financed much of West Papua's development, including infrastructure like internet access, roads, and education systems. Development led to an influx of Indonesian migrants looking for work, making indigenous Papuans a minority. Indonesia makes large amounts of money by extracting from West Papuan gold mines, copper mines, and other natural resources.[32] [33] In 1970, an independence movement, the Organization for a Free Papua, formed and began a pro-independence guerrilla campaign, establishing a government in exile.[34] In 2018, violence reached a level that could only be called armed conflict.[35] Fighters from the Organization for a Free Papua and Indonesian government forces remain in conflict, a dispute continuing alongside allegations of racism from nationalists groups that triggered

region-wide protests, more violence, and the evacuation of thousands of people to temporary shelters or into nearby forests.[36] [37]

V. THE PHILIPPINES

The origins of the Mindanao conflict can be traced back to the 16th century when the native Moro population of the island resisted invading Spanish forces. The conflict has evolved over the centuries and cropped up again in the 1960s with the Moro's primary adversary being the Philippine Government. The conflict in the Moro/Muslim areas has evolved over the past 44 years—from an ethno-nationalist struggle between an aggrieved minority and the central government, to a highly fragmented conflict with multiple overlapping causes of violence. The main actors in opposition to the Philippine Government are the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), formed in the 1960s, and an offshoot of MNLF, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), formed in the 1980s. Since the late 1970s, the Philippine Government has been in peace talks on and off separately with the MNLF and MILF, with ongoing conflict throughout this period. In the mid-2010s, new actors, mostly IS-aligned groups and communist insurgents, became present in Mindanao and threatened the government and civilians in the region with terrorist threats and violence. In 2014, a historic peace agreement was concluded between the Philippine government and the MILF to pave the way for a "Bangsamoro" region to expand upon the existing Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). In January 2019, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) was formally established by a plebiscite. Even with a peace agreement in place, there is ongoing violence from Islamic State groups in the region.

PATTERNS

I. INFLUENCE OF LONG STANDING SOCIAL TENSIONS ON MISINFORMATION

In the five conflicts analyzed, the content of misinformation reflects long standing social tensions between ethnic groups, religious groups, and nationalities. In many cases, colonial policies exacerbated tensions. Across these conflicts, disinformation campaigns often used racist and xenophobic rhetoric to dispute territorial claims or claims to independence and self-determination.

In Burma, British colonial policies that encouraged the migration of Muslim Indians to settle in the predominantly Buddhist nation has led to violence between the two religious groups since the nineteenth century.[38] These tensions continue to inform Buddhist misinformation campaigns against the Rohingya. For example, anti-Muslim pamphlets, most notably the widely-distributed *The Fear of Losing One's Race* published in 2001, claim the Muslim community wants to establish supremacy through intermarriage.[39] Often in coordination with Nationalist Buddhist groups, the Tatmadaw have used disinformation to amplify violence against the Rohingya, making false claims that the Rohingya are illegal immigrants and a threat to Burma's sovereignty and national security. Such rhetoric, along with with assistance from Nationalist Buddhist groups, contributed to the 2017 state-sponsored genocide of the Rohingya.[40]

The Spanish and American empires introduced a similar migration policy when colonizing the Philippines. Beginning in the 1920s and continuing today, the state-sponsored resettlement of Christians in the Mindanao region have resulted in Muslim Moro groups being pushed out of their homes, leading to violence between the government and armed Muslim groups fighting for self-determination.[41] Although ongoing misinformation campaigns reflect the distrust between Christian and Muslim communities today, religious tensions between these groups go back centuries. For example, beginning in 1637, "moro-moro" plays served as early versions of misinformation in which Spanish colonists depicted the Moros as villains and inferior to Christians.

At the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, conflict stems from competing claims over the Durand line, a colonial partition which heavily affects the Pashtun people.[42] The longstanding rivalry and animosity between India and Pakistan also plays a role: Indian actors have misrepresented past battles or attacks as being current via doctored images on social media to increase tensions.[43] In an effort to degrade sympathy for the Pashtun people, Pakistani authorities have dispersed disinformation on social media, accusing members of the nonviolent Pashtun Protection Movement of colluding with Indian and Afghan intelligence services.[44] In Afghanistan, the Taliban and opposition groups are spreading disinformation aimed at confusing the narratives surrounding Panjshir, the last bastion of anti-Taliban resistance. Analysts warn Panjshir is serving as a "proxy playground" between the Pakistan-backed Taliban and Indian-backed National Resistance Front, heightening long standing social tensions.[45]

In the Armenia and Azerbaijan conflict, territorial claims have fueled contestation and occasional violence since the 1980s. The tensions have primarily concerned an ethnically Armenian enclave in Azerbaijan called Nagorno-Karabakh, which has traded hands multiple times, most recently landing with Azerbaijan following conflict in 2020.[46] Misinformation has impacted peacebuilding efforts by "reinforcing enemy images, increasing enmity and furthering the already extreme polarization between Armenian and Azerbaijanian societies."[47] Most war coverage in both states comes from the respective Ministries of Defense, leading to one-sided coverage that is viewed uncritically by media players.[48] This is further exacerbated by reduced access to foreign journalists by Azerbaijan, or unfettered access but with limits on permissible speech in Armenia.[49] Continued efforts to inflame the conflict and confuse the narrative around the Nagorno-Karabakh region demonstrate the role ethnicity plays in these conflict zones.

II.   ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is one of the main vehicles for spreading misinformation and disinformation in conflict areas. The absence of alternative news sources in conflict zones leads to the public relying on social media as a primary news source. This reliance, coupled with the difficulty of fact-checking on social media, allows misinformation, disinformation, and fake news to spread quickly.

Absence of alternative news sources:

Social media has become a breeding ground for fake news, misinformation, and disinformation because of a lack of traditional media sources or diminished trust in

mainstream media. Facebook and Twitter are effectively the internet in many of the countries analyzed, making them the main platforms people go to for factual information. In Indonesia and the Philippines, social media is a primary news source in the conflict area, and this may stem from lack of credible, traditional media outlets. In the Philippines, Facebook Basics, introduced in 2013, partnered with local carriers to offer Facebook with zero data charges. Consequently, Facebook became the de facto internet for many Filipinos. A 2017 survey found that Filipinos with internet access trust social media more than mainstream media—87 percent of these respondents claimed to trust information found on social media.[50]

In the cases of Burma and Azerbaijan-Armenia, government and civilian groups use Facebook and Twitter to sustain false narratives using misinformation and disinformation. In Burma, the Tatmadaw weaponized Facebook by spreading disinformation about the Rohingya to incite violence against them. Amnesty International reported the Tatmadaw used Facebook to garner public support for their campaign against the Rohingya, which included widespread murder, rape, and arson.[51] A 2018 U.N. fact-finding mission found Facebook played a "determining role" in violence against the Rohingya, and Facebook admitted they failed to do enough to stop hate speech and violence against the Rohingya.[52] At the beginning of the Armenian-Azerbaijan conflict, a video allegedly showed Azerbaijani forces executing Armenian prisoners of war. The video was widely shared, and many Armenians used it to fuel their anger toward Azerbaijan. However, the video was later revealed to be from a different conflict entirely and had been doctored to falsely depict the events in question.[53]

Fast spread of misinformation due to lack of fact-checking on social media:
In Burma and the Philippines, limited fact-checking abilities on social media allow posts with misinformation and disinformation to go viral. For example, in Burma, posts inciting violence against groups opposing the junta continue to go viral.[54] A 2021 investigation by the rights group Global Witness found Facebook's algorithm was amplifying such content,[55] including posts claiming resistance groups are ISIS and advocating for the arrest of civilians.[56] Misinformation and disinformation were amplified through the military's sophisticated campaigns to influence Facebook's algorithm in order to create an environment of pro-coup nationalization. In 2014, Amnesty found Facebook had only one Burmese-speaking content moderator to monitor the posts of 1.2 million active users in Burma, and that Facebook directly profited from paid advertising by the Tatmadaw.[57] In the Philippines, civil society actors against misinformation highlight the difficulties for Facebook to monitor posts in native languages. For example, Facebook and Twitter in-house filters for "fake news" do not work when the post is in the local Mindanao language, so it is easy for misinformation and disinformation to slip through the cracks, which allows rumors to run rampant throughout the community unchecked.[58] Social media in Asian developing countries appears to be less regulated by content moderators or does not have the capacity to detect misinformation and disinformation in posts, allowing false information to take root in societies as fact.

III.   MISINFORMATION TACTICS

Inauthentic accounts as vehicles for disinformation tactics like zone flooding and bots:
The most common vehicle political actors in these conflict zones use to propagate disinformation is inauthentic accounts. These accounts post "news" articles, images, and comments on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube.[59] Many of these inauthentic accounts contain branding to increase their credibility, so they are less likely to be removed.[60] To mass produce inauthentic accounts, disseminators of disinformation use automated bots to generate targeted harassment of adversaries.[61] [62] While many fake accounts cannot be tracked directly back to leaders of the conflict, digital forensics has linked campaigns to government allies.[63] For example, Burma's military junta has social media teams composed of soldiers creating scores of fake accounts and posting talking points they are given from leadership.[64]

If inauthentic accounts are the vehicle for disinformation, zone flooding is a preferred method in these case studies. Zone flooding is the use of large volumes of information—or in this case, disinformation—to overwhelm social media, so most information available is disinformation. Disinformation makes it difficult for audiences and trackers to separate accurate and inaccurate content. It can also make audiences feel like they have all the available information when they do not.[65]

One zone flooding example is from Burma, where thousands of social media posts on YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter link to fake accounts of military personnel alleging election fraud and labeling protestors as traitors.[66] Rampant, incorrect allegations result in no legitimate news verification and increase disinformation and hate speech.[67] In Indonesia, disinformation creators spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on pro-government advertisements and condemnations of West Papuan's bid for independence. Despite Facebook deleting hundreds of posts with incorrect, pro-government rhetoric, a plethora of posts perpetuate hate speech and racism, which may have led to increasing anecdotal reports of racism and police brutality.[68] [69]

Multiple, simultaneous disinformation campaigns: international versus domestic:
In some case studies, political actors created multiple, simultaneous disinformation campaigns: global ones aimed at the international community to foster a particular narrative and domestic campaigns that promote messages to internal audiences. The messaging across audiences is different, with global campaigns trying to earn support and sympathy for military action from the international community and domestic campaigns often focusing on scapegoating, developing extremist narratives, and xenophobia. Dual strategies may have the impact of exacerbating tensions and divisiveness within the countries in conflict while delaying international action and shifting sympathies.

In the West Papua conflict, messaging for international audiences focuses on eliciting sympathy from the international community. Indonesia uses inauthentic accounts to promote propaganda that is not distinctly misinformation—such as stories highlighting benefits the Indonesian Government reaps on West Papuans—to support a blatantly wrong narrative that West Papuans are happy with the status quo and do not wish for autonomy.[70] Posts are often in English rather than the country's native language.[71] For example, an

article entitled, "Doing the right thing: The UN echoes the positive responses over West Papuan incident," was published which falsely implies the UN supports Indonesian action (when in fact the UN is calling for human rights investigations on the conflict).[72] [73]

Meanwhile, internal messaging uses direct, aggressive rhetoric, labeling adversaries as traitors or extremists. This leverages existing racism, xenophobia, and scapegoating. After a rumor was posted online about West Papuan students damaging an Indonesian flag, the fervor escalated into a protest with accusations of discriminatory police brutality. The violent protest led to such an increase in misinformation online the government claimed the only solution to be an internet blackout.[74] [75] These posts sowed seeds of discord and tore groups apart during a vulnerable time.

CONCLUSION & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The following policy recommendations are designed to address misinformation threats in conflict-affected areas in Asia. These recommendations focus on strengthening media literacy, supporting independent and local journalism, developing regional disinformation monitoring networks, and engaging with tech and social media companies.

1. **Strengthen Media Literacy.** Strengthening media literacy through investment in childhood literacy, educational efforts, and digital literacy through partnerships with local communities to increase trust is a crucial step to combat misinformation. Governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can work together to develop targeted communication campaigns aimed at the most vulnerable individuals to misinformation. By intentional use of local languages and culturally appropriate messaging, these campaigns can effectively reach and resonate with their intended audiences.

   Providing media literacy training for teachers and adults ensures a more comprehensive approach to fostering critical thinking and responsible information consumption. Focusing on media literacy techniques that are directly relevant to prevalent misinformation tactics (e.g., bots, media tampering, and inauthentic accounts) could enhance effectiveness of these efforts. Training should also focus on the specific patterns that are seen above. By adopting a multi-faceted approach to media literacy, societies can build stronger defenses against misinformation.

2. **Support Independent and Local Journalism.** Independent and local journalists can play a role in vetting, providing, investigating, distributing, and fact-checking information for and to the public. For places where there is a lack of alternative news sources, independent/local journalism could have a great impact. NGOs and other organizations can support these media outlets by offering financial incentives, such as grants, to aid their efforts in delivering quality journalism.

   Governments have the responsibility to ensure safe environments for journalists to conduct investigations and publish. One way to accomplish this is by complying with

reputable international media outlets, such as *BBC*, *New York Times*, and *Al Jazeera*, in their independent research and publications. Additionally, collaboration with the UN Committee on Information[76] can further strengthen the support for journalists by ensuring that they have the resources and protection needed to do their work. By fostering an environment that values and supports independent and local journalism, societies can build stronger defenses against the spread of misinformation.

3. **Develop Regional Disinformation Monitoring Networks.** Developing regional disinformation monitoring networks is an effective strategy for combating the spread of misinformation. By fostering relationships with neighboring countries, educational institutions, and NGOs, stakeholders can share information related to misinformation, which then aids in the monitoring and identification of false narratives more effectively. Within these networks, governments can develop responses such as debunking myths, coordinating efforts on particular vulnerable groups, and other countermeasures.

   Existing frameworks, such as those implemented by the European Union (EU)[77] or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)[78], can serve as examples for developing regional networks tailored to specific contexts. These organizations have shown success in fostering cooperation and information sharing among their member countries, which can be adapted to tackle the issue of misinformation.

   Furthermore, incorporating elements from partnerships with organizations like the National Democratic Institute (NDI)[79] and their Info/tegrity initiative can offer valuable insights and resources for combating disinformation. By working together, regional stakeholders can create a more resilient information ecosystem and better protect their societies from the harmful effects of misinformation.

4. **Engage with Tech Companies and Social Media Platforms.** By strengthening relations and forming joint strategies, governments and tech companies can work together to combat false information. Such relationships consist of data sharing, improving misinformation identification algorithms, implementing moderation policies on various platforms, and coordinating efforts to identify and remove bots and slow the spread of zone flooding.

   The Digital Services Act implemented by the European Union,[80] which includes transparency reporting requirements, serves as a valuable reference point. Companies like Facebook have also established transparency centers to further improve accountability. Mandatory transparency reporting would provide insights into company operations, policy development, and rule enforcement. For a tangible global effect, democratic governments should collaborate to ensure coherent application of these mechanisms across jurisdictions. Meanwhile, digital platforms should proactively implement comprehensive transparency reporting, including independent auditing. Incentivizing social media companies to provide researchers with free or reduced-cost access to their data can promote research on mitigating misinformation and disinformation. Fostering collaboration between governments, tech companies, and researchers can lead to more effective responses to the spread of false information.

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