

**The Age of Advanced Communication:  
Impacts of Superpower Disinformation on U.S. Public Diplomacy**  
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**Abstract**

The age of advanced technology is among us. Beginning in the 1430s with the invention of the printing press, innovations such as the telegraph, radio, television, and the internet have changed the channels of communication, foreign and domestic, forever. Much of the previous research dominating the field of United States foreign policy focuses upon the age of disinformation. Some research pieces surrounding the impacts of communication tools on public diplomacy are outdated as technology is constantly changing. Rather, an up-to-date, comprehensive study of the shifting public diplomacy and media strategies due to these advanced communication tools would paint a thorough picture. This historical, qualitative research uses past events of disinformation through advanced communication tools in order to define the change in United States societal behavior, thus observing a change in public diplomacy. Based on the initial research, three major impacts surrounding these tools have been discovered and further research is proposed.

## Introduction

Advanced technology is everywhere. Today, the internet is one of the primary forms of communication technology used in the United States. According to one study, 91 percent of Americans say that they use the internet, with 85 percent engaging in daily use.<sup>1,2</sup> Because of the internet's speed and broad scope, information has the ability to become more accessible to everyone. Unfortunately, not all citizens in other countries have this luxury. Even today, people in other states are oppressed as they are constantly and purposefully fed false information in an effort to control societal behavior. From current Chinese surveillance worldwide to historical Russian initiatives like the creation of the KGB, what looks like freedom to some is not really so.

The purpose of this research is to discover the impacts of superpower disinformation through various advanced communication tools on United States public diplomacy. A major puzzle in the foreign policy arena is the amount of disinformation that occurs and spreads throughout the world. With the ability to spread knowledge through research now capable at the click of a button, why are so many instances of disinformation present? The average IQ in the United States is trending down rather than up.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, the research question posed is, how have advanced communication tools and strategies impacted public diplomacy foreign policy among superpowers through disinformation? As a growing problem, further research surrounding the impacts of disinformation from other superpowers would be beneficial to the foreign policy arena. The hypothesis is that while these communication tools allow for the spread of accurate information, they also allow for the spread of inaccurate information. This is especially harmful within democratic systems because it is up to the people to do their own research. The internet has become such an easy place to access information that pure curiosity and the drive to find a solution has seemingly begun to disappear.

## Research Framework

In this research, the dependent variable is United States public diplomacy while the independent variables include the various events of disinformation that occur using advanced communication. In using historical events of disinformation, it would be difficult to conduct research that is dependent on surveys or interviews. Because of this, the research will resemble an observational, longitudinal study. There is a massive body of literature surrounding this topic that will be of great importance. In attempting to solve the puzzle surrounding instances of disinformation, this research will stem majorly from what others have done in this realm.

Measurement of societal impacts will be effects such as changes in overall voting behavior, political climate, frequent use of advanced technology over time, and changes in public diplomacy or media strategies. Information will be gathered through observation and historical events. Data could also be gathered through testimonies from both government officials attempting to combat disinformation and citizens who are living with the new initiatives in a future study. While there is already literature surrounding this topic, technology is constantly updating and changing. Up-to-date research will always be needed. This is especially the case when there are claims of international interference in recent presidential elections.

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center, "Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet," 2021, <https://pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/>.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Perrin and Sara Atske, "About three-in-ten U.S. adults say they are 'almost constantly' online," 2021, <https://pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/03/26/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-say-they-are-almost-constantly-online/>.

<sup>3</sup> Bernt Bratsberg and Ole Rogeberg, "Flynn effect and its reversal are both environmentally caused," *PNAS* 115, no. 26 (2018): 6674-6678.

### Creating a Theoretical Framework

In an effort to conceptualize all of the variables present in this study, each piece of the research question must be thoroughly defined. The first step of measurement is to understand the concepts of public diplomacy, advanced communication tools, superpowers, and disinformation. Once defined, these themes will be analyzed within the literature.

#### **Public Diplomacy Foreign Policy**

Since the research question aims to display how advanced communication impacts public diplomacy, it is important that public diplomacy be properly defined. Public diplomacy can be defined as “the transparent means by which a sovereign country communicates with publics in other countries aimed at informing and influencing audiences overseas for the purpose of promoting the national interest and advancing its foreign policy goals.”<sup>4</sup> This is different from government public relations in that public relations “is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.”<sup>5</sup>

One important note about the definition of public diplomacy is that the Center on Public Diplomacy defines it as the “transparent means.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the strategy of using disinformation for achieving goals would not fall under the true definition of public diplomacy. Instead, disinformation can be viewed as a completely separate policy practice more in the realm of manipulation. Transparency is the ability of one state to “see” the intentions of another state. Of course, transparency will be higher within democratic structures as there are more freedoms of press and speech than in authoritarian government regimes.

Unfortunately, too much transparency can be a bad thing as it results in the inability to bluff to other states. Colonel Sean Larkin argues that technology today mandates openness as publics and government leaders can access open-source information almost immediately.<sup>7</sup> Because of this, a new age of hyper-transparency is created within democratic structures. Therefore, the idea of using disinformation for strategy in foreign policy shifts. For example in the United States, if the people were aware of the government’s intentions to bomb Iraq before it occurred, there would likely be debate on social media platforms and news outlets addressing it. Therefore, Iraq would be able to find out the intentions and have a preemptive plan of action.

#### **Advanced Communication Tools**

Advanced communication tools could mean many things. For the purposes of this study, advanced communication tools means mass media through social media and news outlets. However, these tools use different mediums in an effort to reach the people. The most common media that is used today is the internet. A Pew Research study found that more than 80 percent of Americans get their news from electronic devices.<sup>8</sup> Thus discussion of advanced communication includes social media and news outlets. The medium through which most people access communication is the internet.

#### **Superpowers**

As there are many powerful states throughout the world, it is important to define which exact states will be featured within this study. As Russia and China both have a history with the United States and are large powers themselves, these two will be considered the superpowers of

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<sup>4</sup> CPD, “Defining Public Diplomacy,” 2022, <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/page/what-is-pd>.

<sup>5</sup> PRSA, “About Public Relations,” 2021, <https://www.prsa.org/about/all-about-pr>.

<sup>6</sup> CPD, “Defining Public Diplomacy,” 2022, <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/page/what-is-pd>.

<sup>7</sup> Sean Larkin, “The Age of Transparency: International Relations Without Secrets,” *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 3 (May/June 2016): 136-146.

<sup>8</sup> Elisa Shearer, “More than eight-in-ten Americans get news from digital devices,” 2021, <https://pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>.

this study. Henry Kissinger developed the idea of triangular diplomacy as a way to combat the up-and-coming Communist powers inherent in Russia and China.<sup>9</sup> The idea of triangular diplomacy is to have a better foreign relationship with the other two points than they do with each other. For example, if war was imminent, war would be declared on the “odd man out” and the other two superpowers would likely band together to keep the third state in check.

### **Disinformation**

Finally, the major concept of this paper is the theme of disinformation. With public diplomacy and advanced communication both defined thoroughly, this research can move forward in an effort to understand disinformation, misinformation, and information. The idea of “misinformation” is the unintentional spread of inaccurate information, while “disinformation” is deception by the intentional spread of inaccurate information.<sup>10</sup> For this study, information is understood as any statement meant to inform.

For many, however, the idea of disinformation and misinformation is quite blurred. Henry Nau discusses this blurred line in his article “Why We Fight Over Foreign Policy.” As a complex subject, foreign policy deals with natural matters of the world, but also with humans who have the ability to think, lie, create, and change their minds in a given second. Therefore, with this subjective mindset, what a person tells another may not be a purposeful lie, but rather something that is informed by their own past prejudices and experiences.<sup>11</sup> The United States has used methods of disinformation in foreign policy throughout history. One example is Operation Bodyguard, which was a World War II strategy with the intention of concealing strategic information surrounding the D-Day invasion.<sup>12</sup>

### **Strength and Weaknesses of the Research Design**

A research concept such as this provides many various strengths and weaknesses. The largest weakness is that with such broad and abstract ideas, measurement can be difficult. As the importance of measurement is subjective to the researcher, important impacts can be missed or irrelevant impacts can be added. Another major weakness is the fact that since this amount of technology usage is still relatively recent, it does not have a major amount of active time that long-term impacts can be noted. Therefore, what is present in the short-term could very well change with the next technological advancement. While living in the technological era does not allow for the accurate prediction of long-term impacts, the ability to observe current events as they occur is present. A major strength is that the foundational idea of disinformation has been refined by many scholars, and therefore any advancement can be assisted with previous literature.

### **Literature Review**

Understanding the vast body of literature surrounding the topic of disinformation in public policy is the first step within the research after creating the framework. This literature review aims to understand basic elements of foreign policy through themes such as international paradigms, the bargaining range, coercion, and more. Understanding these building block elements will allow the full grasp of what types of impacts can come from disinformation through advanced communication tools in an effort to understand current events and initiatives.

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<sup>9</sup> CPD, “Triangular Diplomacy At Work Again With China, India and Russia,” 2022, <https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/tags/triangular-diplomacy>.

<sup>10</sup> Don Fallis, “What Is Disinformation?” *Liberty Trends* 63, no. 3 (Winter 2015): 402-426.

<sup>11</sup> Henry R. Nau, “Why We Fight Over Foreign Policy,” *Policy Review*, 2007, <https://www.hoover.org/research/why-we-fight-over-foreign-policy>.

<sup>12</sup> Don Fallis, “What Is Disinformation?” *Liberty Trends* 63, no. 3 (Winter 2015): 402-426.

Foreign policy is how one state conducts its relationship with another state. There are many different theoretical paradigms that can describe a state's foreign policy strategy. These paradigms include realism, institutionalism, liberalism, and constructivism. In more recent years, a rise of critical theory, feminism, and Marxism has also been seen, though in more of a domestic sense. The idea of realism believes that states throughout the world generally make their decisions based on advancements of self-preservation. Hans Morgenthau understood within his theory of realism in international relations that humans are selfish, egotistical, and emphasize the importance of power due to the lack of authority within the international arena.<sup>13</sup> To him, *animus dominandi*, or the desire to dominate, is the main source of conflict within the international arena.<sup>14</sup> When more land is dominated for a singular state entity, more power is present. There are more resources to use, thus resulting in a higher financial stability, thus allowing for more of a military in order to protect the dominions. This idea of realism is seen today across many states of the world, with the United States displaying similar tendencies. Institutionalism believes that if states work together, then there is a better chance at surviving because power can be pooled together. This idea of working together for a common goal can be seen as an allusion to the domestic idea of critical theory or socialism. Liberalism believes that the impacts of foreign policy come from current domestic policies. These ideas stem from the infamous classical work *Perpetual Peace* by Immanuel Kant in which he defines the importance of democracy.<sup>15</sup> Finally, constructivism believes that non-material elements motivate state actors, such as ideas or identities. Foreign policy is important because it allows for a state to remain independent. If it were not for the relationships that the United States made during the time of the Revolutionary War, it is possible that it would still be under the rule of another, more powerful state. Foreign policy also provides safety. Some states may move to attain security on their own, e.g. realism, while others rely on more powerful states, e.g. institutionalism. Everything generally circles back to the realist view of self-preservation, which inherently aligns with the Darwinian theory "survival of the fittest."<sup>16</sup> Thus this study is understood through the lens of a realist.

Within foreign policy, there are various techniques and strategies that can be used in an effort to achieve what is best for the national interest of a sovereign state. At the core of international relations, all states have some form of credibility, whether good or bad. According to Brands et al., "credibility represents the degree to which an actor's threats and promises are believed by other actors in the international system; it is a function of the degree to which an actor's words are taken to be believable."<sup>17</sup> This credibility within a state can fluctuate from time to time, especially within democratic systems, as leaders change. For example, President Truman likely would have been credible after his authorization of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, yet President Barack Obama lost some of his credibility with the "red line" that he drew for the Syrians in 2012. Just as in poker, there are bluffs within international politics. The problem comes when another state calls a bluff. Henry Kissinger once wrote, "A bluff taken seriously is

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<sup>13</sup> W. Julian Korab-Karpowicz, "Political Realism in International Relations," 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism-intl-relations/#HansMorgRealPrin>.

<sup>14</sup> W. Julian Korab-Karpowicz, "Political Realism in International Relations," 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism-intl-relations/#HansMorgRealPrin>.

<sup>15</sup> Immanuel Kant, "Perpetual peace," 1795, Philosophical essay.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, London: John Murray, 1859.

<sup>17</sup> Hal Brands et al., "Credibility Matters: Strengthening American Deterrence in An Age of Geopolitical Turmoil," *Center for Strategic Budgetary Assessments*, 2018, [https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/Credibility\\_Paper\\_FINAL\\_format.pdf](https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/Credibility_Paper_FINAL_format.pdf).

more useful than a serious threat taken as a bluff.”<sup>18</sup> Brands et al. continues to write, “Credibility is thus a subjective perception rather than an objective reality - what matters is less whether a country *will* actually make good on its threats and promises than whether other actors *believe* that it will.”<sup>19</sup>

For credibility to properly be signaled to another state, a costly action must be taken first. “Signaling” is a term for communicating intentions in the foreign policy arena. According to Fearon, there are two types of costly signals that can be taken by one state in an effort to signal their intentions to another. Taking a costly action is a form of signaling credibility. The two types of costly actions are to “(a) tie hands by creating audience costs that they will suffer *ex post* if they do not follow through on their threat or commitment...or (b) sink costs by taking actions such as mobilizing troops that are financially costly *ex ante*.”<sup>20</sup> According to Tomz, an audience cost is “the domestic price a leader would pay for making foreign threats and then backing down.”<sup>21</sup> This can also affect credibility. Democratic structures and those elected by the people have further costs that other systems do not. Public opinion matters for the political survival of leaders in these structures.

When one state is conflicted about going to war with another state, it is important to understand the bargaining range. According to Powell, the bargaining range is “the set of territorial divisions that both states prefer to fighting.”<sup>22</sup> The bargaining point is the exact tipping point in which one further demand would result in war. Within international relations, finding that point is the best way to ensure obtaining your own objectives. War is costly, and most reasonable states do not prefer war to other potential demands due to the pursuit of self-preservation.

As stated previously, transparency is the ability of one state to “see” the intentions of another state. This transparency can often be observed through citizen behavior and advanced communication tools. Therefore, the idea of using disinformation for a military strategy was born. It is a way that helps democratic structures avoid hyper-transparency with other states. Anymore though, disinformation is not limited to military strategy. With new communication technology such as social media and the internet, American daily lives are indoctrinated with the spread of disinformation. Often, it surrounds false advertising from businesses in an effort to obtain new consumers or disinformation surrounding current events or political candidates. For some, it goes as far as libel. Often, when thinking back to a time before the world was at a person’s fingertips, it can be hard to distinguish between what is true and what is false. Are the headlines being seen false in attempts to gain support from the people in order to pass a certain legislation? Alternatively, is what is being seen true, it is just seen more than before many had smartphones?

Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis provide an excellent, comprehensive work on the idea of disinformation. They concluded that media manipulators are most often motivated by ideology

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<sup>18</sup> Hal Brands et al., “Credibility Matters: Strengthening American Deterrence in An Age of Geopolitical Turmoil,” *Center for Strategic Budgetary Assessments*, 2018, [https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/Credibility\\_Paper\\_FINAL\\_format.pdf](https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/Credibility_Paper_FINAL_format.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Hal Brands et al., “Credibility Matters: Strengthening American Deterrence in An Age of Geopolitical Turmoil,” *Center for Strategic Budgetary Assessments*, 2018, [https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/Credibility\\_Paper\\_FINAL\\_format.pdf](https://csbaonline.org/uploads/documents/Credibility_Paper_FINAL_format.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> James D. Fearon, “Signaling Foreign Policy Interests: Tying Hands versus Sinking Costs,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no. 1 (February 1997): 68-90.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Tomz, “Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach,” *International Organization* 61, no. 4 (Autumn 2007): 821-840.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Powell, “Bargaining Theory and International Conflict,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 5 (June 2002): 1-30.

and money.<sup>23</sup> In the political climate within the United States, ideology frequently lies alongside political or religious beliefs. While 33 percent of Americans identify as independent, 24 percent in that category still lean either left or right.<sup>24</sup> That leaves only 9 percent of Americans that truly do not identify with a political party. With the major bipartisan structure, many Americans use their political party as an identifying characteristic of who they are. Just from one person sharing with another which political party they most identify with, there are multiple assumptions and reactions that are often immediately made. In regard to money motivation, with individuals who make a living off of having a presence on social media, disinformation can easily be spread. For example, there are influencers who promote a certain food or product as though they love it, when in reality, it is not something that they would use. Money can also motivate politicians to spread disinformation in an effort to gain public support. As stated earlier, public opinion is absolutely critical to a career politician.

As defined earlier, the unintentional spread of inaccurate information is “misinformation.”<sup>25</sup> Just as with any form of communication, misunderstandings and misperceptions are likely to occur. According to Albert Mehrabian, 55 percent of communication is nonverbal, 38 percent is vocal, while just 7 percent is the actual words.<sup>26</sup> In using advanced technology, it may not be intentional disinformation, but rather a misunderstanding that seemed intentional. In advanced communication technology today, body language and vocal intonations are generally not used. That means there is the potential for miscommunication up to 93 percent of the time, according to Mehrabian’s study. In international relations, these misperceptions or misreading of signaling can result in a lot of damage. Along with this, what may feel true to one person depending on their life experiences and worldview may not be true when viewed in a larger picture.

Online activity can also be fake. Studies have shown that less than 60 percent of internet usage is even human, while much of the rest is spawned by a bot or a click farm.<sup>27</sup> With an open-source structure, information can also be outdated. When citizens sift through websites for information, the date of publication is not always viewed or present at all. Thus, while something may have been true ten years ago, it does not mean that it is anymore. Since anyone can put anything on the internet, the content is only limited to the imagination of any person in the world who knows how to upload.

Both misinformation and disinformation can provide vastly different impacts on public diplomacy. For example, if disinformation is spread consistently throughout the United States, other states may not take the president very seriously because it alludes to a lack of intelligence from an outside perspective. If a proper public diplomacy strategy is not in place in an effort to prevent propaganda from other states, then it will be a vicious cycle of disinformation, lack of intelligence, and a wedge being driven between the American people when one political side attempts to solve it.

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<sup>23</sup> Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, “Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online,” *Data & Society Research Institute*, 2017, <https://datasociety.net/library/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/>.

<sup>24</sup> Pew Research Center, “Political Independents: Who They Are, What They Think,” 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/03/14/political-independents-who-they-are-what-they-think/>.

<sup>25</sup> Don Fallis, “What Is Disinformation?” *Liberty Trends* 63, no. 3 (Winter 2015): 402-426.

<sup>26</sup> University of Texas, “How Much of Communication Is Nonverbal?” 2021, <https://online.utpb.edu/about-us/articles/communication/how-much-of-communication-is-nonverbal>.

<sup>27</sup> Max Read, “How Much of the Internet Is Fake? Turns Out, a Lot of It, Actually,” 2018, <https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/12/how-much-of-the-internet-is-fake.html>.

An example of everything in play together is the 2016 United States presidential election. USA Today discussed the various “social media memes” that circulated after the 2016 election surrounding Russia’s alleged interference.<sup>28</sup> To be clear, this study does not intend to discuss whether or not this did or did not occur. However, these discussions are not the first allegations of Russian intervention in the West. The idea dates back to the Soviet Union’s establishment of the Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti, or KGB for short. The official purpose of the KGB was to gather foreign and technical intelligence and domestic counterintelligence.<sup>29</sup> Since the creation of the KGB in 1954, there have been various people with firsthand experience who defected to the West. One such example is Ladislav Bittman. As a high-up Czech intelligence officer, Bittman is deemed an “insider.” However, with limited hard evidence, he defines the Soviets’ “‘active measures’ as ‘clandestine operations designed to extend Soviet influence and power around the world.’”<sup>30</sup> Bittman claims that these activities included both terrorism and assassination.<sup>31</sup> Another example includes Yuri Bezmenov. While he passed away in 1993, his words have found new meaning among the next generation. As a member of the Novosti Press Agency, a publishing sector within the KGB, Bezmenov’s alleged job was to use propaganda against their own citizens, trick Americans into publishing Soviet propaganda, conceal slave laborers from those visiting the USSR, and more.<sup>32</sup> Based on these accusations, the KGB has accomplished its goal of attempting to drive a wedge between Americans and democracy by its own public diplomacy strategy of publishing propaganda abroad. Not only this, but socialism, which is what many Americans now prefer to democracy, inherently leads toward an authoritarian regime, which would further Russian ideals. With something like an interference in an election, which is inherently democratic, many Americans lost a major amount of faith in the democratic structure and now are looking for other government systems that they believe may work better. One study found that only 3.5 percent of voters would defect from a presidential candidate who acts undemocratically.<sup>33</sup> Another study found that only 16 percent of Americans believe that democracy is working well within the United States, while 45 percent believe the opposite.<sup>34</sup> Yet another study found that 2 out of 3 Americans believe democracy is “under threat.”<sup>35</sup> Are these impacts the work of an external state?

One major work that has been completed about public diplomacy in an age of disinformation is titled “Can Public Diplomacy Survive the Internet?” Jeffrey Hancock specifically discusses the psychological principles between public diplomacy and social media. He argues that we are not living in an era of post-truth, regardless of what many claim, but rather we are more

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<sup>28</sup> Devon Link, “Fact check: Meme makes false claims about media’s 2016 and 2020 election coverage,” 2020, <https://usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/11/25/fact-check-false-claims-medias-2016-2020-election-coverage/3770232001/>.

<sup>29</sup> Robert W. Pringle, “KGB,” 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/KGB>.

<sup>30</sup> Curtis Carroll Davis and Ladislav Bittman, “The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider’s View,” *Naval War College Review* 39, no. 4. (1986).

<sup>31</sup> Curtis Carroll Davis and Ladislav Bittman, “The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider’s View,” *Naval War College Review* 39, no. 4. (1986).

<sup>32</sup> G. Edward Griffin, *Deception Was My Job The Testimony of Yuri Bezmenov Propagandist for the KGB*, The Reality Zone, DVD, Amazon, 1984.

<sup>33</sup> Graeme Wood, “Only 3.5 Percent of Americans Care About Democracy,” 2020, <https://theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/09/few-americans-care-about-democracy/616534/>.

<sup>34</sup> Alexa Lardieri, “Just 16 Percent Says U.S. Democracy is Working, Poll Finds,” 2021, <https://usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2021-02-08/just-16-percent-says-us-democracy-is-working-poll-finds>.

<sup>35</sup> Courtney Vinopal, “2 out of 3 Americans believe U.S. democracy is under threat,” 2021, <https://pbs.org/newshour/politics/2-out-of-3-americans-believe-u-s-democracy-is-under-threat>.

aware of finding the truth.<sup>36</sup> From the findings in his report, humans are generally at fault to automatically trust people (e.g. *truth bias*).<sup>37</sup> While this may be acceptable in day-to-day interactions with people at work, family members, or others, current events and news about a state should not stop at a mere headline. One study found that roughly 60 percent of people do not read more than just the headlines in a given week.<sup>38</sup> This truth bias of mass media should not occur, and has been on the decline in recent years.<sup>39</sup> Often, many online media outlets get paid per click from advertisers. This is one of the motivating factors (e.g. money) that was described by Marwick and Lewis.<sup>40</sup> This method does not lead journalists to titling a work with truthful information. Rather headlines are made to be captivating so a person is inspired to click into the article, thus resulting in a paycheck for the media outlet.

The psychological effects of fact-checking are also outrageous. Some scholars believe that fact-checking helps lead people to new information, while others have found that this only results in people clinging even harder to a prior, incorrect belief.<sup>41</sup> According to research, once a belief has set in for an individual, it is difficult to shake, even if there is concrete evidence to prove the belief wrong.<sup>42</sup> In a political climate with such hostility like the United States, this becomes even more difficult, because the correct information may be something “from the other side.” Also, when a person believes an idea is already correct, there is no motivating factor to be curious. So if a person reads a headline, deduces a belief from it, and it turns out to be wrong, nothing will motivate that person to try and find a correct answer. Rather, it is possible for him to spend the rest of his time swaying people into believing something that is incorrect and rejecting those who try to correct him.

### Initial Research

Technological advancement over the years has allowed communication to occur across a larger geographic area at a higher speed. At this stage in the research, there are three foundational points that can be made about advanced communication tools today. The internet allows for information to be shared quickly, enables an increased reliance due to the ease of access, and fosters a democratic system.

The purpose of a communication tool is to do just that: communicate. Thus, beginning with the telegraph, these tools over time have been created in an effort to make the spread of intelligence and information an easier process. The internet has given humans the ability to share information rapidly and across the globe. It can now create approximately 2.05 billion open-source results in just 0.96 seconds for a single person; possibly even more if that person has access to a higher internet speed. Today, people are able to access information as soon as it happens or even follow along live. In public diplomacy and international relations, truly understanding an opponent can

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<sup>36</sup> Jeffrey T. Hancock, “Psychological Principles For Public Diplomacy In An Evolving Information Ecosystem,” *Can Public Diplomacy Survive the Internet?* (May 2017): 49-53.

<sup>37</sup> Jeffrey T. Hancock, “Psychological Principles For Public Diplomacy In An Evolving Information Ecosystem,” *Can Public Diplomacy Survive the Internet?* (May 2017): 49-53.

<sup>38</sup> Chris Cillizza, “Americans read headlines. And not much else,” 2014, <https://washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2014/03/19/americans-read-headlines-and-not-much-else/>.

<sup>39</sup> Megan Brenan, “Americans’ Trust in Media Dips to Second Lowest on Record,” 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/355526/americans-trust-media-dips-second-lowest-record.aspx>.

<sup>40</sup> Alice Marwick and Rebecca Lewis, “Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online,” *Data & Society Research Institute*, 2017, <https://datasociety.net/library/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/>.

<sup>41</sup> Ethan Porter, “Facts Matter, and People Care: An Empirical Perspective,” *Can Public Diplomacy Survive the Internet?* (May 2017): 55-59.

<sup>42</sup> Stephanie Pappas, “Why False Beliefs Are Hard to Shake,” 2018, <https://livescience.com/63554-why-false-beliefs-stick.html>.

be aided by slow, methodical methods rather than quick, knee-jerk reactions. However, with information so quickly shared, decisions must reflect that same speed.

Many young people do not remember a time without the internet or smartphones. With this type of reliance, whoever has the capacity to control a large sum of the technology or media market has the capacity to control the people. Using the internet to find an answer is easy. It has become so easy in fact, that people search for information that is already known rather than thinking through a problem. This reliance affects the ability to problem-solve and engage in memory recall. It is an increasing, subconscious problem that people need to be aware of. Over time, this share of intelligence has gotten easier. Once one communication tool was implemented, inventors around the world started thinking, “How can this be made better and faster?” The internet has spawned an era of self-doubt because anyone can “fact-check” anyone with the click of a button. It has diminished high levels of academia because anyone can seemingly find the answer to anything with ease. Unfortunately, since it was discovered many people only read the headlines, fact-checking often occurs with inaccurate information. The final point about advanced communication technology is that the idea of using the internet at all is inherently democratic. The first amendment in the United States Constitution provides the freedoms of press and speech. Why would an open-source platform like the internet need to be efficient if there was not an inherent purpose to spread information?

### **Next Steps**

Because of the amount of disinformation that can be knowingly spread throughout democratic systems, the United States needs to have a specific public diplomacy and media strategy in place in order to combat this. Today, the United States government is aware of the problem and working on finding a good strategy to fight it. However, since mass disinformation across social media platforms is still relatively new, the policies in place are still in the trial and error stage. In 2017, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) created the Global Engagement Center (GEC) which was the first coordinated effort at attacking the negative impacts of disinformation on public diplomacy head on<sup>43</sup>. The GEC is centered around four pillars of engagement: partnerships, data analytics, content, and interagency engagement.<sup>44</sup> While the GEC focuses on building partnerships in order to combat disinformation and understanding the data, it is lacking a solid action plan for how these pillars will truly assist United States public diplomacy. This is a fine line as preventing the spread of information could block the right to the freedoms of speech and press.

Studies have found that the trust Americans have in the media is becoming quite low. While Hancock discussed the truth bias in regard to trusting things that are read online or things that a friend may post, the idea of trusting in the media for news is declining.<sup>45</sup> In 2021, only about 36 percent have trust in mass media, which is the second lowest on record.<sup>46</sup> While democratic structures do have the ability to fact-check information, the political climate between Republicans and Democrats can blind citizens to any information they attempt to check. With more than hundreds of thousands of opinionated editorials from people pushing out their own opinions, it can be difficult to find the information that has actually followed the scientific method and been tested

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<sup>43</sup> Vivian S. Walker and Ryan E. Walsh, “Public Diplomacy and The New ‘Old’ War: Countering State-Sponsored Disinformation,” *U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy*, 2020.

<sup>44</sup> USDOS, “Global Engagement Center,” 2016, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/gec/index.htm>.

<sup>45</sup> Jeffrey T. Hancock, “Psychological Principles For Public Diplomacy In An Evolving Information Ecosystem,” *Can Public Diplomacy Survive the Internet?* (May 2017): 49-53.

<sup>46</sup> Megan Brennan, “Americans’ Trust in Media Dips to Second Lowest on Record,” 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/355526/americans-trust-media-dips-second-lowest-record.aspx>.

to be true. According to a Pew Research Center survey, 67 percent of Americans have noticed that their news sources have presented factual information to favor one political side, 56 percent have noticed breaking news headlines that have not been fully verified, and 37 percent have reported “made-up information intended to mislead the public.”<sup>47</sup> Even still, 86 percent of Americans get their news online, even though the trust is gone.<sup>48</sup> The people are telling others that they do not have trust in the media, yet still follow the same practices of obtaining information from pundits or clickbait headlines. The behavior is oxymoronic. With human nature foundationally being greedy, as per realist theory, trust is unfounded. People know this, but still believe their sources are accurate. Instead, all people should be skeptical of information given by another person and always be willing to do their own research. However, with the ease of the technology in play, attention spans have been on the decline. One study has shown that the average attention span for humans today is eight seconds.<sup>49</sup>

One effort that the United States could engage in to combat dated misinformation would be disclaimers. For example, when looking on certain government websites, if an article had been archived, there is a note at the top of the page dated when it was archived and a watermark stating “ARCHIVE” across the entire webpage. Once webpages reach a certain age, they should be visually “archived” so that the individual attempting to gather information understands that it is outdated and may no longer be accurate. That way, the information is still accessible, but age is recognized. The same could be said with many news programs spreading disinformation about political candidates. On television at various intervals for cable news programs, disclaimers such as “Opinions presented by ‘Name’” would help continuously remind viewers that what is being said may not be fact. With the foundational freedoms of speech and press, it is highly important not to infringe upon the rights of Americans. Therefore, it comes down to educating the public where valid information can be found. Alongside this, valid news sources and studies should be financially accessible for the people, rather than requesting large amounts of money for a single article. However, there should not be one entity that controls the entire library of “valid information.” As previously stated, whoever has the capacity to control a large sum of the technology and media market has the capacity to control the people. With a major platform such as Google and Facebook holding a large portion of the news side of the internet, the terms and conditions allow these businesses to filter what people can and cannot see. While this is not inherently illegal, it does not lead to the discovery of truth. News entities bound on releasing the truth should receive some sort of incentive from the government. If instances of disinformation are found, the incentive is immediately lost and only can be regained over time. Verbiage such as research design, hypothesis, research question, variables, and ethics should be normalized.

Another potential idea would be to expand the idea of truth in the media internationally. During the pandemic, the United Nations attempted to band together to ensure that people within states were able to have access to accurate and up-to-date information.<sup>50</sup> However, this effort

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<sup>47</sup> Elisa Shearer, “Two-third of U.S. adults say they’ve seen their own news sources report facts meant to favor one side,” 2020, <https://pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/02/two-thirds-of-u-s-adults-say-theyve-seen-their-own-news-sources-report-facts-meant-to-favor-one-side/>.

<sup>48</sup> Elisa Shearer, “More than eight-in-ten Americans get news from digital devices,” 2021, <https://pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>.

<sup>49</sup> Jill Ebstein, “Our attention span is shorter than a goldfish’s. Here’s what we can do about it | Commentary,” 2021, <https://orlandosentinel.com/opinion/guest-commentary/os-op-attention-span-dwindling-20210706-rvv2owqhezbp5hkmyqqtpmiq4u-story.html>.

<sup>50</sup> UNIS Geneva, “UN combats disinformation during pandemic,” 2021, <https://un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-combats-disinformatoin-during-pandemic>.

should not just be pursued during a pandemic. As described above, inaccurate information can result in many negative impacts, such as sending states to war over simple misunderstandings. A subcategory should be created within the United Nations in an effort to combat false information. This would help the United States public diplomacy strategy on both ends in regards to image and propaganda from other states.

In sum, this topic requires further research to determine the further effects that superpower disinformation has on the public, thus the effects that advanced communication tools have on public diplomacy. While there is a large body of literature surrounding this topic, the amount of research conducted in a post-Trump era, e.g. the differences between President Trump's and President Biden's strategic relationships with Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, could be greatly expanded in order for the chance at new findings. With major impacts found just from this initial research, the academic community would benefit greatly from a completed piece.

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