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DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SCIENCES  
UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY  
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MADN-SOC

05 November 2022

MEMORANDUM FOR The 73<sup>rd</sup> Student Conference on U.S. Affairs (SCUSA)

SUBJECT: Addressing Social Media's Challenge to American Democracy

1. **Issue:** The purpose of this memorandum is to propose policy options which the United States can use to address social media's ability to undermine the integrity of the American democratic process.
2. **Strategic Analysis:** The emerging technologies of the twenty-first century have allowed us to become inextricably linked together on a scale previously unseen. Social Media, one of the most novel and impactful of these emerging technologies, has created a global information system rife with polarization. This quagmire, with the potential to influence billions, necessarily requires robust global solutions. Though there are attempts to globally address this problem through organizations like the Global Network Initiative (GNI) and multistakeholder agreements such as the Declaration of the Future of the Internet, there is no consensus on identifying social media as a global issue. Despite the enormous number of people on social media, there is an absence of media literacy. In addition to media illiteracy, there is also a lack of regulation for social media platforms which creates opportunities for misinformation and disinformation to spread and privacy breaches of individual consumer data to occur. As the world faces new 21st century challenges, the 20th century institutions are not equipped to solve issues with technological nuance. Few multilateral institutions have been implemented to combat the issue; therefore, global solidarity is imperative to solving the international problem of media.
3. **Relevant National Interests:**
  - a. Upholding the integrity of the American democratic process
  - b. Protecting constitutional rights in an age of emerging technologies
  - c. Maintaining the rules-based international order
4. **Strategic Options and Recommendations:**
  - a. Social media's novel influence on human information flow calls for a multidimensional solution. Four major levels are used to analyze the effects of this change: (1) problems at the individual-level, (2) in the marketplace, (3) in society, and (4) in the global information system.

- b. A long-term solution requires that humanity develop an understanding of how social media affects the global information system, however, there is a lack of institutions necessary to implement policy change at this level. Because most of the world's social media platforms are based in the United States, the country is in a uniquely strategic position to implement domestic policies which have a net positive effect on people across the globe. A long-term solution would require a truly global effort and therefore we endorse creating an international institution with the primary goal of tackling the issues of emerging technologies. Until the formation of such an international body, policy should focus on the other four levels of problems presented by today's widespread social media usage.
- c. At an individual level, people do not take responsibility for their personal media and information literacy and do not act as conscious consumers of the media they consume. Rather than prioritize the health and welfare of people, market-driven social media platforms employ algorithms that target people's emotions and work to polarize people and create ideological echo chambers. In the United States, there is no meaningful government regulation of social media, despite its disproportionate, detrimental effects on the nation and world. More regulation will work to shape social media into more informative and authentic platforms that still host freedom of speech and expression. Both educational and legal reform will actively work to create a safer social media space, and may even negate the need to suspend or ban individuals over time.

5. **Implementation:** The following courses of action should be implemented:

- a. *Education in media literacy:* Within mandated educational programs, it is proposed that students be required to (1) define and identify misinformation, (2) identify potential external biases, (3) understand subconscious biases and potential effects of selective exposure, (4) understand how to research and use reputable sources to confirm information, and (5) understand and interpret how news sources present information to their audience.
  - i. A *semester-long course* incorporated at the elementary, middle, and secondary levels is recommended as a requirement. States themselves would decide in which grade levels to implement this course. Teaching positions may be created because of this policy, pushing forth job growth, a secondary benefit. To compensate for the resources required to create and implement this policy, states that choose to create a course in media literacy will be provided with a higher federal subsidy. A semester-long course, however, would be more costly and divert time away from other core classes than a workshop.
  - ii. A *workshop* is recommended to take place semesterly for the duration of a school day at the primary and secondary level. The Department of Education would supply resources and contract media literacy-focused civil society organizations to lead these workshops. States will subsidize these workshops and require that they be put on for students twice a year. This approach allows

for planting the seeds for greater media literacy, without drastically changing course schedules. Still, a semesterly workshop would limit the formal time delegated to media literacy in public schools to twice a year, hindering its effectiveness. Although online training programs and parental guidance offer alternative solutions, online training programs experience less engagement than in-person learning, and parents often lack the time and/or expertise to inform their children on the intricacies of misinformation (Buckingham, 2002). This memo also considers the success of countries such as Taiwan and Finland that have already incorporated media literacy into primary and secondary school curriculums to combat the influences of hostile, revisionist powers. As the United States faces threats from similar powers, it is essential to implement similar preventative measures (Media Literacy, 2019; Kao, 2021). Due to the ever-evolving nature of social media, this would require frequent updates.

- b. *Privacy protection legislation:* A congressional act—such as the American Data Privacy and Protection Act—is proposed to achieve aims similar to those of the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which gives social media consumers control over what data is collected by businesses. The specific identifiable information from the collected data is removed and/or separated, offering more control to consumers and protecting their data (Robbins 2022). Organizations that sell goods or services to countries in the EU and organizations collecting the behavior of data subjects all must comply with the GDPR (Pop 2022). California recently adopted a policy inspired by the GDPR but on a smaller scale. The California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA) provides consumers with control over how businesses collect and use their personal data (California Consumer Privacy Act 2022). Unlike the GDPR, which places limitations on all organizations, this legislation will specifically limit data collection, providing consumers greater transparency and security. Social media platforms who violate this act will be subject to penalties such as a deduction of the platform's revenue or a fine which will be enforced by the proposed Social Media Regulatory Bureau.
- c. *Banning surveillance advertising:* To protect the data privacy of citizens, a ban on surveillance advertising is recommended. This ban would restore transparency and accountability to digital ad placements, substantially defunding sites that serve as critical infrastructure in the misinformation and disinformation pipeline. It would also help the government preserve citizens' Fourth Amendment Rights that are currently being sidestepped and prohibit online advertisers from using personal information. In 2021, it was found that four in five Americans supported a ban on surveillance advertising, reflecting a desire for privacy protection rights. (Rosner, 2021) On January 18th, 2022, the 'Banning Surveillance Advertising Act of 2022' was introduced to Congress. This Act addresses the concerns expressed above and provides for enforcement of these provisions by the Federal Trade Commission, states, and individuals (Congress.gov, 2021).

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- Patrick Elter, *United States Military Academy*
- Ellen Henderson, *Western Kentucky University*
- Bethany Jablon, *United States Military Academy*
- Noah Jager, *United States Military Academy*
- Emma Marti, *Piedmont University*
- Joseph Muir, *Texas A&M University*
- Naomi Poss, *University of Wisconsin, Madison*
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