Combating Misinformation through Media Literacy Education

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Represent *is a series from the CSIS International Security Program on diversity, inclusion, and representation in national security. Amulya Panakam describes her experience facing misinformation in the state of Georgia and steps that governments at the national and state levels can take to combat, primarily through media literacy education.*

Growing up in the state of Georgia, I've witnessed the state become a battleground for partisan politics and misinformation. I've watched as peers at school have reposted misleading content in social media about the validity of the 2020 presidential election, neighbors participated in the January 6th riots on the U.S. Capitol, and anonymous pamphlets spread Q-ANON ideology throughout my community. For most people, the far-reaching effects of misinformation are concerning but an afterthought in their daily lives. However, in Georgia, the proliferation of misinformation on social media has made the truth more vulnerable than ever, and its weaponization of misinformation has diminished diverse, credible mediums and voices that enable citizens to make informed, educated decisions about their government and livelihoods.

In recent years, the United States has increasingly faced threats from foreign powers seeking to undermine and influence democratic processes through propagandistic means. Foreign adversaries, like Russia, tend to exacerbate tensions with U.S. society by amplifying divisive rhetoric and misinformation that originate from domestic voices. The U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence's report on Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election found that "operatives [masquerading as Americans] used targeted advertisements, intentionally falsified news articles, self-generated content, and social media platform tools to interact with and attempt to deceive tens of millions of social media users in the United States. This campaign sought to polarize Americans based on societal, ideological, and racial differences, provoked real-world events, and was part of a foreign government's covert support of Russia's favored candidate in the U.S. presidential election." Misinformation became a powerful weapon in the 2016 election used to disrupt and undermine the legitimacy of the electoral process. It has challenged core democratic ideals and taken advantage of vulnerabilities in U.S. national security.

In Georgia, persistent misinformation from domestic actors has infiltrated the state's political processes. In the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election, the disarray of election fraud claims resulted in an onslaught of lawsuits and litigation seeking to challenge the election results. On an hourlong telephone call, President Trump pressured Georgia's Republican secretary of state, Brad Raffensperger, to "find 11,780 votes" that would overturn the presidential election. When Mr. Raffensperger upheld and reaffirmed the original outcome of the election results in the state, social media and local news pushed disinformation campaigns that continued to discredit him and the election. Fledgling websites like The Georgia Star News created a pro-Trump outlet that fed larger audiences misinformation. The website published baseless claims about widespread election fraud in Georgia and conspiracy theories to steal the election from Mr. Trump. These claims were explosive and spread rapidly within the conservative media sphere. A few weeks later, Trump's lawyer Rudy Giuliani claimed there was video evidence of election workers pulling out suitcases of fraudulent ballots in Biden's favor. Georgia election officials and state investigators have said that the "suitcases" were standard ballot containers and the video shows the normal processing of the ballots. However, this video was widely circulated on social media, exacerbating election conspiracy theories and fueling

threats towards polling places and election officials. Driven by the questioning of the presidential election results and the latest Georgia Senate runoff races, election misinformation has escalated to unhealthy and dangerous levels in local communities. In North Georgia, an anonymous political tabloid containing alt-right propaganda has landed on the doorstep of unsuspecting community members. Named The Pamphleteer, the handout spreads misinformation and conspiracy theories about COVID-19, voting rights, and the 2020 presidential election. While social media played the largest role in spreading misinformation, local news and other forms of mass media have contributed as well.

Warnings about misinformation in mass media have become an increasingly common feature of American politics since the 2016 election. In the Senate Intelligence Committee's report, media literacy education was recommended as a measure to protect against malicious digital content, and to "...help build long-term resilience to foreign manipulation of our democracy." But while the issue of misinformation is becoming more widely acknowledged within Congress and the American public, media literacy education as a solution has resulted in a stalemate. In 2019, U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) introduced legislation, The Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Act, to combat foreign interference campaigns by creating a grant program at the Department of Education to help states develop media literacy education and fund existing initiatives across grades K-12. This bill did not attract widespread coverage, and therefore was not enacted. The ongoing debate about misinformation, and the lack of bipartisanship has culminated in minimal endorsement of media literacy education and a lack of prioritization for cybersecurity education. The United States political realm has faced threats globally and domestically, but has yet to establish comprehensive programs and policies that address misinformation.

Through media literacy education, students will be able to critically analyze the media and become wiser producers and consumers of information, and by extension, will become responsible digital citizens. Media literacy education teaches students to apply critical thinking to messages in mass media, produce and consume media conscientiously, and build an understanding of how the media shapes global culture and society. Peter Singer, a strategist for New American and author of LikeWar: The Weaponization of Social Media, wrote, "Building such "digital literacy" or "cyber citizenship" skills is how we build more resilience in the system…such skills reduce our individual and societal vulnerability against everything from Russian info ops to COVID-19 anti-vaxxers." Attacks on American national security through the use of targeted misinformation and propaganda are becoming increasingly more common, and the United States must prepare the next generations of voters and leaders through media literacy education in promoting civic education and public discourse.

Finland is an example of the successful implementation of media literacy education. The Scandinavian state has an extensive and comprehensive media literacy program, where media education is integrated into core classes. In a media literacy index, Finland ranked first as having the highest potential to withstand the negative effects of fake news and misinformation through its quality of education and trusted media. Russia's dominant presence in Europe and its information warfare campaigns have led Finland to create an exhaustive education curriculum that seeks to consolidate and diversify leadership within media literacy. Students actively fact-check information, think critically about the media, and learn about fake news in its various forms. Media literacy education has proven to be extremely beneficial to Finnish national security; Finland has emerged as a resistant force to Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns in Europe.

In the United States, Illinois, Florida, and Ohio have recognized the need for media literacy standards and these states have worked to develop media literacy education. Students in these states are learning how to use media responsibly, adapting to the rapidly changing global communications environment preparing against information warfare. While there are a number of organizations in this space, the leading grassroots advocacy organization is Media Literacy Now (MLN). MLN promotes media literacy education in K-12 public schools and has advanced media literacy efforts around the country. Erin McNeill, the group's founder and president of Media Literacy Now has emphasized that "sophisticated communications technologies have become very cheap and widely accessible. We must build resilience to dangerous disinformation with an urgent focus on media literacy education from the earliest grades." MLN has advised around two dozen states in media literacy and helped pass 15 successful pieces of legislation in 8 states. Their work will potentially affect the education of 10 million students and help defend against misinformation.

In Georgia, a similar media curriculum can help jumpstart a movement that prioritizes digital competency and promotes awareness of media influence. As a student there, I believe a comprehensive media literacy curriculum will promote civic education, political discourse, and bridge bipartisanship in my community. As the 2022 gubernatorial and midterm elections approach in Georgia, I look forward to creating dialogue about the impact of misinformation, while also building a framework that empowers truth and democracy in the digital realm.

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Amulya Panakam is a senior at West Forsyth High School in Cumming, Georgia. She is an alumnus of the National Security Fellows program at Girls Security and is passionate about cybersecurity education. Amulya hopes to support marginalized populations affected by misinformation, while also working to create a responsible and healthy digital world through media literacy education.

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