

The Disinformation Link: A Discussion of How Global Citizenship Education Contributes to Global Political Stability

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Abstract: The threat of Social Polarization and disinformation is growing in these post-pandemic times, threatening the political stability and social cohesion of the world, and education has become an option to address this crisis. This paper examines Global Citizenship Education (GCE)'s ability to counteract disinformation and Social Polarization (SP) using media and literacy training (MIL), as previous studies on these topics rarely address their direct relationships. The finding suggests that there is a strong probability that MIL, under the guidance of the GCE framework, has the capability to mitigate disinformation and, in turn, SP. However, due to limited evidence in the area, this paper is unable to confirm the relationship between SP and Global Political Stability. Despite this, this paper still offers a unique perspective on GCE, which helps set the stage for future studies to explore related topics. The insights derived from this paper are valuable for various actors and researchers, which could help contribute to a more stable, peaceful global society.

Keywords: Global Citizenship Education, Disinformation, Global Political Stability, Social Polarization Media and Information Literacy.

1. Introduction

In 2023, a report from the World Economic Forum (WEF) pointed out that our world is becoming increasingly politically unstable. Among the five biggest risks of 2024 are misinformation and disinformation, and societal or political polarization [1]. As countries are still trying to recover from the aftereffects of COVID-19, misinformation and disinformation are given the opportunity to “ferment,” and in turn, polarize our society and destabilize political stability by eroding communal trust and “diminishing shared values” [1]. As new globalized crises related to social polarization (SP) continue to arise, the WEF points to public awareness and education as the approach with the most potential and advocates for coordinated efforts as the “only viable pathway” to secure our future [1].

Before discussing the relationship between these factors, it is important to clarify the difference between misinformation and disinformation. While both consist of “inaccurate, incorrect or misleading” information, these two concepts differ in the “intent of delivery”: The cause and spread of misinformation is unintentional. Its counterpart, on the other hand, is the product of deliberate, coordinated, and concentrated efforts [2]. This article chooses to focus on the concept of disinformation not only due to it being a pervasive, hybrid threat that erodes Global Political Stability (or GPS for short) but also its strong ties with education, as critical thinking and reasoning skills could

be vital to empowering a culture of mutual understanding, stabilizing society and reducing divisions [3]. With high support for using education as a solution to tackle disinformation, theories and methods have been developed towards implementation, one of them being Global Citizen Education (or GCE for short) [1,3]. Focusing on fostering a sense of trust, community, and responsibility, GCE is deemed a potentially effective antidote for the polarizing and fragmenting impact of disinformation [3]. While the elements mentioned above have been the frequent subjects of past studies, there exists a significant gap in studies that systematically examine the relations between them, and how they would interact with each other to form a correlational “chain of influence”. This article, as a result, aims to explore how GCE could possibly tackle disinformation and, in turn, SP and GPS using the device of media and information literacy training (MIL).

The following framework is thus proposed: By introducing MIL to combat disinformation, GCE has the potential to indirectly address social polarization and, in turn, enhance global political stability (GPS) (see Figure 1 below).

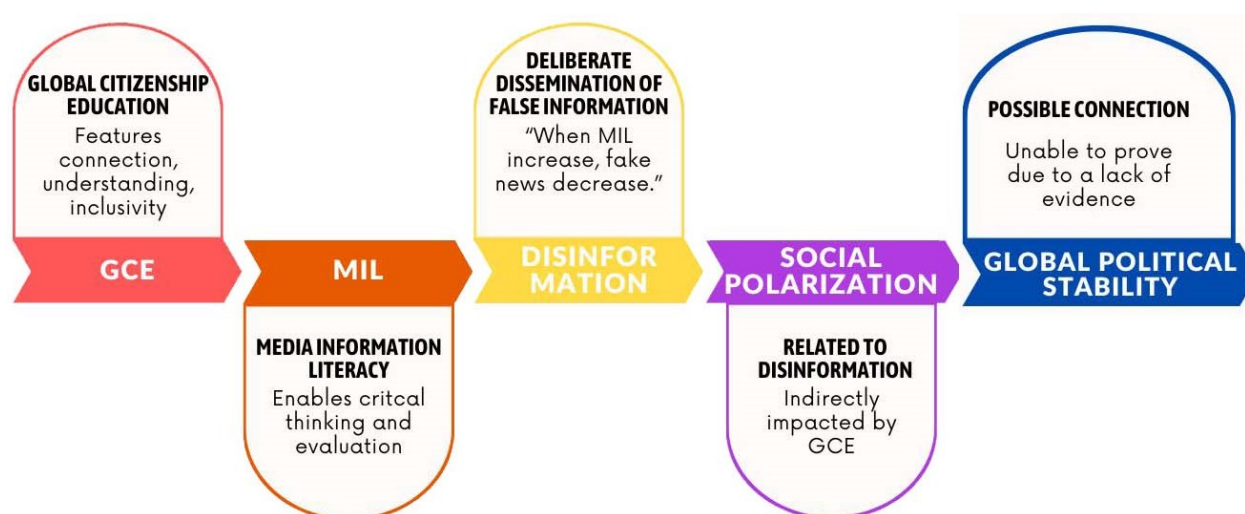


Figure 1: How GCE impact Global Political Stability

Visualized in the figure above, this article’s argumentation process is divided into three parts. Part One will focus on how GCE tackles disinformation through the use of MIL training, and Part Two will discuss the relationship between disinformation and SP. Finally, Part Three shall provide an argument about the connection between SP and GPS before reviewing all three parts through a holistic lens.

2. How GCE Tackles Disinformation through the Use of MIL

2.1. Global Citizenship Education (GCE)

The concept of GCE has been the center of many previous studies in the last decade. However, rather than a concrete concept, GCE is rather fluid and can be adapted based on the perspective of those who are utilizing it. Recently, more and more studies have begun to reflect on previous GCE practices, and it has become critical to reflect on the concept as the global political and social environments grow increasingly more dynamic and complex after the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, Borgebund & Børhaug argued that GCE limits itself to global political perspectives by focusing on “what” the crisis at hand is rather than “why the case is created” and “how can we tackle it” [4]. The authors then suggested that by combining global political concepts, GCE would have more potential when it comes to helping its learners understand the basic inner workings of politics—a “why”

alongside global activism--“how.” Another limitation of current GCE practices, according to Auh & Kim is its lack of “core competencies”—directive values that can promote strong reasoning backbones and enrich the teaching process [5]. The authors then further argued there existed alignments between GCE and core values in other fields—in this particular case, Christianity—and how much resonance can provide young learners of GCE with spiritual support and help them brace against new and more unforeseen global challenges. It is worth noting that a preliminary review of literature in the field revealed that many scholars target GCE in a pedagogical context, especially in schools targeting young people, instead of moving onward onto other broader, more informal contexts beyond classrooms. In other words, GCE, despite being the subject of many previous studies, is still a field that has a lot of “unexplored territory” and has many “gaps” to address.

2.2. Relationship

This article argues that GCE-driven MIL could be used as a device to tackle disinformation and, in turn, social polarization, which would enable GCE to positively influence global political instability and sees GCE as being capable of this task because of its focus on the spirit of “common humanity.” In their 2015 emphasis, UNESCO established that GCE features “interdependency” and “interconnectedness” on multiple levels of society [6]. With a core spirit that stands up to instability and an emphasis on MIL training, GCE could enable its recipients to think critically, logically, and rationally, allowing them to learn to accept a “multiplicity of viewpoints” and eventually “resist manipulation by nationalists and popular interests” [7,8]. In fact, past scholars have already tried implementing GCE-driven MIL training, and their experiments have yielded promising results. Previous studies conducted in Finland and Sweden have demonstrated that MIL training is effective in helping students cultivate the ability to critically evaluate online information and make better judgements when “fact-checking” [9,10]. Meanwhile, studies conducted in non-European settings such as Ghana also demonstrated this trend, that as “(MIL) training increases, the sharing of fake news decreases,” signalling its potential to operate in a coordinated global context [11]. In actual field practice, many international civil actors, such as the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), are already trying to offer MIL training [12]. Governmental-level efforts across EU member states are also steadily increasing. For example, Sweden is actively adjusting MIL curriculums and cooperating with pan-European authorities [13,14]. If more political and financial support is directed toward formalizing MIL training, this training device can perhaps overcome its current limited impact and become a truly useful tool [14]. Given its capability to combat disinformation by enabling critical skills in the general populace and its capacity to cooperate across contexts, GCE-motivated MIL appears to be a suitable tool for indirectly addressing the rising SP and thus contributing to GPS.

3. The Relationship between Disinformation and Social Polarization

3.1. Social Polarization (SP)

Before addressing the relationship between disinformation and SP, it is important to first clarify the concept of SP. In an article by Kyrychenko, there exist two types of SP: political-based polarization and group-identity-based polarization [15]. On the one hand, political-based polarization features party-association or ideology-based division and is mostly relevant in countries with a democratic system, such as the US. In contrast, group-identity-based polarization centers around divisions based on social identities and cultural differences and thus can be in a range broader than the former. Both of these concepts have a certain degree of connection with media and, in turn, disinformation. For instance, Kyrychenko points out that media, especially social media, uses “echo chambers” to reinforce the pre-existing beliefs of its audience, fostering hostility and amplifying pre-existing animosities between those who adopt different political views. On the other hand, Törnberg et al.

argue that by reinforcing the distinction between in-group and out-groups, media can influence those who identify with partisan social identities [16]. Given the scope and impact of these two concepts, this article will focus on political-based polarization. The following analysis intends to use the European Union (EU) as a case study because it is not usually under the spotlight of studies surrounding SP [15].

3.2. Relationship

According to scholars and governmental organizations, the EU and its member states have been victims of various forms of recent disinformation narratives. A report committed by the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) in 2023 shows that disinformation is rampant in many member states concerning important global topics such as the War in Ukraine, climate change, and, most importantly, the electoral process [17]. These disinformation narratives, usually driven by political actors and social media, could undermine the legitimacy of elections and governmental institutions and destabilize national and even regional political stability [17,18]. Since politicians are both the instigators and benefactors of such polarization, as they are “deliberately disseminating false information” and actively using new mediums such as social media and its algorithms to “drive argument to the extremes,” the general population feels increasingly torn apart in opinions, as they feel “neutral” is no longer a viable stance [18,19]. If the European and international community do not timely address the further widening gap between extreme elements of EU society, as time passes and the Polarization moves beyond the “tipping point,” it will be much harder to reverse, potentially leading to unrest, violent outbursts and hate crimes, and could perhaps in turn, destabilize the political stability of the EU and the world connected to it [1,16].

4. The Relationship between Social Polarization and Global Political Stability

A preliminary literature search was conducted to gain insight into the idea of GPS. The result indicates that while GPS has been a frequent topic of past scholarly works, it has rarely been directly addressed as the central focus of a study, and there has been no defining literature operationalizing the concept. Rather, the concept of GPS, at least most of the time, seems to be used by scholars as a not clearly defined “umbrella term” referring to a foggy vision of social and political “status quo” consisting of no challenges, conflicts, non-reformist reforms and other “chaotic factors” that could rapidly “shake up” the current societal and political order. For instance, Islam et al., while addressing the impact of poverty and inequality in their article, used the concept of GPS to refer to the “state of wellness” of the social and political environment on a regional and transnational scale. On top of that, many researchers framed the lack of GPS as a negative [20]. In Asongu et al.’s article, GPS is linked with a global crisis, which would threaten “peace” and “security” [21]. These studies indicate a potentially “unspoken consensus” among scholars that the concept of GPS resembles a “form of good” or a “metric of goodness” that the international society should strive for in order to ensure the well-being of the members of humanity, although who counts as “members” has not been overtly addressed. Unlike previous scholars who treat GPS as a static or vaguely positive ideal state, this article operationalizes GPS as a dynamic equilibrium shaped by the conflicting social forces in democratic countries. Compared to previous iterations, this version of the concept is more inclusive, as it takes into consideration not only partisan forces but also marginalized groups. It is also worth noting that there are almost no recent peer-reviewed studies that openly and directly address the relationship between SP and GPS. Rather, many of these studies seem to focus on relations between economic aspects and GPS. Thus, this article argues that due to the lack of relevant peer-reviewed materials, the relationship between SP and GPS remains mostly undetermined, but there could be other ways to prove that relationship.

5. Conclusion

This article has attempted to use current pieces of evidence to argue that GCE is important to GPS. Through a variety of evidence, this article uncovers the potential reality that through MIL training and education, GCE can counteract disinformation and, in turn, influence SP. However, this article is unable to address the gap between SP and GPS—the final part of the link—due to the lack of sufficient evidence. Regardless, this article serves as a preliminary “dip” into the systematic studies in relative topics, thus providing a unique perspective into the field of GCE and laying the groundwork for future studies to investigate relative new research directions, including the correlation between these SP and GPS or even the degree of correlations between these elements. By framing GCE as a tool for addressing global crises, this article also acknowledges the autonomy and agency of informed global citizens, putting faith in their ability to contribute to a more stable, inclusive world. As a result, this article may also serve as new inspiration for a variety of researchers and actors, including policymakers and educators, who are concerned with addressing SP in relative contexts, contributing to a more inclusive, just and peaceful world.

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