UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

April 13, 2026
Debra Herrick

How information disorder shapes global politics

In international politics, outcomes are shaped not only by what countries do, but by how those actions are perceived. UC Santa Barbara political scientist Julia Morse studies how information disorder — a media environment where it's easy to create content and spread false or misleading material — shapes international politics.

"At the end of the day, it may or may not matter whether a behavior technically violates international law. It matters who wins the contest over public perceptions of behavior," she said.

Across three recent papers, Morse examines how these dynamics are playing out in the international arena, from how governments respond to accusations of wrongdoing to how international organizations like the United Nations operate in a more fragmented information environment.

In "Smoke and Mirrors: Strategic Messaging and the Politics of Noncompliance," published in American Political Science Review and co-authored with Tyler Pratt, an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Morse analyzes how governments defend themselves when accused of violating international law. The study identifies several common strategies, including outright denial, reframing the meaning of the law and challenging its relevance to a particular kind of behavior.

Drawing inspiration from current events like the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the researchers use survey experiments of U.S. respondents and international policy elites to test how different strategic messages affect willingness to punish violations. They found that while direct denials can be countered by credible evidence, other forms of messaging — particularly those that reinterpret legal standards — are more difficult to rebut.

“The good news is that denials are easily countered by credible independent authorities,” Morse said. “But the less good news is that trying to redefine the boundaries of the law is a pretty successful strategy.”

The study also highlights the role of international organizations in shaping these outcomes. When institutions such as the United Nations provide credible information, they can reduce the effectiveness of misleading claims, though their influence is not uniform across all types of messaging.

A second paper, “Information Disorder and Global Politics,” published in International Organization, expands the analysis to other areas of international politics. Rather than focusing on a single case, the article outlines how changes in the way information is created and shared are affecting core assumptions in international relations, with implications for both war and peace.

“There are so many theories in international relations that assume information is available in a consistent way,” Morse said. “And actually in the modern information environment, that’s just no longer the case.”

The paper points to several implications, including challenges for democratic systems, increased difficulty in sustaining international cooperation and new dynamics in conflict. It also raises questions about how both the public and political elites process information, noting that susceptibility to misleading or strategically framed content may not be limited to any one group.

In a third publication, “Information Fragmentation and Global Governance in Hard Times,” in Ethics & International Affairs, Morse focuses on how these trends are affecting global governance institutions. As formal international organizations face gridlock and competing signals, a growing number of informal institutions are taking on larger roles.

These newer bodies can be more adaptable and insulated from political pressures, but they also raise questions about transparency and accountability. The result, Morse suggests, is a shifting landscape in which the effectiveness and legitimacy of global governance are increasingly tied to how information is produced, shared and interpreted.

Across all three papers, a common theme is the central role of information in shaping international outcomes. Morse's earlier work, including her book "The Banker's Blacklist: Unofficial Market Enforcement and the Global Fight against Illicit Financing" (Cornell University Press, 2022), examined how international organizations influence behavior by sending credible signals to global markets. Her recent research suggests that this signaling function is becoming more contested.

"It's less clear who is credible in this environment. Where should governments, publics, even corporations, look for reliable information?" Morse said. "And even if that credible signal exists, it's harder for that signal to break through the noise."

As the global information environment continues to evolve, her work points to a growing challenge: understanding what happens in international politics means knowing how those events are communicated and how they are understood.

Media Contact
Debra Herrick
Associate Editorial Director
(805) 893-2191
debraherrick@ucsb.edu

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.