GUIDELINES FOR TEACHERS
MODULE 7 - MEDIA LITERACY

This module was developed by the European Parliament - Spokesperson's Unit and not by the author of the other modules.

We are all targeted by efforts to influence us, and the reasons can be commercial or political. Sometimes these efforts just seek to catch our attention and draw us in. Some students are probably already aware of this phenomenon, but for others this may be a new concept. In the class there may also be students who rely on disinformation sources to obtain news on certain topics, or who just believe certain items of disinformation. Fact-checking is the most powerful tool we can use to understand what is true, but it is very time-consuming, which makes it impossible to verify all news items. The trick is to know when to be suspicious.

This lesson includes an exercise to train students in identifying potentially manipulative content, and a discussion about how you can avoid being taken in. It will also raise their awareness about their own vulnerabilities, based on how they consume news, and how they express their own opinions.

This lesson is a mix of group activities and presentations. It also includes ideas for games on the topic, as well as recommended further reading, and lists of European fact-checking organisations.

METHODOLOGY	DURATION	MATERIALS
Initial Presentation and Game	15 mins	- A smartphone for each group.
Group exercise and discussion	30 mins	- Computer + projector + whiteboard
Final presentation	10 mins	- Computer + projector + whiteboard

OBJECTIVES AND SKILLS

ATTITUDE

- The pupils become aware of warning signs indicating manipulative content

- The pupils become aware that they can be manipulated - just like anyone else

KNOWLEDGE

- The pupils learn what disinformation is, and the main reasons behind it.

- The pupils learn some fact-checking techniques.

- The pupils learn some concrete examples of EU measures against disinformation.

STEP BY STEP

1. INITIAL PRESENTATION AND GAME

SETTING

Students are sitting in class and the teacher divides them into small groups. The teacher starts the lesson by showing two photos of fake news (first set of slides).

PROCESS

- The students have to say if they think the news is real, or if they feel it is unreliable, explaining why. After every group has expressed their ideas, the teacher reveals the solutions. A discussion follows with students on different news sources. Students are asked to list the sources they use (or know, for younger students) to get news about what is happening in society and the world. Answers can include newspapers and magazines, TV, radio, online media, blogs, podcasts, social media, friends, etc.

- Write on the whiteboard the most used information sources by the class. Ask students to reflect on why they think a source is reliable, or why it isn't. Easy or difficult to obtain? Can you trust it? Do you know the story's author? Also, ask why they use these sources, including pros and cons.

- Linking this to the opening pictures at the start of the presentation – ask students if they have come across any strange news lately. How? Where did it come from? What kind of source was it? Why was it reported? By whom?

    If a student remembers the details of a suspicious piece of news – this is really good. However, many students will have difficulties remembering where they saw it or who wrote it. It is easier to remember a story than its background. If the students cannot recall examples of strange news, they can look for them later in the exercise.

CONTENT: SLIDE DESCRIPTIONS

1. To be fooled - or not?

This presentation was created to provide an introduction to disinformation, especially disinformation related to the European Union, and thus EU institutions including Parliament. Its aim is also to give advice on how to avoid falling for the tricks used by malicious actors.

2. Ice-breaker: reliable or not?

Let's start with an easy example that probably won't fool anyone, but will just make them laugh. Here it would be ideal if the students not only mention that the UFO story is not credible, but could also comment on the pictures and headlines. In fact, here we can recognise several typical fake news patterns: doctored pictures, words in uppercase, strong or exaggerated language. The source is a conspiracy theorist.

3. Reliable or not?

Unreliable: here the trick is to verify sources and whether claims are supported by any hard evidence or recognised studies in the real world (in this case they aren't). Also, the sources are questionable (look at the website link and the Twitter account).

4. Reliable or not?

Unreliable: here the trick is to verify sources and whether claims are supported by any evidence (in this case, they aren't). Double-checking also helps, as climate change is scientifically-proven.

5. Real or fake?

Real news. As improbable as the headline seems, this is in fact a **real news story**. The **video** above, released by Rio de Janeiro's State Secretary of Prison Administration, depicts convicted drug-trafficker Clauvino da Silva as he is apprehended by prison guards while attempting to escape prison disguised as a young woman.

The video was posted on YouTube by the official channel of **Global News**, the news and current affairs division of the Canadian Global Television Network. The verification tick next to the account name indicates that this is probably a reliable source.

2. GROUP EXERCISE AND DISCUSSION

SETTING

Exercise: the class remains divided into small groups. Each one should have at least one smartphone.

PROCESS

- Ask the students to go through their usual news sources and look for items or other public social media posts they find strange (excluding personal or private messages), that they find particularly misleading, or that just seen too good to be true. Basically, they should look for news that has elicited a strong reaction, and that they remember well precisely for this reason. Each group should look for two to three different news items to present to the class.

- When presenting their examples, ask students to explain what they think the author's goal was? If they got it from a friend – if they think their friend is aware of this? Would they share this information with others?

- Lead a short **discussion** on the reasons behind the choices made by individual students. The idea is to trigger a debate on how our pre-existing ideas and beliefs push us towards sharing news or information that is consistent with them, without double-checking their validity or content. The message of this activity is that it is important to read content before sharing it, and decide if it is based on solid and reliable evidence.

  Suggested questions to trigger the discussion:
  - Why did you choose to share that article?
  - Did you read the article in full?
  - What do you think is the article's strongest argument?

- Do you believe this article to be truthful? Why?
- If you held a different position, would you have shared the same article?
- Do you think this article is persuasive for people who do not hold that position? Why?

- **Opinion or fact**? Draw a distinction between opinion and fact.

- Now approach the **concept of disinformation**. Show the (simplified) definition of disinformation on the presentation.

  For reference: **EU definition**: disinformation is understood as verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm. Public harm includes threats to democratic processes as well as to public goods such as Union citizens' health, environment or security. Disinformation does not include inadvertent errors, satire and parody, or clearly identified partisan news and commentary.

CONTENT: SLIDE DESCRIPTIONS

6. Class activity starts

7. Thinking about our sources of information

Ask the students to go through their usual sources for news to look for news or other public posts on social media (not private messages just for them) they find strange, or that seem particularly deceptive to them, or just too good to be true. Basically, they should look for news that has elicited a strong reaction, and that they remember well precisely for this reason. Each group should look for at least one example to present to the rest of the class.

8. Strange in what way?

On the whiteboard write the information sources most used by the class. Ask students to reflect on why they think a source is reliable, or why it isn't. For instance: Is it free of did you pay for it? Easy or difficult to find? Can you trust the information? Do you know who writes the story?

Also ask why they use these sources, and their pros and cons.

Have students match their examples of strange stories to one or several of the categories listed.

Link this to the pictures at the start of the presentation – ask students if they have come across any strange news lately. Strange in what way? Where did it come from? From what kind of source? Why was the story written? Who wrote it?

If a student remembers the details of a suspicious-looking piece of news – this is really good. But many students will find it difficult to remember where they saw the news or who wrote it. It is easier to remember a story than the background around it. If the students do not remember any strange news, they will have a chance look for it later in the exercise.

9. Opinion or fact?

Draw a distinction between opinion and fact.

What is a fact? A fact is something that can be checked and backed up by evidence.

What is an opinion? An opinion is based on a belief or point of view. It is not based on verifiable evidence. Some people might think it is the opposite. Ask the students to go through the articles and

highlight the parts that are opinions, those that are facts from a named source, and those that seem like facts but don't mention sources. Ask the class to share their findings.

10. What is disinformation?

Ask the students if they know what disinformation is. Check the students' examples against the definition. Could some of them have been disinformation?

If not – which could be classified as disinformation? (For instance, unpleasant news or opinions, marketing, mistakes or misunderstandings).

3. FINAL PRESENTATION

PROCESS

- Go through some problems linked to disinformation, and underline that anybody can be fooled, especially when:
    - strong feelings are involved (love, fear, hope)
    - the message comes from someone we trust
    - the message is in line with our existing beliefs

- Being aware of disinformation and that you can be a target is a first step towards protecting yourself.

    Fact-checking is a good second step, and can also be fun: it is like playing detective, and the students could really enjoy it. Most of the time the fact-checking process is quite time-consuming, but students shouldn't feel discouraged because often particular features of a piece of information reveal a lot about the quality of the message conveyed.

- Explain the difference between misinformation and disinformation. [*The teacher can decide to use this content (or not) depending on the audience. This is better suited for students aged around 16 to 18*]

- **Spotting fake news**.

    Fact-checking tips [see the compass image on the presentation]:

- **Spotting hoaxes and trolls**

    1. How can I verify the reliability of a social media profile?

    Verified account ribbon: public figures and some people on Twitter and other social media request that their accounts be marked as 'verified' to avoid fakes and inappropriate use.

    If an account is not verified, but it seems that it should be, it is best to be cautious and perform further checks.

    Account history: check the timeline of published content, the network of friends and followers, 'likes' and other clues to understand if an account has been created for a specific purpose, such as to intervene in a political debate or for advertising.

    Red flags: accounts with few friends or that look like bots; published messages are concentrated in a single moment; no original content posted but only shares of content from other accounts.

2. What is clickbaiting and how can I recognise it?

Clickbaiting means using exaggerated or dishonest content created with the intention of getting users to click on a link. This type of content often has:
  - Headlines all in uppercase
  - An exaggerated tone (like 'BREAKING NEWS' or 'SHARE' in capital letters)
  - Unfinished headlines

All these approaches encourage us to open links, and this in turn generates revenue through advertising for those who create clickbait. This can also be used to collect data about us, which is then reused for marketing or other purposes.

3. How can I check whether an image is authentic, has been used elsewhere, or has been doctored?

Google Images is a quick way to verify how an image has been shared, and in what context. Image searches can be done with a file or a link.

CONTENT: SLIDE DESCRIPTIONS

11. What is the problem with disinformation?

Go back to the concept of opinions and facts.

12. Disinformation can do real damage in real life

Example of disinformation causing damage.

13. Disinformation can put people's life at danger

Example: incorrect health advice can convince people not to get medical treatment, or to underestimate or overestimate a certain illness. This image about COVID-19 is a good example.

16. Fake news, what is it about?

[The teacher can decide to use this slide (or not) depending on the audience. This is better suited for students aged around 16 to 18]

Disinformation is not the only type of information that can cause damage to its targets. It actually has a lot of nuances. Focussing on what is fake or true is not that important. **A lot of disinformation has some truth to it.** Accidental mistakes are usually not harmful (but can be).

About the spread: disinformation can be spread intentionally, as a part of a strategy, or as part of a business model. It can also be spread and innocently or inadvertently, for instance due to insufficient knowledge and media literacy skills.

Misinformation: is false information that is spread, without there necessarily being an intention to mislead. Example: a picture used in another context can sometimes take on a total different meaning. Sometimes this is intentional, sometimes not. Disinformation, on the other hand, is spread with the clear intention of misleading and deceiving.

17. Knowing what is true and false

Being aware of disinformation and that you can be a target is already a good first step to protect yourself.

18. The sad but true story of Penka the cow

A Bulgarian cow called Penka escaped from home and accidentally crossed the border to Serbia. Two weeks later, Penka's owner received a call from the Serbian police to come and collect the cow, which had been identified by her ear tag. All cows in the EU are required to have one.

But when Penka's owner wanted to bring her back into Bulgaria, the border officers asked him for documents proving that the animal was in good health. This is standard procedure at the borders when you want to enter the EU. Unfortunately, Penka's owner had no such documents and the cow ended up in the hands of the Bulgarian authorities. Penka was quarantined and she might even have been put down if she had been found to be carrying any diseases. She couldn't simply be allowed into Bulgaria without any documents: this is how the EU seeks to prevent the spread of dangerous animal diseases that could be passed on to humans.

The case was first reported by a Bulgarian animal rights organisation. The international press picked up on it, publishing articles expressing outrage at 'Brussels bureaucracy'. It also attracted a lot of attention on social media. In just a few days, it appeared in hundreds of outlets all over the world, always told in exactly the same way.

Penka created a snowball effect. Her story shows how one funny little incident can create a whole narrative for anyone to exploit and point a finger of blame at EU bureaucracy, completely ignoring the actual reasons behind the checks at the border.

The story was not entirely 'fake', but it ended up as disinformation, because it was used to warp reality for political and commercial reasons, transforming a mundane border check into a worldwide anti-EU debate.

19. The fact-checking compass

Most of the time the fact-checking process is quite time-consuming, but students shouldn't feel discouraged because often particular features of a piece of information reveal a lot about the quality of the message conveyed. Recognising 'fake news': to be divided into misinformation and disinformation (explain the difference!).

Tips:
- Read the whole article – do the content and the headline match? How can I verify a website's reliability? Example - URL analysis: always check if it is the original website or if the URL is put together with a slight modification in the name or extension. The idea is that a distracted or hasty reader will not notice this. Disinformation sites take the names of well-known news sources, but change small details.
- Search for the story on the internet – do other sources support what is claimed?
- Do you know what kind of sources they are?
- Verify the date and author. Public figures on social media often have 'verified' accounts, as do media organisations and journalists. Often people working in the information industry have websites or other public profiles that can help users find them and their work.
- Check if pictures look strange or doctored. If so, you can do a reverse search on Google Images.
- Think about context when evaluating information – this is crucial. For example, imagine that a phone manufacturer tells you that their sales had doubled. Now add context: it was December, the holiday season, many discounts were available in stores, so buying a phone

was simply a little cheaper. This was to be expected, right? The same often also happens in public debate.

USEFUL LINKS

Definition of disinformation in different languages contained in the 'How to spot disinformation' report.

Online games on disinformation:

- The Bad News Game (several languages) and Bad News Game for Kids (fewer languages). Create your own fake news. Standard version, ages 15 and up. Kids' version, ages 8 and up.
- Fakescape (CZ and EN). Games that teach students how to 'escape' fake news. On demand and free for lecturers. Ages 13 and up.
- Fakey (EN). Game that teaches media literacy and how people interact with misinformation. Ages 16 and up.
- Escape Fake (DE and EN). Downloadable game app to teach media literacy in a playful way. Ages 15 and up.
- Millab (EN, GE, AR, AZ). Fun games for youngsters on how to spot fake news, trolls or cyberbullying. Ages 12 and up.
- Troll Factory (EN). Player are trolls who create fake news. Ages 16 and up.

Lists of fact-checking organisations in many EU countries

- Poynter Institute
- Facebook
- The EU's own anti-disinformation group and 'think before you share' campaign

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