Detect:
Enhancing Digital Citizenship

Method Manual for Pupils

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Introduction

In today's world, we are widely exposed to different media content and huge amounts of information. Probably each of us, at least once, came across a piece of information and trusted it only to find out later it was false – whether intentionally or unintentionally. In today's digital age, information is spreading uncontrollably and faster than a few decades ago. This means that more than ever before there is a need for developing skills of media content evaluation as a tool that could help us lower the impact of false and distorted media content.

In this manual you will be introduced to the most common types of false media content, ways of recognising them and tools to fight them. We hope that you will develop, with the help of your teachers, skills that can help you assess credibility of the contents you read, watch, and listen to on online media. This manual deals primarily with the concept of propaganda, how it relates to our perceptions of the world around us and the techniques it utilises to do so. This is not a complete field guide to where you might find propaganda – because nobody can foresee it – but rather a look into techniques used in order to make propaganda work. Within this manual, you will also encounter the term propagandist – a maker, disseminator or promoter of propaganda. Usually a paid one, at that.

Chapter One

Disinformation & Fake Content

Think and try to answer:

- Every time before you click the "Post" button, do you think about the content you are about to share on social media?
- Do you consider the possibility that the content you post might be false?
- How quick are you to re-share something interesting or funny a friend posted?
- Is there a media source whose content you completely trust?

- Are you aware that there are global companies specialised in disinformation creation and spreading?
- How many times have you seen a post that seemed to be missing some important information?
- What can you do to make sure a piece of information is true?

If any of these questions got you thinking, you might want to continue reading this manual to find some guidance in answering them. There are good practices you could implement in your everyday online life that can help you recognise disinformation and false media content, prevent you from spreading them unintentionally, but also make you aware of how absurdly challenging it is to be a well-informed citizen in the digital age.

Not so long ago, we used to trust and rely on the traditional media to deliver us the news, but nowadays more and more people, especially younger generations, are being informed almost exclusively via social networks, and while doing so do not regularly evaluate the authenticity and credibility of the information. The main difference between social networks and traditional media is the lack of editors who would select and check the content that spreads on a social network. This fact can be an advantage for exercising free speech and avoiding censorship. However, one should ask who gets to choose what we see in our feeds if there is no living and breathing editor doing it. If you ever decided to share any information, who would be there to make sure you were truthful and honest? Who would make sure that a photo your friend posted had not been tampered with, changed or 'Photoshopped'?

Disinformation is not an invention of the digital age – different propaganda machines have used it throughout history. The digital age and technologies have just made it easier and quicker to create and spread lies, which means that the consequences are also more far-reaching.

According to EU Kids Online Croatia research (2018), children between the age of 9 and 17 spend most of their free time every day on some form of online media. Almost three quarters (73%) of children who are online media consumers are aware of the "fake news" concept, and three out of ten (39%) says they have noticed an example of false content online.

In a national representative survey for Bulgaria of the National Center for Safe Internet and sociological agency Marketlinks, conducted in 2016, it is found that 24% of Bulgarian children start using the Internet at the age of 7 and about 97% of them are active internet users. About 15% of them say they were worried or scared of something they saw online in the last year. About 87% of children over the age of 9 use social networks; one-third communicated online with someone they never met live and about 30% were offended or affected by a peer online.

A commonly used definition of 'disinformation' is: "A term that includes all forms of false, incorrect or deceiving information created, represented and promoted in order to either harm the public or gain profit."(JRC Digital Economy Working Paper 2018-02) Here, we would like to expand that definition and include any piece of information that:

- deceives,
- is made up,
- is incorrect,
- talks about events that never happened,
- reports words that have never been said,
- announces events that were never meant to happen,
- is created to disrupt people's trust in other people and society in general,
- diminishes the credibility of the media and sources that report it,
- influences our beliefs, common sense, and behaviour,
- was created intentionally but can be spread intentionally and unintentionally.

That is, disinformation is deliberate. The main intent of disinformation is to manipulate the public and lead them to false conclusions about people, events and phenomena that are being reported. This broad definition encompasses the term 'false news' that the public and experts lately use mostly in political context, which is best exemplified by the USA presidential campaign of 2016.

Over to you!

Find out what Vales (a town in Macedonia),
Donald Trump and Pope Francis have in common.

'False news' are created on the basis of disinformation with the goal of deceiving and manipulating the public. According to EUROBAROMETER survey conducted in February 2018 among 25,576 people from 28 member countries, 85% of EU citizens believe that the phenomenon of 'false news' is a problem in their countries.

Over to you!

Find out more about the results for your country of this or similar surveys!

It is important to be able to recognise disinformation so as not to be manipulated, but also to avoid being a part of its promotion and spread via social networks. In other words, we have to improve our media competencies and literacy.

How can a false content post make us want to share it with our friends and family under our own name? False content posts are effective because they are created to be convincing, sensational or attention-seeking. They use stereotypes and biases that already exist in the society, but, at the same time, look like regular news. They count on our emotions – anxieties, disdain, anger, frustration. The emotional aspect, combined with the inner workings of social networks, make for a perfect propaganda machine – every time we click the "Like" or "Share" button, algorithms give that post or comment more value and soon enough, a false content post is at the top of our feeds. Also, once such content gains attention, it is almost impossible to correct the mistake and somehow erase it from our feeds as well as from our memory. Furthermore, arguing over divisive disinformation benefits the original disseminator in following ways:

- the "news" gets even more attention in the form of online reactions (clicks, comments, shares),
- people form groups that demonize each other as enemies, which leads to more anger and frustration,
- even well-intentioned and well-informed people end up feeding the algorithms which are designed to spread posts that engage people the most.

Over to you!

Research what "bots" are.
How can they help in spreading disinformation?

Chapter Two

Ten Tips

on how on how to recognise disinformation and false media content

One – Reading only the headline is not enough

People often share news because the headline seems interesting or even funny, without realising that the rest of the article contains disinformation. Always read everything you decide to share.

Two – Check the source!

Try to find out where a story first appeared online and then look at the webpage and domain of the source. Use search engines to find different reporting of the same story. Look at other articles from the same source to see if their content is always sensationalist. Domain names can tell you if a real news organisation stands behind the story or if it is a fake (unusual or nonsensical URLs should raise suspicion). Another example are pages that have the terms 'wordpress' or 'blogger' in their URLs, which means that they are curated by private individuals and represent their personal opinions, rather than an official institution or news agencies.

Three – Read the imprint

This section of a media website will give you information about the owners of the media outlet, its editors and journalists. Every credible media has this data available and you can than further research those names. Also, have a look at the 'terms of service' that explain what kind of a media you are looking at (e.g. some might represent themselves as serious media, but state in the terms of service they are a satirical site, or that they publish only their own personal opinions).

Four – Check the date and time of publishing!

A method often used in creating disinformation is to present some old news and images as if it was breaking news. A bit of digging based on date and time of publishing can quickly reveal "recycled" material.

Five – Research the author!

Information about the author can shed some light on the news itself. Find other material by the same author and analyse their style – try to assess their writing and decide how credible they are.

Six – Check the sources and click the links!

This one can be tricky – both too many and too little citation of sources and backing links could be suspicious. Sources and links should be provided, but sometimes a tool to fool us is to overwhelm us with multiple links that all lead to other fraudulent sources. The easiest way to counter this problem is to check if other more credible media reported on the news - professional journalists would have made the necessary back-checking.

Seven – Back-check questionable quotations and images!

Authors of false news often cite words out of context or even quote famous people saying things they never uttered. Also, they might use a photo unrelated to the rest of the story to change the tone of the article without a single word. Try using applications and services like TinEye or Google's reverse image search to find out more about the original photo.

Eight – Be aware of your own biases!

This tip is maybe the most difficult one to follow, but one of the most important ones – people usually look for things that confirm their beliefs. False content authors know this, and therefore create emotionally charged and polarizing stories. We always have to ask ourselves whether we like and share media content because what is said is based on facts we can check, or because it reinforces what we believe and values we hold.

Nine – Check other sources!

If news seems fishy, see who else reported on it. No other media coverage means you are likely dealing with false content.

Ten – Think before you share!

Remember, propaganda creators count on you to do the work for them. Disinformation starts from someone malicious, but its spreading depends on us being biased, overly emotional, lazy and uninformed. And you don't won't to be any of that, do you?

Chapter Three

Propaganda

3.1. Propaganda and media manipulation – the whys

Propaganda is broadly defined as taking planned and purposeful actions with a goal of changing and controlling opinions, and consequently, influencing people's actions and behaviour.
In other words, the goal of propaganda is to change opinions and beliefs of the target audience that will also lead the target audience to do what the propagandist wants. Think of marketing for a second – a marketing expert creates advertisement campaign that will firstly change the customer's opinion (the product is desirable, useful, needed, luxurious, etc.), and secondly change the customer's behaviour (choosing and buying the product). Unlike campaigns in marketing, propaganda in a political context is almost exclusively considered in a negative sense, because its ultimate goal is producing non-critical thinking and controlling the public's behaviour by constantly playing with human perception, emotions, and thoughts. Having said that, some authors emphasise that, depending on the goal of a media campaign, there are examples of both positive and negative manipulations of the public.

Over to you!

Try to find examples of positive media campaigns (democratic, promoting human rights and freedoms) and negative propaganda (undemocratic, divisive, destructive).

3.2. Propaganda techniques – the hows

3.2.1. Inciting emotional responses

As mentioned in connection with disinformation, propaganda is based on firing human emotional responses in order to attract and hook target audience to a certain goal. In its simplest and truest form, propaganda plays with our minds. How? A skilfully managed propaganda uses our fears and biases to incite fear, hope, frustration, compassion, shame, etc., and these emotions create excitement that disables critical thinking and propels quick irrational responses.

A good example of this exploitation of human nature and emotions are conspiracy theories. Although some of them might look like innocent fun, others play with our deepest insecurities. We are surrounded with things like death, disease, and uncertainties about our future. Some of these horrible things have no logical explanation, some are explained, but in a complex, unsatisfying way. This leaves us susceptible to believing false, but simple reasoning behind these complex problems. Being exposed to conspiratorial explanations consequently influences our behaviour in several ways: we ignore the more complex, but true reasons behind a problem, we become desperate and lose hope in any possibility of a change, we form bad habits and, instead of critically thinking, assess all problems with a conspiratorial mind-set.

And one more thing, the success of this manipulation depends on you thinking you are too smart to fall for any such tricks, but the truth is, a normal human being should feel emotions and act on them. The problem is this can be exploited if we are not aware of our own feelings and vulnerabilities.

Over to you!

Look at the following pictures and think about the emotions that are shown in them, emotional response of someone who looks at the photos, and what the intention of someone who published them could be. Can you explain how each of these photos could change the tone of an article? And what about knowledge of who is in the photos?

3.2.2. Simplifying ideas and information

Propaganda is not necessarily all falsehood. In fact, it uses lies and false claims, half-truths as well as true facts and information that is overly simplified or given without the right context. Stories that are very simple and straightforward are used to manipulate people as we can easily understand and identify with them. Those stories often use simple metaphors and vivid imagery to look more 'natural' and 'true'.

Oversimplification is effective when simple, quick and catchy phrases replace critical thinking (e.g. saying 'strong leader' without clearly explaining what 'strong' means). Our everyday communication relies on this kind of simplification, but manipulation happens when this human need to simplify, neatly categorise, and empathise is used to trick us into not thinking deeper at all.

Finally, the most recent and extreme example of this simplification would be memes - very complicated topics and societal issues being distilled to a single photo and a catchy phrase.

Over to you!

Research the most popular news portals or a Facebook page of some popular media outlets and see if you can recognise stories that are easily relatable, and use simple ideas, catchy phrases and memes.

3.2.3. Answering to the needs and values of the public

Effective propaganda uses messages, topics and language that very often directly and sometimes even exclusively target a separate group or segment inside the general public.

Through social networks we constantly give away personal information that is then used to target us with ads – both marketing and propaganda ones. We are segmented into groups according to our lifestyle, activities and hobbies, but also place of birth/residence, gender, skin colour and ethnicity, the celebrities we might like, our values, and even personal dreams and hopes. Finally, propaganda can play with our fundamental needs to love, be loved, and to belong somewhere. People want to find other people, groups, and ideas they can relate to, so they receive messages created specifically to feed on those needs.

Digital age has made this kind of targeting easier than ever before, and both legal and illegal means are being used to find out how to influence us successfully by adjusting the message almost on an individual basis.

Over to you!

Think about your personal information available online that could be used to target you with a personalised message. Have you ever noticed how online suggestions and recommended content change with your past and current online activities? Compare your examples and conclusions with your peers, but also older friends and family members and teachers.

3.2.4. Attacking the "enemy"

Propaganda can be a tool that creates, names, and defames political opponents. Questions on legitimacy, credibility, values, and character of opponents and their ideas are sometimes simply manufactured or sometimes presented in a sensationalist manner. Besides the goal of discrediting the opponent, this also quickly starts heated discussions.

These conflicts are effective because people are intrigued and drawn to them, so they create a lot of attention. Furthermore, it is another way of simplification as it boils down complicated topics to a 'black-and-white' picture, and triggers 'us vs. them' behaviour, which again impedes thinking critically about complicated ideas and conflicting information.

Defamation is often accompanied by ridicule, which aims to achieve the primary goals of propaganda under the disguise of legitimate joke and satire. Again, we must critically think and decide which jokers might be entertaining and which ones have other agendas.

Sometimes propaganda smears individuals and ruins their reputation hoping that the ideas they stand for will be discredited by extension. Also, when the group mentality is created among the audience, the smearing of an opponent creates a feeling of superiority and entitlement, which is a great starting point for further manipulation.

Finally, discrediting individuals and forcing tribalism can lead to hatred and discrimination of anyone who is the 'other' or "enemy", or at least to indifference towards that same hatred and discrimination. This happens when propaganda targets groups that are identifiable by their unchangeable characteristics.

Over to you!

Think of the last time there was a public discussion in your country about a celebrity or a politician whose reputation was questioned. Have some other more serious topics or political issues been introduced into the conversation about the person? Describe different ways people have reacted to the story.

Chapter Four

How to be critical online

A quick recap

Critical evaluation of media sources comes down to systematic and constant checking of the credibility of media sources. It is a set of methods that can help us consciously choose the source of information and critically consume the contents. The biggest challenges for this approach in the digital age are the amount of available information and a lack of obvious tools that can objectively filter the data for us.

Always keep the following criteria in mind:

- Authenticity - is the source who or what they claim to be? Is the content original or a copy? Is there anything that raises suspicion of its credibility?

- Currentness - is the information up-to-date or are there newer discoveries? How far apart is the time of reporting/posting/publishing and the actual event?

- Independence - is the source independent or does it rely on data from another place? Can you easily trace their citations?

- Objectivity - is the information presented factually or as an opinion? Whose interests does the source represent? Is there conflicting information being reported in other sources that seem credible?

Whenever you want to use information or share something online you should ask yourself the following:

- Who is the original messenger? Can I trace the creator by name? Is there a contact available?

- What is the intention and purpose of a certain page, official profile or media outlet? Was it created to inform, entertain, sell something or propagate certain values and opinions? Does it have more than one intention? How is it financed?

- Who is the target audience? Are the posts, articles and stories simple and relatable? Are catchy phrases and funny or shocking images and videos being used?

- How often is the page or profile used and updated? Do links work? Can you fact-check the information in other sources?

Use the tools available to research anything suspicious :

- Copy headlines or parts of text in quotes into a search engine and see where else it appeared.

- Investigate photos using images.google.com or tineye.com to see where else they were used and when they were originally created.

- Audio and video material can be tricky to check, but make sure to look up the file name if available. Also, anything that looks like a cut-out recording should be suspicious. If there are many very similar recordings from different sources using very similar style of editing, it is probably automated uploading done by bots.

- Too many profiles, posts, video uploads, similar memes, comments that appear online very quickly should be suspicious. Remember that humans need time to react and create, unless they are professional propagandists who can employ bots to do the job for them.

Wikipedia as a perfectly imperfect source

- Use Wikipedia only as a starting point! Wikipedia is great at providing basic information on a topic but never use it as the only source of information. Your research journey can begin here, but also find at least two other sources.

- Fact check the sources used for Wikipedia articles. Check the reference list! Wikipedia is great for collecting keywords and finding other references since it provides a reference list at the end of each article. These references can be a useful tool to continue your investigation. After using Wikipedia, explore other sources.

- Compare how the topic is presented on Wikipedia with some other source or encyclopedia! Wikipedia is not a completely reliable source (Wikipedia, 2019b). Articles are written collaboratively, which contributes to the democratization of the knowledge, but this is both the site's advantage and disadvantage. Also, articles available in English outnumber the rest - around 5,860,000 in 2019 compared to 2,301,800 in German, 252,200 in Bulgarian, and 205,328 in Croatian (Wikipedia 2019a). Just by looking at these numbers you can identify English language privilege – the source is more valuable to those who are fluent in it.

- Check the changes and the explanations of the changes in Wikipedia article! Wikipedia articles are always re-edited, so you should check the changes and make a reference in your research to which version of the article you used by stating the date and quoting the exact page.

- Read the same Wikipedia article in different languages to recognise different perspectives! When you speak more than one language, it is useful to compare the Wikipedia articles on the same topics that are written in different languages to learn more about how a topic is framed by the editors of different background - what is mentioned and what is left out. It is important to keep content selection and disparity between the articles in mind when doing your own research.

- Discuss and cooperate! Discuss findings with your colleagues and teachers. Research is a challenging and fun way to develop critical thinking and argumentation competences.

Resources

Bad News – Online game

https://getbadnews.com/#intro

Croatian media literacy portal – youth section

https://www.medijskapismenost.hr/djeca/

HR Kids Online – EU Kids Online research in Croatia

http://hrkids.online/

Online Life is Real Life – an original podcast from Firefox

https://irlpodcast.org/

Museum of Personal Stories of Roma People

People sharing stories of prejudice, hardship and overcoming preconceived notions about their ethnic group
https://muzejosobnihprica.com/en/homepage/

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Notes