

*Detect:
Enhancing Digital Citizenship*

*Method Manual
for Teachers*



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Strengthen Thinking & Democratic Competence

Under this heading, you will find some additional sources
of information and suggestions for further research



Description

Over the years, the online sphere has become a phenomenal source of information on a variety of topics, from news and current events, to cultural products, to extensive study materials in virtually all areas of knowledge from the pre-school to the doctoral level. The faster access, increased storage capacities and greater competencies of an ever-greater number of content producers have all contributed to a greater variety of content than ever before at the public's online fingertips, available instantly and from anywhere in the world.

However, not all online content is trustworthy or based on trustworthy sources. In fact, a number of actors have harnessed the potential of the abundance of online sources and are using it to manipulatively present materials that suit their own agenda to a wider audience, despite the fact this agenda has no societal benefits. The potential of fostering fear, uncertainty and doubt on a mass scale for political, financial and other interest-driven reasons has not decreased in the online era. On the contrary, many new tools are being extensively used to assist precisely these actions.

Identifying manipulative online content is not just a matter of thinking intensively about the veracity of any specific claim made online. It is a process of questioning one's own assumptions and their origins, as well as considering the various social, political and economic forces driving the production of content found online. In addition, identifying fake or manipulative content is itself a technology-assisted process, relying upon the ability of users to trace the sources of content to their origins and re-evaluate them in the process, possibly even becoming aware of how the content was produced or manipulated in the first place. The purpose of this manual is to provide the necessary steps for teachers to implement a DETECT hands-on learning experience about disinformation and manipulative content found online.¹ The goals of DETECT activities are the following:

- to raise the awareness of teachers and students about identifying manipulative content online,
- to help empower students to identify trustworthy sources of information present online, and,
- to raise the resilience of youth to manipulative content and disinformation online by encouraging them to take the steps necessary to check the credibility of such content.

¹ This Manual deliberately avoids the term „fake news“ because we adhere to the idea that news is – by definition – true and informative. The content we address here is, ultimately, neither of the two.



Learning Outcomes

With the implementation of the DETECT activities, teachers and educators will be better-equipped to train young people to utilise critical thinking and fact-checking information they find via various online channels. Teachers' competences (knowledge and skills, attitudes) for teaching media and digital literacy will be enhanced, and they will be provided with a choice of examples and exercises on the mechanics of disinformation, the reach of various content, the possibility of back-tracing online content, fact-checking the information they find, etc. These skills can in turn be implemented by youth in their everyday usage of information and communication technologies.

This curriculum promotes a learner-centred environment. This approach is based in the principles of democratic, participative, cooperative and experiential learning. In such an interactive environment, critical thinking, democratic dialogue, and a holistic view are valued and encouraged throughout the whole educational process.

The methodology described in this Method Manual is suitable for implementation in a non-formal education environment, as the proposed exercises utilise tools (computers and online search engines) that might not be readily available in a classroom context. However, the structure and concept of the workshops allow the activities to be implemented in school environments as well.

Expected educational outcomes of DETECT Training for teachers include the following:

- to identify, support and promote diversity within different environments,
- to recognise stereotypes and prejudice in the media,
- to develop online research skills of youth,
- to encourage initiative among young people in improving the online media landscape
- to understand media literacy as a means for promoting and strengthening inclusion.

The approaches used in this Method Manual include the following:

- Problem-based learning: Problem-based methodologies encourage learners to ask and answer questions, making use of natural curiosity about specific events or themes. Participants are invited to reflect on issues that do not have absolute answers or easy thought-processes, and that reflect the complexity of real-world situations. Problem-based learning opens the way for an active, task-oriented, and self-controlled approach to the learning process.

- Inquiry-based-learning: The aim of the inquiry-based methodology is to enhance competencies to face controversies, risks and challenges for the use of (social) media, the encouragement of critical thinking, and media literacy by implementing inquiry in classes. Inquiry-based learning starts by posing questions, problems or scenarios rather than simply presenting established facts or portraying a smooth path to knowledge. It is important to encourage students to identify and research issues and questions on their own to develop their knowledge or solutions.

It is recommended that educators implementing activities use the diversity of experiences and perceptions present in the learner groups as positive learning tools, which can help in raising awareness of participants. Furthermore, it is recommended that educators make further links to real-life examples for the concepts presented and to encourage critical thinking, which will help in empowering future active citizens and can have significant effect in preventing radicalisation.

Methods used are communication-based, activity-based, socially focused and self-directed:

- ice-breakers and participant introduction activities
- discussions
- interactions
- experience sharing
- practice sharing and experimentation
- personal, group and meta-reflections and evaluations.

Different forms of work are used within the curriculum: they include individual work, working in a pair (think-pair-share method), working in smaller groups, and working in a larger group (plenary).



Purpose

The DETECT Teachers' Method Manual is a practical guide to enhance the digital and media competence of youth in both formal and non- formal learning environments. However, it is also meant to be a guide for teachers to connect several possible forms of hands-on learning experience with a somewhat broader context and to provide them with an understanding of key terms and concepts.

The main theoretical resource for teachers is still the DETECT Compendium and we suggest everyone willing to learn more about the various aspects of media literacy, recognising disinformation and education for digital competence to use it. However, the idea of the DETECT Method Manual remains to be a stand-alone resource that can be readily picked up and used in an educational context.

Exercises

Below are examples of exercises that can be implemented as part of the DETECT activities. The exercises cover a relatively large range of the aspects of online disinformation and are intended to allow for both experiential learning and discussing examples, as well as reflection and links to more theoretical sources.

Preparatory Activity

Ask the participants about their media habits – what media they consume (e.g. online portals, TV, radio, print media, podcasts/on-demand media etc.) and how often they consume each of them (e.g. every day, several times a week, once a week, several times a month, once a month).

When the participants have documented their media habits, ask them how they would define:

- Media literacy,
- Digital literacy.

Discuss the provisional definitions and attempt to find common elements among them, using Venn diagrams. Then provide the participants with feedback from the DETECT Compendium, in order to help them gain more understanding of what the intent of the methods used is going to be.

Exercise One

Catching the concepts – The What's What of online content

Content that does not correspond with facts comes in many flavours and all of them can easily be found online. Some of it is inaccurate deliberately, by choice of the people writing, editing or distributing the material. Some is merely mistaken with no deliberate effort to spread disinformation, and this happens even to reputable media outlets. Some is produced for commercial reasons and inauthentically presented as informative content. Finally, some content was never meant to be taken seriously and is deliberately made unbelievable or absurd in order to entertain the audience.

The purpose of this exercise is to demonstrate the difference between disinformation, which is deliberately misleading, and misinformation, which occurs when insufficient information is available or a mistake has been made. It also introduces the concepts of propaganda as a broad activity of influencing opinions and emotions, and satire as an entertaining critical portrayal of societal problems and flaws. Finally, it presents the notion of “clickbait” – content that attracts “clicks” online by stoking the interest of readers to find out more, based on incomplete or misleading information.

The exercise consists of simply linking concepts from one list with scattered definitions from another. Any examples provided within the exercise should be recent, in order to be as relevant to youth as possible.

<i>Concepts</i>	<i>Definition</i>
<i>Propaganda</i>	An activity used by governments, corporations and non-profit organisations in order to govern the emotions, attitudes, values and knowledge of the audience it is directed at.
<i>Clickbait</i>	The practice of using sensationalist, bombastic head-lines and attention-grabbing visuals in order to make content more attractive for accessing and generating revenue, often while misleading about what the content is about.
<i>Hidden advertising</i>	Content meant to "sell" goods and services that is deliberately made so that readers are unable to tell it apart from regular media content.
<i>Satire</i>	Commenting on societal phenomena by portraying them in an entertaining and exaggerated way, often so that it looks somewhat believable.
<i>Disinformation</i>	The act of deliberately spreading made-up, incomplete or extremely biased material, with the purpose of achieving financial or political goals.
<i>Errors</i>	A common problem of media outlets that can cause them financial damage and legal procedures, usually addressed by publishing corrections and apologies.

The above concepts make it easier to illustrate several different causes and motivations for untruthful content that can be found in the media sphere by pointing to their most pertinent features:

- Errors are unintentional and are, as a rule, corrected by explicit action from the media publisher. They are a result of misinformation and may lead to further misinformation. Therefore, it is an expected course of action for responsible publishers to take steps to stop them from spreading by publishing retractions.

- Satire is false information presented as truth but can (usually) hardly be thought of as misleading because it is obviously absurd, over-the-top or so implausible as to be humorous. The purpose of well-executed satire is to make fun of flaws, biases and hypocrisies, while not being malicious towards any social group as a whole.
- Clickbait is misleading by design. Its purpose is to entice readers into accessing it under (partially) false pretence. However, it is rarely malicious in that it intends to merely play into the audiences' desire for entertainment.
- Propaganda is a very broad term, denoting generally “mediated persuasion”. More broadly, propaganda can be understood as the activity of influencing people's attitudes, values and, ultimately, actions by steering them in desired directions. Some sources differentiate propaganda according to its sources, as being either “white” (from known and verifiable sources), “grey” (from unknown sources) and “black” (from misleading, falsely identified sources). Propaganda can therefore fill a number of communication functions, from empowering people and encouraging pro-social behaviour, to sowing panic, discontent and fear. This has important implications in discussing the extents and effects of systematically influencing audiences. The DETECT Students' Method Manual refers to propaganda extensively and sets out its main functions of enticing emotional reactions, simplifying reality, targeting opponents and mobilising audiences.
- Hidden advertising is an act of advertisement deliberately posing as news content. Although many viewers would probably consider themselves to be able to discern between the two with certainty, this distinction may not be readily visible, and various terms are in place to describe the level of integration between content and advertisement, such as e.g. native advertising.
- Disinformation is the act of deliberate spreading of false information intended to mislead and specifically produced with the intent to manipulate audiences. Both its intent and its effects run against the idea that a democratic public should be informed truthfully, completely and in a timely manner in order to participate in decision-making. Few producers of disinformation would probably admit to running disinformation campaigns deliberately because to do so would be bad for their reputation. Still, some do so.

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Can you imagine disinformation falling under various headings? Would a disseminator of disinformation have an interest in disguising it as “an honest mistake” or “satire”.

Exercise Two

Looking into stereotypes and sensationalism

Media, or the majority of media we encounter every day, will sometimes resort to sensationalist titles, stereotypical portrayal of various groups, topics about sex, violence and crime, and other ways of capturing the audience's attention. Sensationalism "sells" media content because most people would want to find out more about topics that are controversial, volatile, provocative, even shocking. Stereotypical portrayals of various groups are generally not a good media practice because they obscure the full variety and individualism of the group members. However, it is important to bear in mind that stereotypes also play a cognitive role, because they are easy to understand on the whole and help media audiences make sense of the complexities of society and events in today's world.

The first step in reflecting on stereotypes and sensationalism is to ask students to try to deduct: why is sensationally presented and "clickbait-like" content often present in the media? And why does it spread so readily on social networks?

Basically, these "light", easily understood and alluring topics are very successful at connecting economic forces with interest in a specific type of media content. This content and its presentation drive "clicks" on social media and web portals, minutes of podcasts heard or videos watched, copies of newspapers sold and by necessity ads seen and revenue generated. This revenue can then drive further media production, including relevant and high-quality journalistic content and content that caters to the public interest.

The next step of the exercise consists of reading from a list of (genuine!) headlines from news portals and print media recognising and reflecting on what elements make them sound sensationalist or stereotyping. The students should be divided into pairs and given examples from the following list of headlines as hand-outs:

<i>Headline</i>	<i>What could be found within it</i>
Big defeat for our national football team: they played like little girls!	Gender stereotype – "little girls" denoting 'weakness'
Looking awful! Famous actor packs on 30 kilos of fat for new role	Sensationalist approach - emphasising person's physical appearance
Here we go again: Czech tourists go hiking in flip-flops	Nationally-specific stereotype – Czech tourists' behaviour portrayed as 'reckless'

<i>Headline</i>	<i>What could be found within it</i>
World's best tennis player stokes imagination: looks at the outfit she wore, the entire auditorium was looking only at her!	Sensationalist approach - emphasising person's physical appearance
Montenegrin man falls asleep at work. Is anyone surprised?	Nationally-specific stereotype - Montenegrins portrayed as 'lazy'
MP comes into session in mini-skirt	Sensationalist approach - emphasising person's physical appearance
Who gave her a driver's licence? Woman driver in white Mercedes Benz crashes into window of famous clothing brand	Gender stereotype - women portrayed as 'bad drivers'
Sexy scientist on important discovery: "I am on the verge of discovering a cure for cancer"	Sensationalist approach - emphasising person's physical appearance
We wonder: Blondes or brunettes? Which are smarter?	Gender stereotype - blond-haired women portrayed as 'dumb'

The students can then be asked to modify their headlines so that they emphasise different aspects of their topics, bear more informative value and avoid resorting to stereotypical portrayals or "cheap" clickbait-potential. However, caution should be taken with a number of the examples, as they are not likely to be easily transformed into anything genuinely media-worthy or corresponding to public interest in any meaningful way. This can also be a valuable follow-up activity to demonstrate that a very superficial or sensationalistic choice of topics may not be necessarily subject to reframing to make it more valuable. Some topics just lend themselves to low-value sensationalism, however skilfully they might be framed.

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Do you recognise the stereotypes these headlines have referred to? Would you be able to discuss them with someone who is unfamiliar with them? And even if you correct them, are these still important pieces of news?

Exercise Three

Pictures and what they do to our perceptions

The importance of visuals in conveying messages cannot be overstated. We receive the vast majority of our sensory inputs from visual stimuli. People are especially receptive to visually-constructed messages, and ideas that can be underscored with effective visuals are among the most powerful tools of advertising, political propaganda and any other activity attempting to persuade groups of people in favour or against a person, product or cause. The use of visuals for any propaganda purpose relies very heavily on the visceral, emotional responses that these visuals provoke in those viewing them.

The exercise consists of discussing examples of visuals that are tailor-made to appeal to emotions to achieve political goals. Specifically, the examples provided are those that rely on fear, insecurity, anxiety and anger over migration issues, which have been very contentious all across Europe in recent years. In fact, recent years have seen disinformation campaigns become very successful, in the sense that they may have influenced the outcomes of elections on both sides of the Atlantic.

Students should be divided into three evenly sized groups. Each group is given one of three examples, all from campaigns of political parties in EU Member States:

Country of origin - Switzerland



(The caption reads: 'Opening the door to abuse? No!')

Country of origin - Germany



(The caption reads: 'So that Europe does not become "Eurabia"! Europeans choose AfD [Alternative for Germany, political party]!')

Country of origin - United Kingdom



Students are then encouraged to discuss how they would respond to the following questions:

- What topic does this campaign address as being important?
- Why is that topic important and relevant to many people?
- What emotions could the image used in the campaign trigger in its recipients?
- What is the goal of using this visual message in the campaign? How does it achieve that goal?
- What would you want to do with it? Share? Comment? Like? Ignore? Why?

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Why are fear and endangerment so predominant in these campaigns? What are the deeper causes for these events?

Exercise Four

Micro-targeting and rabbit-holes

Many websites that offer a wealth of content are using very sophisticated algorithms away from the users' eyes. These algorithms are a computational tool that calculates precisely what content should be offered to each unique user based on his/her browsing, viewing or listening history, tags and search strings used, available personal data and a number of other concerns. The logic behind this approach is simple – it uses available information to help users find more of what they are interested in. As with other online media, more videos served translates to more time spent viewing/listening to content on the platform, more ads seen, and more revenue generated.

However, the fact that these algorithms work behind the scenes is well known and many content producers are very interested in using it for their own gain – for transmitting messages they want as part of a “package” of otherwise innocuous content. Using available information, makers of content may choose to produce content that will target users with content from unexpected “angles”, reaching users with messages they otherwise would not have looked for on their own.

Not only product placement or hidden advertising, but also political messages, including toxic, anti-democratic ones, may be found on online content platforms.

Divide students into four small groups. Each group should choose one person among them who has access to their YouTube account. This person will be the group's test subject, although it is preferable that the identity of this person is not disclosed to the rest of the group/class. This person's five recently viewed videos are opened and viewing suggestions in the right-hand side are discussed. Each group reports on the suggestions:

- Are they of a similar topic/sort of video?
- Are they from the same or related content-producers?
- Were there any surprising, unexpected suggestions? If so, why do you think they appeared?
- Was there a politically linked suggestion among unpolitical ones? If so, why do you think it appeared?

Even if none of the suggestions were unexpected, during the debriefing, introduce the concept of targeting audiences with messages. The most sophisticated forms of targeting fall under the definition of micro-targeting – using consumer data, especially on social media, to send different information to different groups, often particular groups that are identified as the desired recipients of political messages.



Exercise Five

Experiential learning with Impulses

People are generally more attracted to news with false information than with true information, most likely because they offer simplistic and often biased perspectives that make it easy to understand our world, albeit through a lens of outrage and apprehension.

In a 2018 study on the spread of news stories on Twitter, the MIT MediaLab found that “falsehood spread significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information”. Meanwhile, truthful information took “about six times as long as falsehood to reach 1,500 people,” and, controlling for relevant variables, falsehoods were “70% more likely to be retweeted than the truth”.

Students are encouraged to watch the viral hoax video Golden Eagle Snatches Kid (available [here](#)), without being previously told that it is fake, i.e. a computer-generated animation.

The video demonstrates ostensibly documentary footage of an event that actually never happened. However, numerous sources are available online, offering a wealth of proof that the video is false, derived both from the subsequent analyses of the footage itself and from the creators' own admission. The trainer gives a certain amount of time for the participants to gather evidence and claims that prove whether the video was manipulated and how it was done. This exercise is even more interesting if it is set as a competition between the groups to see who will gather more evidence. During debriefing, participants are given a breakdown of some of the possible steps for fact-checking the “Impulse” they were exposed to and can reflect on:

- What was the original claim (made by the media piece)?
- What does the source originally claim (i.e. alleged location, timeframe, description)?
- Can the source be considered to be credible? Why yes/why not?
- Is there evidence for the original claim? What sources can you draw it from?
- Is the original claim true? What do you base your judgement on?
- If it was false, how would you correct the original claim?
- What sources do you base your correction on?

The purpose of the exercise is to demonstrate that disinformation can be made for a variety of purposes, entertainment and profit being some of them, on a rather non-political, non-polarizing example.

The following two examples of Impulses for experiential learning illustrate this difference well.

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This Impulse was easily debunked and no-one would care much. What about more politically polarizing disinformation? What role does the mere-exposure effect play? What about confirmation bias?

Impulse No. One

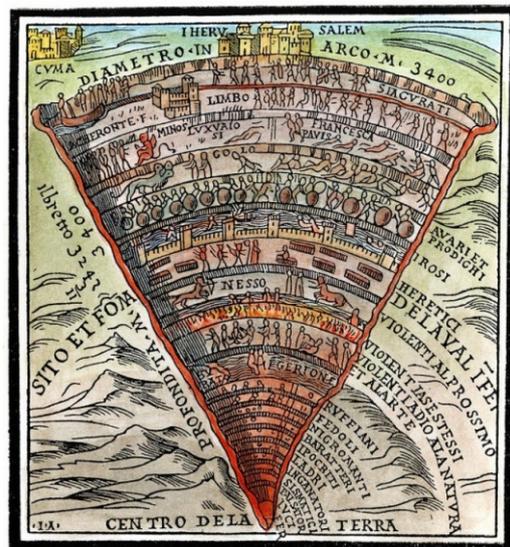
Where in Hell has Dante placed the undecided?

Statement

„The Government obviously sees running the state as though it were a game of thrones, of backstabbing and betrayal. We choose to speak up, now that the time has come to make the important decisions and show that we have attitudes and values you adhere to. **Great Dante wrote in his work that the deepest, darkest circles of Hell are reserved for those who remain undecided and neutral in times of moral crisis**“, said <head of political party> in an interview, criticizing the governing party.

(source: <https://bit.ly/2WS8Yoo>)

Consider alternative sources and steps to fact-check the statement!



(source: <https://bit.ly/2XvZ7BM>)

Impulse No. Two

Muslims destroying a Christmas tree in a shopping mall?

statement

Consider alternative sources and steps to fact-check the statement!

Muslims attack Mall Christmas tree



(source: <https://bit.ly/2KuXQr7>)

'Offended Muslims' Attack Christmas Tree?



(source: <https://bit.ly/2B98j5p>)



[Addendum] Wikipedia - Treat with Caution

Wikipedia is not a reliable source so it shouldn't be treated as such, but it is useful for the beginning of a research. Even the creators of Wikipedia do not consider it as a reliable source (Wikipedia, 2019b). Your research journey can begin here, but it should never stop there. Wikipedia is great to provide basic information on a topic but don't use Wikipedia as your single source. On Wikipedia, articles are written collaboratively, and authors can contribute anonymously which is this site's advantage and disadvantage. More about opportunities and challenges of Wikipedia can be found in our DETECT Compendium "Of Trolls & Bots: The Basics of Manipulation in Social Networks"

How to use Wikipedia

- Use Wikipedia only as a starting point! Fact check the sources! Wikipedia is great to provide basic information on a topic and for collecting keywords. Wikipedia provides a reference list the end of the article. These references can be a useful tool to continue your investigation. After using Wikipedia, find some other sources.
- Check the changes and the explanations of the changes in a Wikipedia article! Wikipedia articles are always reedited, so you should make sure your readers or listeners know which version of the article you used by stating the date and quoting the exact page. Wikipedia is not as egalitarian as it might appear at first glance. Authors can choose and quote sources in accordance to their own preferences, political or other preferences, attitudes and beliefs. Higher level of Wikipedia administrators have more possibility to exclude other authors so they can push towards their preferences. Also, massive gender gap is present. The overwhelming majority of contributors are (white) men, which resulted in a systematic gender bias of the encyclopaedia in content coverage (ibid.).

- Fact check the same Wikipedia article in more languages! 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 differently by the editors, what is mentioned and what is left out. It is important to keep selection and content disparity between the different Wikipedias in mind. There are far more articles available in English, around 5.860.000 in 2019. Compared to this, there were only 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. Yet, the fact that Wikipedia is available in various languages can be a helpful tool when you are researching specific content.

References

Sources

- <http://news.mit.edu/2018/study-twitter-false-news-travels-faster-true-stories-0308>

Further reading

- Croatian media literacy portal – teachers' section: <https://www.medijskapismenost.hr/ucitelji/>
- Read Between the Lines - a media literacy handbook: <http://goo.hr/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/2018-%C4%8Citajmo-izme%C4%91u-redaka-drugo-izdanje.pdf>
- 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/>
- GEAR Curriculum – a handbook for civic, global and intercultural education, available in multiple languages: https://gear.gong.hr/?page_id=3181



Notes