

## Media literacy program and material for adult educators

### ANNEX 2: FAKE NEWS, MISINFORMATION & DISINFORMATION



### **Project APRICOT:**

Attentive parental education for wise being and co-being in changing times

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## 9.2 Annex 2: Fake News, Misinformation and Disinformation

### Introduction

In the Digital Information Age, news and information are shared more rapidly on digital media than ever before, and the ability to discern true information from false information has become highly important and at the same time very difficult.

Today the term ‘Fake News’ has become widely used. The practice of calling information “fake news” is a useful warning for readers/listeners, but it can also generate uncertainty about the trustworthiness of news and information in general, and also of the reliability of individuals and/or organisations.

However “fake news” is not a new concept! To falsify information, historical events or to “embellish a story” has happened throughout history. Today, in the age of mass media, there is just more of it... and of course false information and news are more easily spread through social media.

“Fake News” literally means false/fabricated news. Thus, as a term it does not cover all kinds of false information that you can come across on digital media today.

#### 1. The difference between Fake News, Misinformation, Disinformation, and Mal-information

**Fake News:** ‘Fake News’ is false information that appears to be news, but which has been *created deliberately with the intention to mislead its readers*

**Misinformation:** Misinformation is incorrect or imprecise information, i.e. where the writer does not have a specific intention to mislead – they just got it wrong!

**Disinformation:** Disinformation is “intended misinformation” i.e. The writer/the sender has the intention of creating and sharing false or misleading information.

**Malinformation:** Mal-information is information that is based on reality but is used to inflict harm on a person, an organisation or a country i.e. when genuine information is shared with the intention of causing harm; often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere

#### 2. The different types of Disinformation

As indicated in UNESCO’s Handbook for Journalism education and training (2018), *misinformation* belongs to the category of false information with no intent to harm, whereas *disinformation* is false information that has the intent to harm.

**False connection:** When headlines, visuals or captions don’t support the content. Commonly used in clickbait.

With the increased competition for audience attention, editors increasingly have to write headlines to attract clicks, even if when people read the article they feel that they have been deceived.

(Clickbait, a form of false advertisement, uses hyperlink text or a thumbnail link that is designed to attract attention and to entice users to follow that link and read, view, or listen to the linked piece of online content, with a defining characteristic of being deceptive, typically sensationalized or misleading.)

**False Context:** Where genuine content is used in a false context. For example:

Videos ‘exposing’ ballot-box stuffing used during elections in the US in 2016 + in the Scottish Referendum in 2014.

The anti-Democrat fake news campaign consisted of 4 videos that showed ballot-stuffing in 3 US states. Although the videos are genuine, all of them in fact showcase Russian elections during different years. Multiple clues to this can be seen in the videos. Thus, the content isn’t fake, but the context is utterly false.

Source: <https://firstdraftnews.org/video-alleging-us-election-fraud-fake>

**Manipulated content:** When genuine content or imagery has been manipulated to deceive. For example: face manipulation and *deepfake* technology, where a person in a picture or a video is replaced with another person. It is a type of artificial intelligence that can be used to make convincing pictures and video hoaxes.

**Satire/parody:** Where there is no intention to cause harm ...but has the potential to fool! Satire can be a way to exaggerate or mock the wrong to imply the right. It is often used to expose society’s flaws.

**Misleading Content:** Misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual. For example, in Germany when an online poll asked people who they would prefer as their next chancellor 47.5% said they would want Angela Merkel. This could be seen as a healthy proportion for a multi-party system. However, a news article, whilst mentioning the correct figure, framed the statistic by suggesting that most Germans “absolutely do not want Merkel” – the poll did not ask this question.

Source: Ingrid Brodnig <https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/7-types-german-election>

**Imposter Content:** When genuine sources are imitated or impersonated. Journalists may have their names or by-lines appearing alongside articles they did not write, or an organisation’s logo may be attached to videos and images they did not create.

**Fabricated Content:** Content that is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm

One example of Fabricated Content is Trish Regan’s commentary for Fox News (10th of August 2018), in which she compares the Danish government with Venezuelan

government. One example of 'fabricated content' was the comment that most Danish students who graduate from school want to start up cup-cake cafés! See the web-link/source for more information. You can also see the response from a politician who corrects the false assumptions here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXecLXlzEXE>

**Propaganda:** When content is used to manage attitudes, values and knowledge. Several examples of propaganda were used in Great Britain prior to the vote about leaving the European Union.

**Disguised Sponsor Content:** Advertising or PR disguised as editorial content. Sponsored content inserts paid messaging into articles. It breaks the divide between editorial and advertorial content.

Studies have shown that people often fail to identify when they are viewing an advert, instead believing it to be a real news article - even when the fact that the content is sponsored is disclosed.

Not all sponsored news and information is disinformation/misinformation. It is legal to be sponsored or to sponsor, but it has to be clearly visible.

**Error:** When established news organisations make mistakes while reporting! Some errors will be small and easily corrected, others will cause unintended offence or damage to a brand or individual and may result in litigation.

### 3. The intentions behind Disinformation

The intentions and motivations behind disinformation can include the following:

- Propaganda
- To discredit
- Economic / Monetary gain
- Political
- Personal fame
- To cause harm to individuals (including defamation)
- Polarisation
- Fun/comedy
- Because I can!

#### Intention: Monetary gain

One of the major motivations for spreading disinformation is monetary gain. Anybody can create a hoax website, with intriguing content designed to drive as much traffic as possible towards their fake news.

A profit can be made from this by placing adverts on their site (using platforms such as Google AdSense or Facebook) - receiving money each time an advert is clicked on.

The more intriguing or ‘loud’ their fake content is, the more visits to their website and the more people will click on the adverts. For example, “Pope Francis Shocks World, Endorses Donald Trump for President, Releases Statement”, being not even remotely true, collected 100,000 shares.

If the number of shares is taken as an indicator of how widely viewed these sites are, it is easy to see how they can become lucrative

### **Political Intentions**

Often the goal is to rationalise the actions of a political party and/or candidate or to further their political or economic interests.

It includes stories with eye-catching headlines, provocative imagery, defamatory accusations, and demonstrably false claims about a political candidate, party, or policy.

Usually fully-fledged articles from dedicated host websites, this type of digital disinformation is distributed through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter,

So to put it differently, this type of disinformation is ‘honed clickbait’ that is intentionally framed to manipulate people’s socio-political thoughts and practices by eliciting emotional reactions.

In September 2019 a wave of looting and violence mostly targeting nationals of other African countries in South Africa. But some videos and images shared on social media about the attacks were not all they seemed. Several videos that went ‘viral’, were old or even from other countries, but were being used as evidence of current events in South Africa.

### **Intention: To Gain Personal Fame**

Where false information is posted with the intention of gaining fame or a higher social status.

For example:

Transitioning from an Instagram or YouTube user to a professional “Influencer” (someone who leverages a social-media following to influence others and make money) is not easy. So many adopt the strategy of “Fake it until you make it”!

Hayley, a 15-year-old ‘beauty influencer’ said she noticed her social status rise as she got more attention online this year. “People pretend to have brand deals to seem cool,” Hayley said. “It’s a thing, like, I got this for free while all you losers are paying! People come up to me at school and ask, ‘Do you get sponsored?’ When I say I do, they’re like, ‘OMG that’s so cool.’ “I noticed the more followers I gain, the more people come up and talk to me.”



Another example is posting app-modified photos of yourself as if they were real. Applications such as Faceapp to realistically change your face to smile or look younger.

### **Intention: Defamation**

One example of information with the intention to defame is the news story posted by Daily Mail (UK) that the modelling agency that Melania Trump worked for in New York in the 1990's, also served as an escort business (August 2016). Melania Trump filed a lawsuit based on defamation, as her lawyer stated: "These defendants made several statements about Mrs. Trump that are 100% false and tremendously damaging to her personal and professional reputation" (The Independent. 2016).

### **Intention: Comedy/fun**

An example of information that is written with the intention to make fun are the yearly "April's fool" articles and news, which are published the 1st of April.

### **Intention: Just because I can!**

The goal is to achieve something difficult or audacious. This is supported by a 'hacker' or 'gamer' mentality, assuming the view that systems are there to be 'gamed' or technologically exploited.

## **4. Disinformation in Digital Technologies – how it is spread online**

Disinformation is shared through different mechanisms:

- **From audience to co-producer:** the Digital Era has changed the relationship of the publisher and audience. Today, everybody can take part in the production of news and information, and therefore also fake news and disinformation, and share it through e-mails, blogs or on social media.
- **Going 'Viral':** social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have become well-known channels for spreading disinformation. In fact, research shows that false information is more easily spread on Twitter, than true news (Vosoughi et al. 2018). One of the explanations is that fake stories often address emotional reactions.
- **Weak critical digital literacy:** there is a tendency amongst weak digital users (e.g. older people) to easily share misinformation (Adler-Nissen et al. 2018).
- **Selective exposure and motivated thinking:** People have a tendency to accept claims/contentions that correspond to their own beliefs, and to choose sources that confirm their opinions and existing beliefs.

Individuals also tend to engage in groups on social media that reflect their own beliefs, this is often referred to as "echo- chambers".

However, studies show that users of social media are exposed to a greater amount of different opinions than users of traditional media (Adler-Nissen et al. 2018).

It should be noted that new technologies themselves stimulate production of disinformation. For example, so-called convolutional neural networks (shift invariant artificial neural networks) is a technology of the future, because it can analyse images and it's widely used in criminology, medicine - anywhere where features need to be recognised automatically. However, applications such as Faceapp, employ this technology for commercial purposes, making it available to wider audiences. Using this app, one can modify their photos to look younger, more stereotypically beautiful, make yourself smile or even change gender. Creating such photos and videos and publishing them as if they are genuine can be classified as manipulated content, made with the intention of personal fame. Facetune, some Snapchat filters, applications making you look 'fit' on a photo – all fall under this category, involving technologies of different levels of difficulty and exploiting people's need to be liked.

### The senders of Disinformation on the internet

**Trolls:** are false social media profiles that are controlled by people e.g. working for lobby organisations, special services etc. In particular, because trolls are controlled by people, they are able to create advanced content targeting certain contexts.

**Bots:** are automatized profiles that pretend to be real people, but are controlled by programmed algorithms. The strength of bots is in numbers, e.g. they can profile a certain picture or information on social media by adding many likes.

**Humans:** are also distributors and creators of false information – deliberately or not. Studies show that individuals will to great extent share false information, especially if it complies with their beliefs, touches them emotionally, or just for making fun. Certain sections of the population, who are less experienced in using digital media (e.g. elderly people) are more likely to share false information online.

**There is a wide range of different techniques for spreading disinformation including:**

- **Astroturfing:** Falsely attributing a message or an organisation to an organic grassroots movement to create false credibility
- **Bandwagon effect:** A cognitive effect where beliefs increase in strength because they are shared by others.
- **Impersonator Bots:** Bots which mimic natural user characteristics to give the impression of a real person.
- **Spammer Bots:** Bots which post repeat content with high frequency to overload the information environment
- **Botnet:** A botnet is a number of Internet-connected devices, each of which is running one or more bots. Botnets can be used to perform Distributed Denial-of-Service



(DDoS) attacks, steal data, send spam, and allows the attacker to access the device and its connection.

- **Cheerleading:** Flooding the information space with positive content (cheerleading) by using bots and trolls to ensure dissenting opinions are crowded out by positive comments and posts. Its done by creating online groups that support a particular standpoint (filter bubble) using a large army of posters (bots and trolls)
- **Dark Ads:** Targeted advertising based on an individual user's psychographic profile, 'dark' insofar as they are only visible to targeted users
- **DDoS Attacks:** Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) is a cyber-attack where multiple IP addresses are used to disrupt services of a host connected to the internet.
- **Deepfakes:** Use of digital technology to fabricate facial movements and voice, sometimes in real time
- **Echo Chamber:** A situation where certain ideas are reinforced by repetition within a social space online
- **Fake Platform:** Identity of a web platform is disguised to promote fabricated content
- **Filter Bubble:** Algorithms which personalise and customise a user's experience on social media platforms might entrap the user in a bubble of his or her own making.
- **Flooding:** The overflowing of a target media system with high-volume, multi-channel disinformation. Multiple commentators, both in the form of bots and real users, make an overwhelming amount of posts with nonsense content to crowd out legitimate information.
- **Forgery:** Product or content is wholly or partly fabricated to falsely ascribe the identity of the source.
- **Hacking:** Use of illegitimate means to unlawfully gain access to, or otherwise disturb the function of, a platform.
- **Highjacking:** Unlawful seizure of a computer or an account. A website, hashtag, meme, event or social movement is taken over by an adversary or someone else for a different purpose.
- **Laundering:** The process of passing of disinformation as legitimate information by gradually distorting it and obscuring its true origin
- **Leaking:** Disseminating unlawfully obtained information.
- **Malign Rhetoric:** Lingual ruses aimed at undermining reasonable and legitimate debate and silencing opinions:
  - **Name Calling:** A classic propaganda technique based on abusive or insulting language directed against a person or a group.
  - **Ad Hominem:** Argumentative strategy focused on attacking the person making the argument rather than the content of the argument itself.
  - **Whataboutery:** A rhetorical maneuver which discredits an opponent's position by accusing them of unrelated issues.
  - **Gish Gallop:** A debate tactic focused on drowning the opponent in an overwhelming amount of weak arguments which require great effort to rebut as a whole.

- **Transfer:** A classic propaganda technique based on transferring blame or responsibility to associate arguments with admired or despised categories of thought.
- **Strawman:** A form of argument which targets and refutes an argument that has not been present in the discussion.
- **Manipulation:** Alteration of content to change its meaning
- **Misappropriation:** Falsely ascribing an argument or a position to another's name.
- **Phishing:** A method to unlawfully obtain information online via malware distributed over emails or web platforms.
- **Point and Shriek:** Exploitation of sensitivity to perceived injustices in society to create outrage. E.g. A commentator diverts from a real issue at hand by pointing out the audacity of a make believe incident which plays on pre-existing social grievances.
- **Potemkin Village:** A smoke-screen of institutions and/or platforms established to deceive audiences. A complex network of fake think tanks is established to disseminate disinformation which seems legitimate due to the perceived legitimacy of the network.
- **Raiding:** Temporarily disrupting a platform, event, or conversation by a sudden show of force.
- **Shilling:** To give credibility to a person or a message without disclosing intentions or relationships. An actor endorses certain content while appearing to be neutral but is in fact a dedicated propagandist.
- **Sockpuppets:** Use of digital technology to disguise identity, to play both sides of a debate. A user creates two or more social media accounts under opposing identities i.e. one pro-fox hunting, one against, with the aim of playing the identities against one another.
- **Symbolic Action:** Refer to acts that carry symbolic value in the sense that they signal something to an audience to create a response. Eg. A user plays on universally shared symbolic cues e.g. terrorist attacks to create a climate of fear
- **Tainting:** Leaked contents are tainted with forgeries
- **Terrorism:** Imagery from real-world events is used to make political claims.
- **Woozle Effect:** Self-perpetuating evidence by citation. A false source is cited repeatedly to the point where it is believed to be true because of its repeated citation.

## 5. Recognising Disinformation

Disinformation is about influence. The people who spread it do not want members of the public to make informed, reasonable choices. They try to achieve a goal by deliberately shortcutting normal decision-making processes.

Disinformation impacts politics, democracy, the way we get news, age, and trust.

When the information environment is deliberately confused, this can:

- threaten public safety;
- fracture community cohesion;

- reduce trust in institutions and the media;
- undermine public acceptance of science's role in informing policy development and implementation;
- damage our economic prosperity and our global influence; and
- undermine the integrity of government, the constitution and our democratic processes