



GUIDELINES FOR TEACHERS

How to spot and fight disinformation



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For those of us who grew up in the 20th century, the burgeoning of the information age has been a defining social, cultural and political experience. For young people who are coming of age today, the challenges and opportunities in the next chapter of this story will be no less inspiring and challenging. We cannot predict what the future will bring, but we can equip our young people with the tools they need to navigate whatever the future will bring.

One difference between the world that today's schoolchildren will inherit and the one encountered by their parents' generation, is the availability of information. As democratic societies, such openness has been a great gift. However, we have also seen that in the wrong hands this openness can be jeopardised through the spread of unintended misinformation or even deliberately planned disinformation. Teaching young people to navigate the opportunities and dangers of this constantly changing information landscape remains one of the great challenges in raising and educating children today.

This toolkit aims to give secondary teachers resources in order to start conversations with their pupils about the consequential topics raised by the threat of bad information. Among these are issues around public health, democracy, and the cultural and legal norms underpinning our societies. There are no absolute answers to the questions that inevitably arise when we think deeper about how to discern truth and falsehood. Nevertheless, it is precisely a capacity to negotiate ambiguity and come to judgements through critical thinking that we must encourage in our young people.

With this in mind, this toolbox of lessons does not offer a series of prescriptions or axioms. Rather the materials provided are designed to inspire discussion. Through debate and exchange, pupils will have a chance to experiment in unpicking the multifaceted nature of information both individually and as part of a conversation with peers. These are key skills if they are to become responsible citizens online and in society more broadly. Pupils will thus encounter such characters as Machiavelli, Pope Urban II and today's QAnon conspiracy theorists. By drawing both from history and current affairs, these case studies will help young people situate disinformation in the world around them while also contextualising it as a phenomenon with historical precedents and parallels. We hope this will help teenagers develop the intellectual and personal resources to navigate disinformation in their adult lives.

Educators are a key part of this conversation and following the requests we received from many in the teaching community to supply resources on disinformation, we hope this contribution will be a valuable one to the wider discussion about educating on disinformation. Our methodology is based on our own experience studying and responding to disinformation and misinformation at the European Union. Like the pupils this package is intended for, we too are also always attempting to learn and re-think our approach. We would be glad to receive your feedback.

This toolkit is designed to introduce young people to the phenomenon of disinformation – conveying an understanding of the threats it poses, explaining how pupils can find out more and protect themselves from it, and providing an opportunity to look in more depth at particular examples. The toolkit is open and free to use for any educational establishment. Although it can be adjusted and tailored for any age group, the main target group is teenagers from 15 to 18 years old.

How to use it

The toolkit is designed to cover **1 or 2 lessons** for an average **secondary school** class.

The PowerPoint presentation includes links to several YouTube videos. For a single lesson, just 1 or 2 of these should be enough to get the main points across – you can use the others if you have time, or want to spread the material over multiple lessons. We leave to the teacher’s discretion to decide which videos would best fit a particular class and generate the most interesting discussions.

Recommended activities include the following:

Activity	Minimum time	Suggested materials
Understanding disinformation (slide 5-24)	45 minutes	PowerPoint presentation, video transcripts, interactive discussion
Group work (groups of 5-6 max) (slide 25)	15-25 minutes	Case studies (and PowerPoint presentation as reference)
Group presentations & discussion (slide 25)	25 minutes for each group	Case studies
Summarising & recommendations for further research (slide 26-34)	5 minutes	Reading list

If you have more time available, you could extend the section on ‘Understanding disinformation’ (e.g. by spending more time looking at external sources and discussing the different examples with the pupils) or devote more time to the group work.

- **Disinformation and its threats to society (slides 6-10):**
NB! These examples are presented as ready-to-use materials. You may find other case studies more suited to your pupils or ask them to identify other case studies themselves, as a group task. Aim to make the presentation of these examples as interactive as possible.
 - **Fake research and the ‘anti-vax’ movement** (society requires people in academic institutions to follow high academic standards, so it’s important to understand why they are necessary)
 - **5G coronavirus myth** (a recent example of how malicious actors can capitalise on a crisis situation, which in turn can result into real-life harm). Numerous conspiracy theories shared both on and offline claim that 5G mobile networks caused the coronavirus pandemic. This is false. 5G is based on radio frequency and that does not create viruses.

- **The coronavirus outbreak** gave rise to a wave of misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories that in turn created an ‘infodemic’, capitalising on people’s panic and desperate search for answers about prevention, cures, etc. Often this false information is spread unintentionally, but in many other cases it is disseminated by parties who are trying to generate more clicks by posting ‘clickbait’ (carefully crafted headlines and stories that attract attention).
 - **Emotional manipulation** by using actors as exaggerated ‘victims’ of a situation, to evoke strong emotions instead of the objective opinion a viewer would form by following authoritative news sources.
- **2 models of how disinformation works (slides 11-15):**
 - **Motivating people to support an idea/cause** – fake research has fuelled fears against vaccination, which causes an increase in measles cases. Mention that motives also include political gain, e.g. creating a smear campaign before an election or a foreign government interfering in another country’s election to further their own geopolitical interests.
 - **Exaggerating differences, to undermine group cohesion/solidarity** – it is difficult to target an already strong and united community; disinformation is used to divide people and exaggerate internal differences and existing conflicts or controversies.
- **How disinformation works (slides 16-19)**
 - The role of social media
 - Technology helps to easily manipulate information, and create new forms of content that is very easy to believe
- **How to respond to disinformation (slides 20-24):**

Critical thinking requires everybody to:

 - Check the **content** – are facts and figures accurate? Is the article biased? Is it objective news or an opinion piece?
 - Check the **outlet** – do you know it? Does the URL look strange? Check the ‘About’ page – who is behind it? Who is funding it? What do other trustworthy media sources say?
 - Check the **author** – does this person exist? If you can’t clearly understand who the author is, the rest is also likely to be fake. A well-respected journalist always has a track record.
 - Check the **sources** – does the author use sources to justify their claims? Are the sources reliable (for example, well-established and respected media outlets, well-known experts in the field)? Are the quoted experts real specialists? If the story uses vague sources, or no sources (“some say”), the claims in the article could be fake.

- Check the **pictures** – images are powerful and easy to manipulate. A [reverse image search](#) can show if image has been used before in a different context.
- **Think before you share!** The story could be a distortion of reality, reusing old events in a different context for example – or it could be satire. The headline could be designed to spark strong emotions.
- **Question your own biases** – sometimes a story is too good or entertaining to be true. Take a deep breath, compare with reliable sources and keep a cool head. If you read something that makes you angry, scared or sad, try taking a moment to level out before you share.

- **Work in groups, discussing some typical examples of false information (slide 25):**

Split the class into groups of maximum 5-6 pupils. Assign a case study to each group. Allow around 15 minutes for pupils to read the case study and go through the questions, then another 20-25 minutes for presentations of each group and discussion among the class.

- A dangerous new conspiracy theory that has given rise to a cult-like movement now rapidly spreading in Europe
- Extract from Machiavelli’s book about “divide and rule”
- Unethical and misleading advertising about “incredibly effective” medicine X
- A speech by Urban II at the Council of Clermont (1095), related to the Crusades
- A folk tale about a boy shepherd and a wolf

NB! Again, these examples are rather classical narratives and are presented as ready-to-use materials. You may find other case studies more suited to your pupils, or you can ask them to identify case studies themselves, as a group task. Things like conspiracy theories (the world is ruled by George Soros/Bill Gates, governments spread COVID-19, aliens in Area 51, etc.), false health information, fake facts about minority groups...

For inspiration:

- Poynter COVID-19 database <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn-covid-19-misinformation/>
- EUvsDisinfo cases: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/>
- Lead Stories “Just because it’s trending doesn’t mean it’s true”: website that fact-checks trending stories: <https://leadstories.com/>

- **Summary, tips for finding out more and national resources (slides 26-34)**

Available toolkit content

- **Introductory presentation** (in PPT format)
 - a. The embedded YouTube videos are in English/Russian, but translated transcripts are available
 - b. Explanations and descriptions are available in the *Notes* section under each slide
- **5 workgroup case studies** with tasks (*can be adapted, or different case studies used*)
- **Tips** (interactive games, guides and resources) for finding out more

Alternative stories for consideration:

- **Building hostility to NATO troops via fake stories**
<https://vilniusinstitute.lt/en/lisas-case-repeated-german-soldiers-accused-of-rape/>
Emotionally charged stories usually do damage faster than they can be controlled. These fake stories are usually quite believable.
- **Russian TV attempts to blame the US for the coronavirus**
<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/02/06/russian-tv-runs-conspiracy-theory-blaming-trump-for-coronavirus-a69189>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQRmacSHXoo>
A Russian state television show has run a conspiracy theory which blames the coronavirus



CASE STUDY N°1

THE GROWING INFLUENCE OF “Q”



Background

What do former U.S. President Barack Obama, former U.S. Secretary of State and presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, French President Emmanuel Macron, singer Lady Gaga, the pizza restaurant Comet Ping Pong in Washington D.C., Microsoft founder Bill Gates and actor Tom Hanks all have in common? According to the adherents of the QAnon conspiracy theory, they are all part of a Satan-worshipping, child trafficking ring involving celebrities, political and business elites; U.S. President Donald Trump was allegedly recruited by military generals to expose this network and end their control over the government and the media, also referred to as 'the deep state'. The theory is perpetuated by an anonymous online figure using the codename 'Q', who claims to be a high-ranking official in the U.S. government with top security clearance giving them access to classified information.

QAnon emerged in fringe online message boards like 4chan and 8chan, with the first posts appearing already in 2017, but has gained significant prominence since then among users of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other mainstream platforms. A key characteristic of QAnon that has enabled its rapid spread is its participatory character: 'Q' regularly posts clues on message boards (also known as 'Q Drops'), inviting followers to conduct their own research to solve the mystery and get to the truth behind the different theories. Since late 2019, QAnon has made its way into European online websites, pages, groups and accounts and has morphed into local movements adapting to local narratives and contexts, primarily in Germany, France, Italy and the UK. Existing groups too, like the *Gilets Jaunes* in France or far-right movements in Germany, have adopted QAnon narratives [in some cases](#). The powerful 'deep state' that lies at the heart of Q's narratives allegedly knows no borders, with politicians and elites like Emmanuel Macron being also described as '[pawns of the deep state](#)' by local QAnon followers, or accusations that the German government is running [a secret paedophilia network](#).

Unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic made things even worse, with people being at home and therefore spending much more time on the internet while often being dissatisfied with their government's restrictions and measures to deal with the outbreak (mask wearing, social distancing, lockdowns and restriction of travel). In this context, the QAnon narratives have ranged from theories that the coronavirus is a biological weapon released by 'the deep state', to Bill Gates allegedly having planned the pandemic in order to impose mass vaccinations and control the world population.

Optional:

Watch [this video](#) and do your own quick online research about QAnon.

Questions for discussion:

- Can you identify a common theme behind the QAnon narratives spreading in the US and Europe?
- What makes the QAnon movement 'appealing' for followers? What makes it different from other conspiracy theories?
- Can you identify other moments in history, critical events that have triggered similar waves of conspiracy theories and disinformation across continents? What do they all have in common?
- From what we previously discussed about the objectives of disinformation actors, how do you think QAnon narratives can be used by foreign powers to target Europe and make it look weaker?



CASE STUDY N°2

DIVIDE ET IMPERA ("DIVIDE AND CONQUER")



Story

[..] A Captain ought, among all his other actions, endeavour with every art **to divide the forces of the enemy**, either by making him suspicious of his men, in whom he trusted, or by giving him cause to separate his forces, and – because of this – become weaker.

The first method is accomplished by watching the things of some of those he has next to him, as exists in war, to save their possessions, maintain their children or other of their necessities without charge. You know how Hannibal, having burned all the fields around Rome, caused only those of Fabius Maximus to remain safe. You know how Coriolanus, when he came with the army to Rome, saved the possessions of the Nobles, and burned and sacked those of the Plebs. [..]

As to dividing the enemy forces, there is no more certain way than to have one country assaulted by part of your forces, so that, being constrained to go to defend it, they (that country) abandon the war. [..] Titus Didius, who had a small force in comparison with the enemy, was awaiting a Legion from Rome, which the enemy wanted to intercept en route.

To prevent this, Titus gave out by voice throughout his army that he wanted to undertake an engagement with the enemy on the next day. Then he took steps that some of the prisoners he had were given the opportunity to escape. They carried back the Consul's order to fight on the next day, which caused the enemy to abort their plans to intercept the Legion, for fear of diminishing their forces. In this way, Titus kept himself safe. This method did not serve to divide the forces of the enemy, but rather to double his own.

Some, to divide the enemy forces, have allowed them to enter their country and take many towns, so that by placing guards in them, they diminished their forces along the way. In this manner, having made the enemy weak, they assaulted and defeated him.

Some others, when they wanted to go into one province, feigned an assault on another, so convincingly that as soon as they moved on another, where there was no fear they would enter, they overcame it before the enemy had time to come to its aid. The enemy, as he is not certain whether you will return to the place you first threatened, is constrained not to abandon that place to help the other, and thus often he does not defend either. [..]

Source: Wikisource, Book 6 of The Art of War (1675) by Niccolò Machiavelli, translated by Henry Neville (adapted)

Questions for discussion:

1. How could fake information help in times of war? How can the opponent's uncertainty become an advantage?
2. Is it ethical to lie in wartime? Is it ethical to lie during peacetime?
3. Why are divided forces more likely to be defeated?
4. How does Brexit make the European Union a weaker organisation?
5. Could you name at least 3 issues that are understood quite differently by EU countries that have been members for a longer time and those that joined relatively recently? Do these differences make the EU a weaker or stronger organisation?

Quote

Migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity. They are children, women and men who leave or who are forced to leave their homes for various reasons, who share a legitimate desire for knowing and having, but above all for being more.

Source: Pope Francis, Message for the 100th World Day of Migrants and Refugees

Task

Some refugees are fleeing their homeland for the EU for reasons other than political or safety concerns. They are economic migrants, which is a completely different legal status, and the EU sees a difference between these situations.

Unfortunately, sometimes we do not have a “perfect solution” for how to differentiate between these groups. What’s more, disinformation can be used to portray decisions like that as inappropriate and inhumane.

Imagine 2 different situations:

- a) a Syrian war refugee is **not allowed** to come to your country and is sent back to Syria;
- b) a Pakistani economic migrant is **accepted** by an EU country and receives guaranteed housing and benefits for 2 years.

Explain how these situations would raise tension among the EU population. Which foreign EU opponent(s) might benefit from such instability?



CASE STUDY N°3

MEDECINE SCAMS CAN SEVERELY DAMAGE YOUR HEALTH



Story

[..] Targeting older consumers, a host of new products now claim to boost memory, with some even suggesting they can head off or reverse dementia and Alzheimer's disease — even as mainstream science has yet to find a cure. These claims are starting to get attention from regulators and lawmakers.

"There's a special place in hell for anyone marketing dietary supplements that falsely claim to cure Alzheimer's or dementia — but that's exactly what we have seen manufacturers doing," Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.), the ranking member on the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, said in a statement. Last year, McCaskill sent letters to 15 retailers seeking information on their policies and procedures for marketing supplements, after she learned about a supplement called Brain Armor that was being advertised as "protection" against Alzheimer's, dementia and stroke.

Last November, the Justice Department announced a nationwide sweep of more than 100 makers and marketers of supplements. The companies were accused of making unsubstantiated claims about everything from treatments for Alzheimer's disease to cures for people addicted to pain medications.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) recently settled charges against a California firm that claimed one of its supplements relieves symptoms associated with menopause, including hot flashes and weight gain. The agency also settled charges against two supplement marketers who claimed their products could prevent gray hair or restore its natural color.

Federal prosecutors are pursuing a case against the owners of a Dallas-based supplement company that marketed a weight loss product called OxyElite Pro, which was linked to an outbreak of hepatitis and liver disease. Among the victims: Sonnette Marras, 48, of Hawaii, a mother of seven, who died after taking the supplement in 2013.

Source: AARP Bulletin, June 2016. AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) is a non-profit, nonpartisan organization that empowers people to choose how they live as they age.

Questions for discussion:

6. Why are people willing to believe in dubious promises by unethical manufacturers?
7. What's the difference between scientific medical data and the individual testimonials usually used to market medicine scams?
8. Why are fake medicines usually targeted at less-educated or older consumers? How can we help people in these categories so they don't fall for scam marketing techniques of such medicines?
9. Who is financially interested in spreading such scam information? How do they earn money from deceived consumers?
10. What could be the best countermeasures (aside from legal action) to make such scams inefficient?

Quote

A drowning man will clutch at a straw.

Source: proverb.

Task

Make a list of pharmaceutical products in 2 categories: over-the-counter (non-prescription) dietary supplements and official prescription medicines.

Explain the main differences between these products in respect of the following aspects:

- created at the end of a thorough development process
- official oversight of the manufacturing process
- point-of-sale requirements
- after-sales support and other stages.

Describe how the EU (and authorities in member countries) protect consumers from manipulation with regard to health services/products.



CASE STUDY N°4

SPEECH BY POPE URBAN AND THE CRUSADES



The Speech of Urban II at the Council of Clermont, 1095

In 1094 or 1095, Alexius, the Greek emperor, sent to the pope, Urban II, and asked for aid from the west against the Turks, who had taken nearly all of Asia Minor from him. At the council of Clermont, Urban addressed a great crowd and urged all to go to the aid of the Greeks and to recover Palestine from the rule of the Mohammedans.

[..] Although, O sons of God, you have promised more firmly than ever to keep the peace among yourselves and to preserve the rights of the church, there remains still an important work for you to do. Freshly quickened by the divine correction, you must apply the strength of your righteousness to another matter which concerns you as well as God.

For your brethren who live in the east are in urgent need of your help, and you must hasten to give them the aid which has often been promised them. For, as the most of you have heard, the Turks and Arabs have attacked them and have conquered the territory of Romania [the Greek empire] as far west as the shore of the Mediterranean and the Hellespont, which is called the Arm of St. George. They have occupied more and more of the lands of those Christians, and have overcome them in seven battles. They have killed and captured many, and have destroyed the churches and devastated the empire.

If you permit them to continue thus for awhile with impunity, the faithful of God will be much more widely attacked by them. On this account I, or rather the Lord, beseech you as Christ's heralds to publish this everywhere and to persuade all people of whatever rank, foot-soldiers and knights, poor and rich, to carry aid promptly to those Christians and to destroy that vile race from the lands of our friends. I say this to those who are present, it is meant also for those who are absent. Moreover, Christ commands it.

[..] All who die by the way, whether by land or by sea, or in battle against the pagans, shall have immediate remission of sins. This I grant them through the power of God with which I am invested. O what a disgrace if such a despised and base race, which worships demons, should conquer a people which has the faith of omnipotent God and is made glorious with the name of Christ! With what reproaches will the Lord overwhelm us if you do not aid those who, with us, profess the Christian religion!

Let those who have been accustomed unjustly to wage private warfare against the faithful now go against the infidels and end with victory this war which should have been begun long ago. Let those who, for a long time, have been robbers, now become knights. Let those who have been fighting against their brothers and relatives now fight in a proper way against the barbarians. Let those who have been serving as mercenaries for small pay now obtain the eternal reward. Let those who have been wearing themselves out in both body and soul now work for a double honor. Behold! on this side will be the sorrowful and poor, on that, the rich; on this side, the enemies of the Lord, on that, his friends. Let those who go not put off the journey, but rent their lands and collect money for their expenses; and as soon as winter is over and spring comes, let them eagerly set out on the way with God as their guide.

Source: A Source Book for Mediæval History. Selected documents illustrating the History of Europe in the Middle Age, O. J. Thatcher, E. H. McNeal, New York, 1905.

Questions for discussion:

1. What are the “holy” reasons for the Crusade, cited by Pope Urban II?
2. What are the real reasons for the pope’s request?
3. Why was this public speech so strong and influential at the time?
4. What would have been the response from “the Turks and Arabs” at the time and... today?
5. What cross-checking options were available at the time (1095) in the area controlled by the Catholic Church?

Task

Write a reply letter (speech) from the opponents of Alexius in Asia Minor. It should be addressed to all potential participants of the Crusades.



CASE STUDY N°5

USING PEOPLE'S TRUST TO SPREAD FAKE INFORMATION



Story

THERE was once a young shepherd boy who tended his sheep at the foot of a mountain near a dark forest. It was rather lonely for him all day, so he thought up a plan by which he could get a little company, and some excitement.

He rushed down towards the village calling out "Wolf, Wolf," and the villagers came out to meet him, and some of them stayed with him for a considerable time. This pleased the boy so much that a few days later he tried the same trick, and again the villagers came to his aid.

But shortly after this a wolf actually did come out from the forest, and began to worry the sheep, and the boy of course cried out "Wolf, Wolf," still louder than before. But this time the villagers, who had been fooled twice before, thought the boy was again deceiving them, and nobody stirred to come to his help. So the Wolf made a good meal of the boy's flock. When the boy complained, the wise man of the village said: "A liar will not be believed, even when he speaks the truth."

Questions for discussion:

11. Why is it possible to fool people at all? What are the major reasons? // Lack of alternative information, lack of sources, lack of critical thinking
12. How can education help people counter lies?
13. Is lying a long-term strategy? How does it usually end?
14. What are possible solutions for the shepherd boy after the crisis? How can he rebuild trust (if at all)?
15. Have you heard any similar "crying wolf" stories at school? How are they similar to fake explanations (e.g. "I was ill", "the bus didn't come", etc.)? What are potential long-term implications?

Quote

You can fool some of the people all the time, and all the people some of the time, but you can't fool all of the people all of the time.

Source: Unknown, late XIX century

Task

Create (or describe from your memory) a situation where (a) well-known national media channel(s) use(s) the same "cry wolf" strategy. Explain how trust is used to spread fake information. Use a quote for your situation.