

Community Media Skills Development

Module 0 – Understanding ‘Fake News’



HACKS

Harnessing the Power of Community Media
to Combat Disinformation



Introduction

In this module, we will introduce the concept of ‘fake news’. The spread of fake information, whether deliberate or not, is not a recent problem. It is, however, a problem that affects entire communities and that can change the course of one’s life for the worse.

Disinformation and misinformation can have a high impact in various dimensions of life and it’s essential that all of us understand the potential consequences and how to mitigate them. With the advancement of new technologies, it’s now more important than ever, and also more difficult than ever, to be able to understand how ‘fake news’ work and how to avoid both believing them and sharing them with others. Becoming a responsible and ethical consumer of media is a priority that shouldn’t be overlooked.

In this module, you will learn the following:

Learning Outcomes		
Knowledge	Skills	Attitudes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Basic knowledge of the concept of fake news● Basic knowledge of citizen journalism● Knowledge of how to evaluate information● Knowledge of the techniques used to spread ‘fake news’● Factual knowledge of the impact of ‘fake news’ on the communities● Knowledge of real cases where ‘fake news’ affected the communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Define ‘fake news’● Define ‘misinformation’● Define ‘disinformation’● Identify unreliable online content● Check sources’ reliability● Recognise and define ‘click-bait’● Take measures to avoid spreading ‘fake news’● Explain how AI is making it more difficult to tell fake information apart from real information	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Understand how spreading ‘fake news’ can impact the communities● Understand the importance of being an ethical consumer of content● Become a responsible and ethical spreader of information



1. Introduction to Fake News

“Pope Francis shocks world by endorsing Donald Trump for president”, “Russia releases 500 lions in the streets to enforce lockdown”. Even if you haven’t heard these news, you have probably heard others just as misleading. ‘Fake news’ like these are spread worldwide every day. To understand the scope of ‘fake news’, it is important to differentiate between two concepts: ‘**disinformation**’ - “false or inaccurate information, especially that which is deliberately intended to deceive” (Oxford dictionary) - and ‘**misinformation**’- “false information that is spread, regardless of intent to mislead”. ‘Fake news’ can, therefore, be intentional or unintentional.

When used with the purpose of misleading others, ‘fake news’ can take various forms. Some of the most common ones are **propaganda, clickbait, hoaxes, and scams**.



Propaganda

The information is curated strategically to influence the receiver ideologically, politically, and emotionally.



Hoax

The information has the goals of trick receiver into believing or accepting as genuine something false.



Scam

Information that has the goal of cheating receiver into falling for fraudulent schemes.



Clickbait

Sensationalized headlines with the aim of attracting readers and increasing sales or traffic.

Among the existing types of disinformation, one is especially prevalent. There are news outlets completely dedicated to the publication of ‘fake news’. These are used with **comedy or satirical purposes**. Although they usually make the goal of their content obvious, there is still a real possibility of mistaking it as reliable, especially by those with less media literacy skills.

Examples of parody news websites
The Daily Mash (UK)
Imprensa Falsa (PT)
El Mundo Today (ES)
Der Postillon (DE)
Lercio (IT)
The Onion (USA)



Despite the surge of ‘fake news’ that has come with technology advancement and the widespread use of the internet, disinformation is not a new phenomenon. In fact, there are accounts of disinformation dating to centuries ago. “The idea the news is some attempt at the objective truth—that it is a factual endeavour—might also been a rather modern, and possibility fleeting, invention. [...] Newspapers, historically, reported fake news alongside real news, often with little to distinguish the two types of story.” (Dentith, 2017). An example was the report of King George II falling sick during the 1700s, with the goal of destabilising the kingdom establishment (Starmans, s.d.).

In recent years, the spread of ‘fake news’ has been nothing but exacerbated. While in the old times disinformation and misinformation spread mostly through word-of-mouth and printed newspapers, nowadays there are many more ways that can support the dissemination of ‘fake news’. Online outlets and social media currently play a big role. It not only allows anyone with an internet connection to publish content, but it also allows the content to be spread throughout the whole world. In addition, there are new technological tools that make it possible to create fake content that looks extremely realistic. The evolution of artificial intelligence has come with techniques such as image manipulation and ‘deepfakes’ – “a video that has been edited using an algorithm to replace the person in the original video with someone else (especially a public figure) in a way that makes the video look authentic” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2020).

However, just because ‘fake news’ exist, it doesn’t mean that we are deceived by it, except that we do. Many studies have shown that people not only believe disinformation, but it also tends to spread faster. Why? According to (Brooks, 2021), “The more extreme our devotion to our tribe, group, or side, the more likely we are to believe the information they feed us.”, i.e., the more aligned a piece of news is with our views, the more likely we are to believe it, even if it’s completely false and doesn’t have any factual evidence.

How Fake News Spread	
Description:	Video on the mechanisms that allow the spread of ‘fake news’
Link:	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSKGa_7XJkg





2. The Impact of Fake News

'Fake news' have shown in many instances the negative impact that misleading information can have. 'Fake news' can be harmful in many ways. It can not only affect individuals, but also entire communities. When it becomes an infodemic – "too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments", as defined by (WHO) - it can condition people's political views and even put their lives in danger.

Impact on Politics

"[...] it has repeatedly been demonstrated that biased news has a negative effect on political attitudes." and that "fake news forms a potential threat for democracy" (Thijssen, 2017). There have been various instances where propaganda has played a part in changing the population's views on the government or political candidates, and it has even decided the democratic future of a country. Propaganda is often weaponised as a means of influencing people's choices. A popular example is the 2016 US elections, when a myriad of misleading news regarding the main candidates (Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump) have spread like fire all over the world.

Impact on Health

Perhaps the most dangerous consequences of 'fake news' can be seen by its impact on the population's health. Cures for any kind of disease have long been flooding the internet. "10 natural cures for arthritis", "Drink this infusion for 20 days and you'll never need to see a doctor again" are just some examples of the type of content that we can easily find online. However, often it doesn't have any scientific evidence and can be very dangerous. During the Covid-19 outbreak, we have seen the emergence of numerous cures for the virus that further damaged the health of those who gave them a try and, in some cases, even led to their death.

Social Impact

'Fake news' can impact one's quality of life. In a crisis of any kind, misleading information can cause panic among the population. It has the capacity of impacting one's mental health and provoking emotions such as anxiety and fear, ultimately leading to decreased wellbeing and even social isolation.

Infodemic: Coronavirus and the fake news pandemic	
Description:	Video on the impact of fake news amid the Covid-19 pandemic
Link:	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wT2m3kljcSU



3. Spotting and Stopping Fake News

The key to mitigate the impact of ‘fake news’ is knowing how to spot them. There are some characteristics that allow us to identify media content as unreliable. If you closely analyse the content, you will be able to tell if the news are real or fake. Sometimes, you can even tell which news are fake by the headline alone. If the title seems too sensationalist, it’s likely that, when you start reading the news piece, you will realise that the content doesn’t match the headline.

Fact-checking will be your biggest ally when it comes to protecting yourself from fake news. It will help you understand which content is accurate and ok to share.

What you should do:

- Check the source: Is the source reliable?
- Check the author’s credentials: Does the author have credibility?
- Look out for fake photos: Are the photos manipulated? Were they stolen from somewhere else? A quick search on Google Images can help you answer these questions.
- Check the date: is the content up to date? Make sure that the information hasn’t already been updated.
- Search for other news on the same topic: is the story the same?

FACT-CHECKING

“the process of checking that all the facts in a piece of writing, a news article, a speech, etc. are correct”

Cambridge dictionary

And, above all, always remember that you are responsible for the content you choose to share with others. So, don’t share any content if you aren’t entirely sure that every detail in it is true. You can play a part in stopping ‘fake news’ harming the world. Anyone can become a citizen journalist by “playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing, and disseminating news and information” (Shayne Bowman, 2003).

How to choose your news	
Description:	Video on how to evaluate information and pick reliable news
Link:	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-Yz6HmRgl



Useful links

Factcheck.org – A platform to verify the reliability of current news

<https://www.factcheck.org/>

EU's Action Plan against Disinformation

https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/action_plan_against_disinformation.pdf

Claire Wardle (2017). 'Fake news, it's complicated'

<https://firstdraftnews.org/articles/fake-news-complicated/>

Tucker et al. (2018). Social media, political polarization, and political disinformation: A review of the scientific literature

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3144139

BBC – Fake News

<https://www.bbc.com/news/topics/cjxv13v27dyt/fake-news>

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MEDIA HACKS

Media hacks are a specific type of media coverage that involves manipulating or歪曲 facts to serve a particular agenda. They often involve the use of selective quotes, omission of context, or the creation of fake news stories to discredit political opponents or promote a particular political party.

The UK's relationship with the European Union (EU) has been a major topic of debate in recent years. The UK's decision to leave the EU, known as Brexit, has led to significant changes in the way the UK does business with the rest of the EU. One area that has been affected by Brexit is the media industry. The UK's media landscape has changed significantly since Brexit, with many media organizations adapting to the new political reality.

The UK's media industry has been impacted by Brexit in several ways. One way is through the loss of EU funding for media organizations. The UK government has announced plans to cut funding for the BBC and other public media organizations.

Another way Brexit has impacted the UK's media industry is through changes in regulations. The UK government has proposed changes to media regulations, such as the introduction of a new media regulator.

Finally, Brexit has also impacted the UK's media industry through changes in trade policy. The UK government has proposed changes to trade policy, such as the introduction of new trade agreements with non-EU countries.

In conclusion, Brexit has had a significant impact on the UK's media industry. The changes in the media landscape will likely continue to evolve as the UK's relationship with the EU continues to develop.



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