

# Hashtags, Tweets and Fake News: Contemporary [Dis]Information

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## Keywords

fake news, hashtag, disinformation, manipulation of history, falsification of history, propaganda, security threat, cyberattack, national security

## Introduction for the teacher

This lesson scenario is intended for students aged 14 and above. The subject matter discussed allows for its use in interdisciplinary classes in such subjects as history, native language, social science and media education as well as in meetings with the class teacher.

The material has been divided into three parts: the lesson scenario, a set of source materials and a worksheet with exercises to be done during the class, in a group or individually. Particular elements of the scenario can be modified to suit the target audience.

## Instructions

The script contains eight pieces of source material and a worksheet with exercises referring to some of the sources. They are intended particularly for group work using techniques to engage students, yet individual learners can perform the tasks on their own too. The suggested lesson structure can be modified, along with the use of the sources and exercises. Internet access would be useful during the lessons as well as allowing the students to use telecommunication devices with internet access (smartphones, tablets, etc.). This is necessary because of the educational methods used.

## Operational goals

The student is able to:

- define the terms 'disinformation' and 'manipulation' as well as indicate contemporary methods of fake news creation,
- suggest, on the basis of the knowledge acquired in class and their own experience, definitions of 'fake news' and 'fake photo',
- recognise methods of manipulating historical facts, i.e. verify information available online,
- analyse source texts and photographs pointing out cause-and-effect links.

### **Teaching methods**

- teaching discussion,
- group work,
- brainstorm,
- analysis of source material,
- Phillips 66 method<sup>1</sup>,
- metaplan<sup>2</sup>,
- decision tree,
- mind maps,
- independent work with a set of exercises.

### **Teaching aids**

- board/flipcharts, marker pen/chalk,

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<sup>1</sup>A type of a brainstorm where six teams are created to work together for six minutes. Each team works separately on a topic selected trying to generate as many ideas as possible. The lists produced are extended during a joint debate after which the teams go back to their group sessions. The procedure may be repeated multiple times until a satisfactory list of ideas has been drafted. You can learn more about this method here: <https://www.theedadvocate.org/edupedia/content/what-is-phillips-66-brainstorming/> or here <https://studylib.net/doc/5848394/phillips-66> [accessed 27 April 2021].

<sup>2</sup>One of the activation methods used during class; it involves poster making by the discussion/debate participants. The poster represents a graphic summary of the debate (based on Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaplan> [accessed 14 December 2020]).

- large paper sheets/Bristol board sheets,
- a computer with internet access and a projector/multimedia board, –  
devices with internet access for students.

### **Before the lesson**

Ask the students to read the essay entitled '[Contemporary Disinformation](#)' or '[Deepfake](#)'. It is also worth recommending them to read the book by Tom Phillips *Truth: A Brief History of Total Bullsh\*t*<sup>3</sup> that makes a great introduction into the world of fake news, which – as it turns out – has not been invented in present times.

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<sup>3</sup>Tom Phillips, *Truth: A Brief History of Total Bullsh\*t* (London: Headline, 2020).

## Lesson scenario

### Introduction

1. Ask the students what they think 'fake news' is. Do not explain anything, count on their suggestions. Give them post-it notes on which to write what they associate with the term, then stick them on the board.<sup>1</sup> When discussing the answers together, point out the information that is repeated most often. This will narrow down the list of arguments.
2. Ask the students to come up with examples of fake news that they know or have believed in. They can search for it on the internet and share their findings in class. Also prepare some examples of your own. This will be useful for a less active group. Choose a few that you think are worth discussing together; then verify the fake news by looking for real information. Use websites that debunk fake news.<sup>2</sup> Also, point out that the verification should be done in many ways and each piece of information should be checked many times, paying special attention to the source of the news (whether many news portals do not duplicate the same information, rephrasing it). Go back to the students' associations with fake news and suggest another exercise with post-it notes. If they want to change their definition, now is their chance. In this way, you will create a coherent definition of the concept together.
3. Distribute the worksheets. Analyse source A together (charts). Then the students independently do Exercises 1 and 2. After the exercise, compare the answers from Exercise 2.

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<sup>1</sup> When working online, use such tools as [Jamboard](#) or [miro.com](#).

<sup>2</sup> Some recommended websites are: [Full Fact](#), [Snopes](#), [Fact Check Explorer](#), [EU vs DiSiNFO](#).

## Development

1. The current methods of disinformation are based on old solutions, which thanks to modern technology are commonplace and affect people's lives on an unprecedented scale. The exercise at the start of the lesson showed that many people are unaware that the information they receive through the media (including or especially social media) can be manipulated. There are many types of modern disinformation. Divide the students into groups (of four to six members each) and ask them to read Source B and return to the classifications of the types of manipulation cited in the chart (Source A). At the beginning, the students created a definition of fake news. Now, in groups, they will go through the definition again, this time focusing on specific types of disinformation (Exercise 3).
2. When they have finished their work, ask the group leaders to write down the keywords of the formulas created, supplemented with examples. Instruct the class to make a decision tree, putting fake news as a problem.<sup>3</sup> Discuss the results of the students' work, pointing out the possibilities of free manipulation of information, not only in the world of entertainment, but also in the history and defence aspects of a given country.
3. Go to Source G. Based on a short tweet, discuss what might have happened. Who is the person the information relates to and why might it be harmful not to react promptly to an issue shown in the message? Cite examples of fake tweets relating to modern history.<sup>4</sup>
4. Consider how fake news is given credibility in modern times. Divide the students into groups again and inform them that they are going to work in teams using the Philips66 method, i.e. working quickly and intensively on a given problem. In the first phase of the exercise, the groups spend several minutes working with Sources C, D and E and information found online. In the second phase, the teams meet to discuss the results of their reflections and exchange ideas, written on the board or flipchart. In this way group members get to know each other's positions. In phase three, each team works independently again and revises their ideas or confirms

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<sup>3</sup> A model decision tree can be found in the set of source texts.

<sup>4</sup> An example may be the tweets posted by the Russian or Belarusian Embassy. It is worthwhile reading an essay entitled '[Russia's Twitter propaganda](#)'.

them. The number of phases can be arbitrary. I suggest a minimum of three. After the last phase, the students work together in a discussion based on direct democracy to come up with two ideas for each question, which they think best illustrate the instruction. After they have been introduced to the rules, ask them to look at Exercises 4 and 5 and give the topic of the discussion: how can fake news related to pandemics or politics work?

5. Once the students have finished their work, present their results in the form of a mind map (Exercise 5), whose main topic is what can fake news 'do'?

## **Summary**

In conclusion, present to the students the story of the news about the soldier and the donkey (Source H), pointing out that this seemingly insignificant fake news has been circulating on the internet for many years, is present on dozens of portals and is quoted not only on entertainment websites.

## **Homework**

Write a list of words or phrases (up to ten)<sup>5</sup> connected with the history of the 20th century. The students are asked to create descriptions of these words or phrases as they appear on Wikipedia, but in such a way as to hide fake news among real information. During the next meeting, check the homework in an unconventional way: each student should present a news item and the rest of the class should have a moment to review it, based on their own knowledge and internet searches.

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<sup>5</sup> Below is my proposal of ten topics: the mission of Apollo 11; the sinking of the Titanic; the first ever flight by plane; Noble Prizes for Marie Curie; Spanish fever epidemic; 1969 Woodstock Festival; 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow; the fall of the Berlin Wall; the wedding of Prince Charles and Diana Spencer; and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

## Worksheet

### Exercise 1

Analyse the statistics presented in the form of charts (Source A).

Find out, which information is false (F) and which true (T).

<b>More people trust information found online than they are sceptical about it.</b>	
<b>Many more people distrust online content than the respondents who have no objection to it.</b>	
<b>A fifth of the respondents are unable to recognise forms of online disinformation or manipulation.</b>	
<b>The most frequent type of false information found online is fake news and trolling.</b>	

### Exercise 2

Think about the reasons for people's ignorance concerning online disinformation.

Give several examples and justify them.

**Your answer:**

### **Exercise 3**

On the basis of Sources A and B, write down your own definitions of the phenomena mentioned in the chart. Feel free to give examples you know.

**Your answer:**

### **Exercise 4**

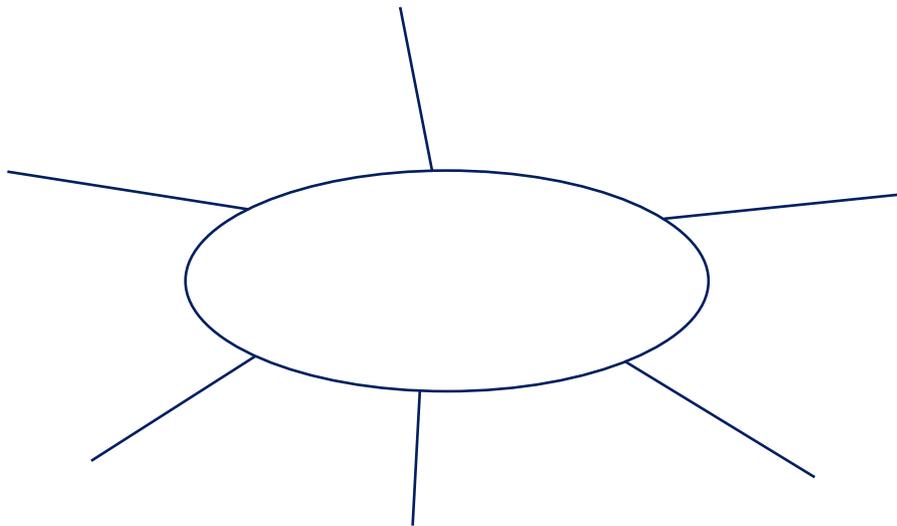
On the basis of Sources C and D, think why certain people decide to take part in debates concerning subjects they have no expertise in. Why is it that a celebrity is more trusted in today's society than a scientist?

**Your answer:**

## Exercise 5

Read Source E and make a mind map<sup>1</sup> for the topic: inconspicuous # as a method of manipulation. Try to write down information that makes that the method of hashtag laundering.\* It is difficult for the user to verify information, while easy for specialists to recognise disinformation.

\* The method consists in the promotion of a given hashtag by a large number of fake accounts. Thanks to mass sharing, eventually the information is repeated by legitimate accounts too. In this way, it reaches mainstream media and news outlets, gaining a semblance of authenticity.<sup>2</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see: [Using Mind Maps as a Teaching and Learning Tool to Promote Student Engagement](#) [accessed 6 December 2021]. A mind map can be also executed online using the available online tools, e.g. <https://coggle.it/>.

<sup>2</sup> The definition above has been developed by the author on the basis of information included in a report *Blame it on Iran, Qatar, and Turkey: An analysis of a Twitter and Facebook operation linked to Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia*, 2. 4.2020 [accessed 12 December 2020]. Available from the Stanford Internet Observatory Cyber Policy Center: <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/publication/twitter-facebook-egypt-uae-saudi>.

### Exercise 6

Compare the information in Sources D and F. Is the policy of social media on fake news effective? Is it easy to get round the blockage? If so, how and why?

Present your reflections on a metaplan<sup>3</sup> using the model below.

<b>What is the situation?</b>		<b>How should it be?</b>
	<b>PROBLEM</b> <b>Fake news in social media</b>	
<b>Why is it not the way it should be?</b>		<b>What should you do?</b>

### Exercise 7

On the basis of Source G, write down what the purpose is of disinformation directed towards state services.

**Your answer:**

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<sup>3</sup> The method's description can be found at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaplan> [accessed 14 December 2020].

## Answers

The lesson scenario and the worksheet have been developed to allow the students to have considerable independence in narrative creation. As the teacher's role is that of a supervisor and moderator, below you can find only answers to questions requiring simple content analysis (Exercises 1, 2, 4 and 7). The rest remains in the hands of your students and your own, dear colleague.

### Exercise 1

<b>More people trust information found online than they are sceptical about it.</b>	<b>T</b>
<b>Many more people distrust online content than the respondents who have no objection to it.</b>	<b>F</b>
<b>A fifth of the respondents are unable to recognise forms of online disinformation or manipulation.</b>	<b>T</b>
<b>The most frequent type of false information found online is fake news and trolling.</b>	<b>T</b>

### Exercise 2

Possible answers:

- reluctance to verify information (as it requires a tedious search through online resources);
- education;
- trust in specific sources of information.

### Exercise 4

Possible answers:

- trust in a known person;
- adverts and commercials featuring that person make them famous, that is visible in the media;
- scientists are frequently unknown to large target groups, and many speak a language hard to understand (but not all).

## Exercise 7

Possible answers:

- destabilising a country's defence policy (harming it); this may be a prelude to military operations;
- creating information chaos;
- undermining the reliability of leaders or the head of state;
- destabilising alliances.