"CHECK IT OUT" HANDBOOK: MODULE 2

Conceptualising Disinformation

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Introduction

The purpose of this section is to introduce the learners to the conceptual background of disinformation. To this end, it presents a definition of disinformation, an appropriate categorisation of disinformation methods and phenomena and a broad outline of how disinformation works in the online world. Understanding disinformation as a concept would equip adult learners with an ability to approach it in an analytical and critical manner upon encounter.

Contents

- What is disinformation?
- Categories of disinformation
- How does Information work?
- Recognising disinformation

Objectives

At the end of this module adult learners

- will understand what disinformation Is
- will distinguish different types of disinformation
- will know how disinformation works

Methods

- **o**pen discussion
- pair work
- group work
- self-reflection

Equipment

- Computer, tablet, or smartphone
- Internet access
- Facebook account

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Preparation: It might be a good idea to prepare a PowerPoint/Prezi/Canva presentation for this part because a large part of the session relies on analysing visual content. Furthermore, think about adapting the examples suggested in this section of the handbook to issues which are more familiar to your audience. For instance, if you are a Slovenian educator tutoring Slovenian learners, try to find some examples from Slovenian public discourse to illustrate a point. The more popular the examples are, the better you will communicate the message.

Another preparation idea: prepare a short quiz (3 questions max) in *Kahoot* or questions with *Mentimeter* to engage participants in the topic. The quiz can be a motivation tool as well as a tool for checking their existing knowledge about disinformation.

Examples of questions:

1. What is typical of disinformation?

a) It is invariably false.

b) It is only encountered on the internet.

c) It is unintentional.

d) It is created for fun.

2. Which of the following characteristics relate to *misinformation*?

a) The content is manipulated on purpose and to cause harm.

b) The information published is private.

c) The mistakes are unintentional (inaccurate photos captions, dates, translations …)

d) They are created for personal or corporate interest.

Present the objective of the session: To conceptualise disinformation as a phenomenon which affects our lives and decisions and to reflect on its nature: What is it? Where does it come from? Who creates disinformation and why?

To involve people in the session and to set common expectations about what they would learn, a good approach would be to ask questions about disinformation and categorise their responses. To do that one can use group work and the students need to collect their ideas in groups; it can be individual work and each participant writes their ideas on post-it notes. The activities can be as follows:

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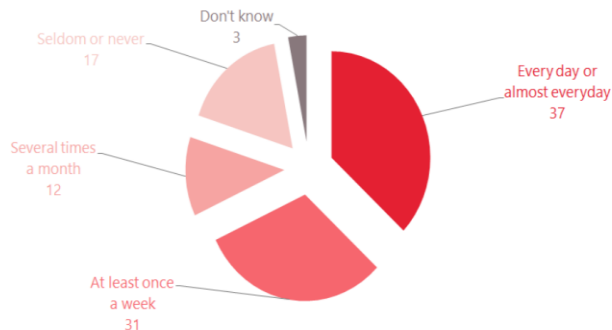Co-funded by the
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- To give examples of disinformation.
- To categorise the examples according to topics. Most probably the examples will relate to identity, money, social benefits, health, technology, etc.
- Where do we encounter disinformation? In what form (videos, articles, posts, etc)?
- Why do people spread disinformation?
  Most probably responses will relate to 'advance of interests': (geo-)political, financial, business, social. Make sure learners are navigated to distinguish between **intentional and unintentional** disinformation. To emphasise this distinction ask them: *Who spreads disinformation?* If learners do not respond accordingly, ask them: *Who here has shared disinformation materials and realised it only after?* (You might want to raise a hand yourself).

Ask how often learners think they come across disinformation.

Use the following (or similar) graph to illustrate:

Q2   How often do you come across news or information that you believe misrepresent reality or is even false?
(% - EU)

Don't know 3

Seldom or never 17

Every day or almost everyday 37

Several times a month 12

At least once a week 31

Base: All Respondents (N=26,576)   1

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CONCEPTUALISING DISINFORMATION: DEFINITIONS

Definitions

Before providing definition, the trainer could ask the participants to come up with their own one and only shows the definition afterwards.

Suggest the following definition:

"*Disinformation is understood as verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm. Public harm comprises threats to democratic political and policy-making processes as well as public goods such as the protection of EU citizens' health, the environment or security. Disinformation does not include reporting errors, satire and parody, or clearly identified partisan news and commentary.*" (European Commission High Level Expert Group, 2019)[2].

NB! Make a note about a different concept which is popular: *Fake News.*

Fake News

This term is known mostly for its usage by politicians to describe news agencies with which they disagree. It is empty of content, derogatory and is mostly regarded as a joke. In this way "it is becoming a mechanism by which the powerful can clamp down upon, restrict, undermine and circumvent the free press".[3] The EU and European states mostly refer to *disinformation* as the relevant concept.

Reflect as a group on the definition:

- Optional questions:
  - What does *verifiably false* mean? The discussion should boil down to (amongst others): made-up and untrue facts, selective or partial choice of facts and statements so that interpretation is impeded, made-up or untrue facts about the context.
  - How does disinformation cause public harm? Ask learners to think of examples.
  - What type of activity is excluded from the definition? How does the role of media relate to this definition?
- Recommended questions:
  - What is the role of *unintentional* actions of spreading disinformation here? Are they responsible for disinformation or victims of it?
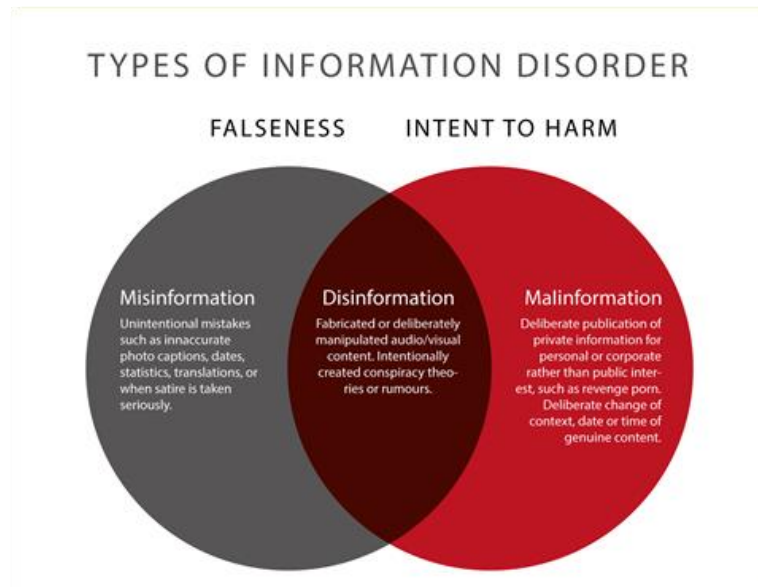
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[2] European Commission, 'Tackling Online Disinformation', 2019, retrieved on 19.04.2020, https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/tackling-online-disinformation.

[3] Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan, 'Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy Making', Council of Europe, 2017 Strasbourg, p. 5.

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Use this discussion as a prelude to present **the theoretical framework** of *information disorder* (Wardle, 2017; Wardle & Derakshan, 2017)[4] which identifies three types of false and/or harmful information:

Figure 1: Types of Information Disorder

TYPES OF INFORMATION DISORDER

FALSENESS   INTENT TO HARM

Misinformation
Unintentional mistakes such as innaccurate photo captions, dates, statistics, translations, or when satire is taken seriously.

Disinformation
Fabricated or deliberately manipulated audio/visual content. Intentionally created conspiracy theories or rumours.

Malinformation
Deliberate publication of private information for personal or corporate rather than public interest, such as revenge porn. Deliberate change of context, date or time of genuine content.

Source: (Wardle & Derakshan, 2017)

- **Misinformation**: Unintentional mistakes such as inaccurate photo captions, dates, statistics, translations or when satire is presented as something serious.
- **Disinformation**: Fabricated or deliberately manipulated audio/visual content. Intentionally created conspiracy theories or rumours.
- **Malinformation**: Deliberate publication of private information for personal or corporate rather than public interest (such as revenge porn). Deliberate change of context, date or time of genuine content.

NB! Falseness (*misinformation*) and intent to harm *(malinformation)* as a combination cause *disinformation*.

Reflect on the definition as a group by thinking of examples. The boundary sometimes is very hard to identify so be flexible about what example goes in which category.

Another activity suggestion: provide them with a piece of news from last week and ask them to turn this news into a) misinformation b) disinformation c) malinformation

Let them work in group and limit the time. In the end everyone presents their "news" and the others give feedback.

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[4] ibid.

CONCEPTUALISING DISINFORMATION: A CATEGORISATION

- o **Satire or parody**: no intention to cause harm but with potential to fool.
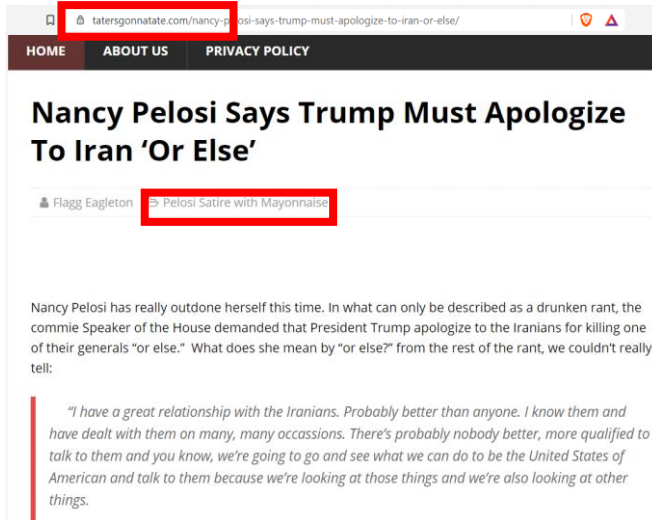
- o In the US this was picked up as truthful by so many news agencies that the US fact checker Snopes had to verify it is not true.[6]
- o Draw attention to the website and the satire clarification.
- o Reflect on who is responsible for disinformation here. Can we blame someone who clarified they were writing a joke?
- o Reflect on how the piece aims to make people feel.

- o **Misleading content**: misleading use of information to frame an issue or an individual.

- o In reality, the plan is for the construction of 'a high-rise condominium complex, will incorporate a Muslim cultural center and prayer space'[7].
- o What is the degree of intention in this case?
- o Reflect on how the piece aims to make people feel. Emphasise the terminology of the article as an instrument to frame the project: "sinister project", "triumphal mosque", "buried information".

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o **Imposter content**: when genuine sources are impersonated.

o This article, which falsely alleged that "Emmanuel Macron was supported by Saudi Arabia during the 2017 French presidential election", was published on "LeSoir.info", a fake website which pretended to be the Belgium newspaper Le Soir. The real website for Le Soir is "LeSoir.be".
o Reflect on how the piece aims to make people feel.
o What could one do to check the authenticity of the website?

o **Fabricated content**: news content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm.

o This article claims that Pope Francis supported the candidacy of Donald Trump during the US elections in 2016, which is something 100% false.
o Reflect on how the piece aims to make people feel.
o What could be the motives behind this content?

o **False connection**: when headlines, visuals or captions do not support the content.
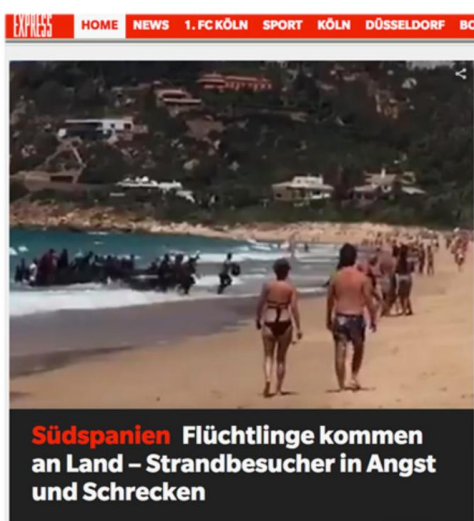
o This article is titled: "South of Spain: Refugees come ashore – beachgoers in fear and dread". However, the content of the article doesn't repeat that claim about "tourists in fear and dread" and includes a video which shows that the tourists were not scared at all by the refugees.
o How did you feel when you saw the photo?
o Reflect on how the piece aims to make people feel.

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o **False context**: when genuine content is shared with false contextual information.

- o This tweet falsely suggests that this is a picture of "a child detained by the US authorities because he is an illegal migrant". In reality, the photo was taken during a demonstration against the Trump administration's immigration policies and the child is not detained at all.
- o Reflect on how the piece aims to make people feel.
- o Which topics are addressed in this content and which emotions are played on?

o **Manipulated content**: when genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive.

- o The original picture of a meeting between Greta Thunberg and Al Gore was edited to claim falsely that the young Swedish activist met George Soros.
- o Reflect on how the piece aims to make people feel.

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After the presentation of the categories reflect on:

- Examples which learners from the group might associate with either of the categories.
- The type of emotions which the examples were interpreted to aim to invoke. Most should relate to fear, anger, sadness, repulsion, worry, etc. Emphasise that those are all strong emotions which aim to provoke people to react.
- Ask what type of reaction is most natural. Most probably that would be an urge to talk about this, to share with people, to comment, etc. Essentially, *to contribute to the spread of disinformation.*

CONCEPTUALISING DISINFORMATION: HOW DOES DISINFORMATION WORK?

This would be a good moment to focus on the importance of *emotional appeal* for the success of disinformation. Before naming these emotions ask the participants what they think: brainstorming.

Disinformation always aims to play on your emotions: to make you cry, scream, get angry, to be afraid, to exclaim in repulsiveness. For this reason, it always plays on things which are most important to people: children, health, money or public finances. One of the most exploited topics is identity. Disinformation could relate to

- national identity (for instance, the EU prohibits something which is typically national);
- religious identity (for instance, an article opposing the rights of Muslims to the rights to Christians);
- social identity (for instance, distorted presentation of an event or activity relating to LGBT rights).

Titles and topics include:

- 'European Court of Human Rights: From March 2016, the baptism of children will be prohibited in member states of the European Union' (Italy, *Libero Quotidiano,* 2016).
- 'Bulgarian authorities are following the Norwegian example in stealing children from their families' (posters and posts on social media; part of a disinformation campaign against the reform of child services in Bulgaria; November, 2019).
- Covid-19 is a hoax or a purposefully human-developed virus (March,2020).

- Social developments and new liberties are driven by a feminist or a homosexual agenda aimed at corrupting public morale (the concepts of a feminist and a homosexual propaganda are largely present in disinformation).[8]

A particularly effective strategy to counter the spread of disinformation would be to always stop and think when you find a piece which provokes you emotionally. Coming across something which makes you feel angry or afraid, always take a moment to reflect 'Wait! Why does this make me feel this way?'. And then double-check with other sources if it is true.

NB! This is where the more theoretical part of the session begins. Try asking the audience frequently about what they think, if they can think of examples or if they think that they have seen/experienced this at some point.

<u>Genuine amplifiers</u>

There are a number of factors related to universal human behaviour which serve as genuine amplifiers to disinformation. Those include:

- **Confirmation bias:** People usually prefer to read and engage with content which reflects their own views. This makes them more likely to share it even if it is not truthful.[9]
- **Homophily**: People's online behaviour (including sharing of content and commenting) is influenced by the behaviour of their online social connections, as they tend to be usually like-minded people.[10]
- **Echo Chambers**: The confirmation bias and homophily, taken together, lead to the creation of online spaces (echo chambers) where people are exposed to and share with their connections predominantly information conforming to their pre-existing beliefs. This is often at the expense of diverse opinions and without regard for truthfulness of content or sources. The algorithms of social media platforms contribute to the development of such echo chambers.[11]

While we are often able to do little to minimise the effect of these trends in behaviour, it is important to be aware of them so that we approach content critically and with an eye to its truthfulness.

You may ask the participants to reflect on what kind of news they come across on their Facebook - can they think of an echo chamber? How often do they read Facebook content that is not in line with their beliefs and values? Let them give examples.

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[8] EU vs Disinformation, 'DISINFO: Europe Brings Totalitarian Feminism to Belarus to Destroy Social Values', 2019, retrieved on 19.04.2020, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/europe-brings-totalitarian-feminism-to-belarus-which-destroys-societys-values/.
[9] Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017, p. 50.
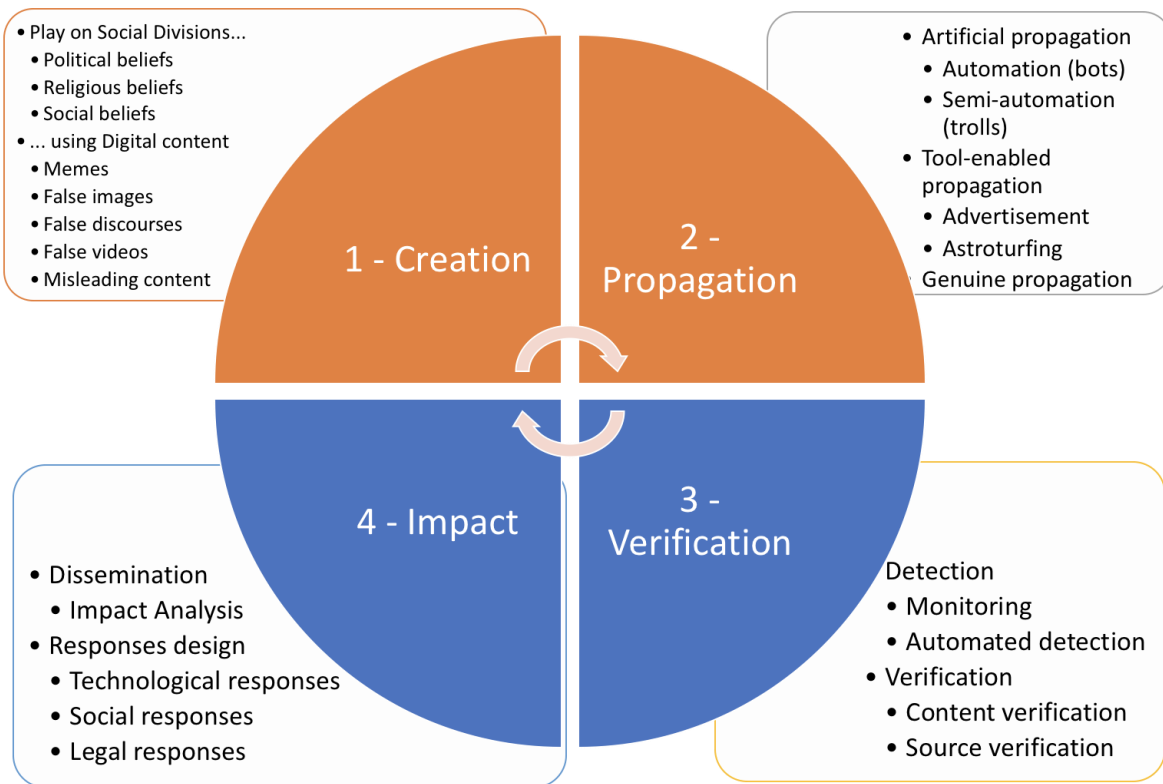[10] Alaphilippe, Gizikis et al., 2019, p. 21.
[11] Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017, p. 50.

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The Propagation of Disinformation

The following graph is a good instrument to conceptualise the propagation of disinformation.

1 - Creation
- Play on Social Divisions...
  - Political beliefs
  - Religious beliefs
  - Social beliefs
- ... using Digital content
  - Memes
  - False images
  - False discourses
  - False videos
  - Misleading content

2 - Propagation
- Artificial propagation
  - Automation (bots)
  - Semi-automation (trolls)
- Tool-enabled propagation
  - Advertisement
  - Astroturfing
  Genuine propagation

4 - Impact
- Dissemination
  - Impact Analysis
- Responses design
  - Technological responses
  - Social responses
  - Legal responses

3 - Verification
Detection
  - Monitoring
  - Automated detection
- Verification
  - Content verification
  - Source verification

[12]

The graph illustrates the lifecycle of a piece of disinformation. The orange area indicates the period of rise, spread and peak of disinformation. The blue area represents the decline of disinformation through verification, dissemination of truth and analysis of impact. Sometimes we see responses to disinformation aimed at providing a long-term solution. Those include legislative initiatives, social movements or a change of online platforms to identify disinformation.

The graph emphasises:

- The topics on which disinformation plays: political, social, religious beliefs.
- The forms of disinformation: usually, digital such as memes, videos, articles, social media posts.
- The instruments for amplification: artificial spread (automated bots sharing each other's content to amplify effect), spread through tools (e.g. paid advertisement) or genuine propagation (unintentional spread by online users).
- The importance of *verifying both the content and the source*.

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[12] Alexandre Alaphilippe, Alexis Gizikis, Clara Hanot, Kalina Bontcheva, 'Automated Tackling of Disinformation', European Parliamentary Research Service, 2019, Brussels, p. 10.

- The importance to disseminate findings about disinformation content and to make people aware about it.

Disinformation does not always follow all stages of this lifecycle. Sometimes disinformation is identified as such at a very early stage and potential public harm is prevented on time. On other occasions disinformation is never caught and continuous to amplify its effects for a very long time before it dies out.

<u>Amplification and Social Media</u>

One of the online places where disinformation can most easily spread and amplify the effects of public harm are social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. There are many reasons for this.[13]

- Social media provide a very easy way to reach a lot of people. In essence, you can write one emotionally provocative article or make a video and you can be guaranteed that a wide group of people will have no choice but to view it.
- The algorithms of these platforms are designed to promote content which is trending. This means that the more users engage with a piece of disinformation, the more users it will reach – a snowball effect.
- Disinformation usually works through a network of channels which are all involved in spreading it. This could include fake profiles and fake groups which share the content so that it is recognised as trending by the platforms. Another option is paid advertising: junk news websites create fake content and advertise it online; users then engage with it and the content-creators get revenue from displaying adverts.
- Social media offer a lot of micro-targeting advertisement instruments. This means that you can design an advertisement so that it targets a specific audience which is more likely to engage with the disinformation. Targets are identified on the basis of job titles, membership in groups, residence, etc.

Conclude the session by asking how learners found it. Are they more aware about disinformation now? What was the most important point they take from this session?

[13] Alexandre Alaphilippe, Roman … 'Face to Face Training for Educators: The Conceptual Background of Disinformation', EU DisinfoLab, 2020, Zalec.

1. What topics does disinformation usually entertain?

    a) Health and money.
    b) Political and social identity.
    c) All of the above.

2. What does disinformation rely on the most to generate reaction?

    a) Emotional appeal.
    b) Disbelief.
    c) Double-checking of information.

3. Can satire or parody have a disinformation effect?

Yes.

4. Can disinformation rely on truthful facts?

    a) Yes, by distorting the context or selectively choosing which part about the facts to present.
    b) No, disinformation is entirely based on untrue facts.
    c) Neither of the above.

5. What type of behaviour contributes to the spread of disinformation?

    a) Verifying content by double checking it with other sources.
    b) Trusting sources and content as long as they reflect your own views.
    c) Taking a moment to reflect on why an article triggers you emotionally as much.

6. Which of the following is **not** a reason for disinformation to be as successful on social media particularly?

    a) Algorithms which identify trending content and enable it to reach more people.
    b) Technological characteristics of platforms which indicate the trustworthiness of sources.
    c) Networks of channels who share each other's content.

Do it yourself

For face-to-face sessions

Ask the learners to separate in teams of no more than six people. Ask them to outline as a group three activities they will do next time when online to identify disinformation and to prevent its spread. Give the groups six minutes to think and then ask one person per group to present. Reflect on the outlined activities as a group.

Possible answers may include:

- Check the trustworthiness of the source.
- Double check the information.
- To not share the piece.
- To inform friends and family that there is a circulating disinformation about a particular issue.
- To pause when encountering emotionally provocative content and to reflect on why it would be so provocative.

For online sessions

Ask the learners to use the internet to find an investigation about a disinformation (campaign). The investigation should scrutinise the disinformation by means of verification of claims and an analysis of its impact. Tell the learners that if they cannot find such an investigation, they should find an online article which constitutes disinformation.

Give them 5 minutes to perform the task.

Reflect as a group on the found materials. How was the investigation carried out? What instruments did the researchers use to identify the disinformation? Can we use these instruments ourselves in day-to-day activities? How do the articles found constitute disinformation? What did they aim to achieve? How did the learners identify them as disinformation?

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