CHECK IT OUT

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 to check 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 in 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

The objective of the session is to conceptualise disinformation as a phenomenon affecting our lives and decision-making and to reflect on its nature: what is it? Where does it come from? Who creates disinformation and why?

An effective way to involve participants and set common expectations about what they will learn is to ask a few preliminary questions on disinformation and categorise their responses. This can be done through group work by asking learners to discuss and collect ideas, but also individually by asking each participant to writes their ideas on post-it notes. The activity can be conducted as follows:
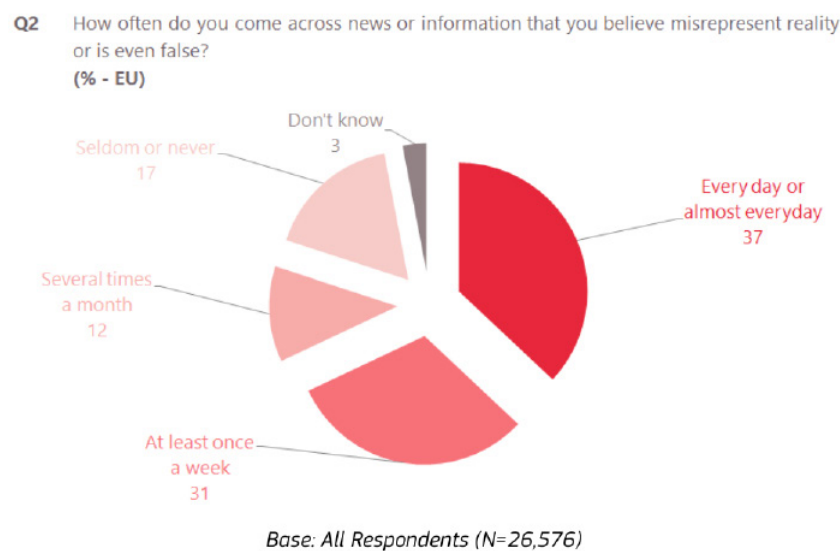
• Ask learners to provide examples of disinformation.

• Invite learners to categorise such examples according to topics.

    The examples will most probably relate to topics such as identity, money, social benefits, health, technology.

- Ask learners to answer the questions "Where do we encounter disinformation? In what form (videos, articles, posts, etc)?"

- Ask learners to reflect on the question "Why do people spread disinformation?"

  Responses will most probably relate to the 'advancing of interests': (geo-)political, financial, business, social. Make sure learners are able to distinguish between intentional and unintentional spread of false information. To emphasise this distinction, try asking them: "Who spreads false information?". After a first round of answers, follow up with a second question: "Who here has shared false information and realised it only after?" (you might want to raise a hand yourself).

- Ask learners how often they think they come across disinformation. Use the following (or similar) graph to illustrate[1]:

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
- Several times a month: 12
- At least once a week: 31
- Every day or almost everyday: 37

Base: All Respondents (N=26,576)

CONCEPTUALISING DISINFORMATION: DEFINITIONS

Before providing an official definition, ask participants to come up with their own. After this preliminary exercise, 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]*

!!! Point out the difference with the wide-spread concept of "**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. The use of the term "fake news" "is
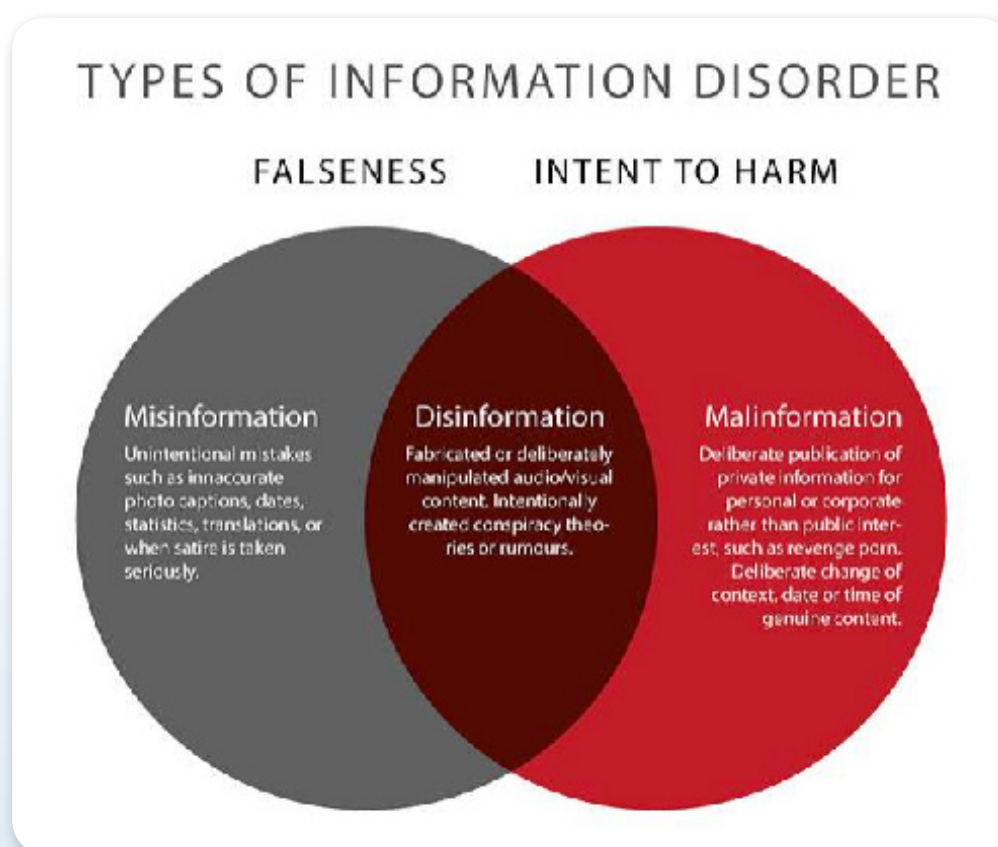
---

[1] Eurobarometer, 2018
[2] European Commission, 'Tackling Online Disinformation', 2019, retrieved on 19.04.2020, https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/tackling-online-disinformation

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:

- Recommended question:
  - How do you regard the act of *unintentionally* spreading false information? If someone spreads false information unintentionally, are they an offender or a victim?

- Optional questions:
  - What does *verifiably false* mean? The discussion should boil down to (amongst others): made-up and untrue facts, selective or partial selection 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 of disinformation? How does the role of media relate to this definition?

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

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.

---

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

- **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.

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

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

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

Let them work in groups and limit the time. In the end, let every group present their "news" and receive feedback from the rest of the participants.

CONCEPTUALISING DISINFORMATION: A CATEGORISATION

Suggest the following categorisation of mis- and disinformation[5] and then reflect on it as a group by providing examples:

- **Satire or parody**: no intention to cause harm but with the potential to fool.

---
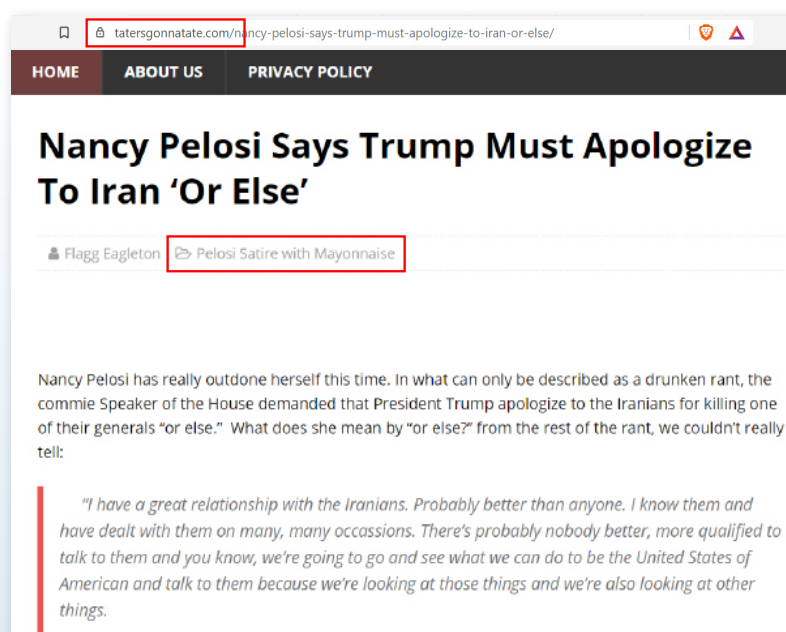
[5] Claire Wardle, 'Fake News. It's Complicated', First Draft, 2017, retrieved on 17 April 2020, https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/fake-news-complicated/; examples from: Alexandre Alaphilippe, Roman … 'Face to Face Training for Educators: The Conceptual Background of Disinformation', EU DisinfoLab, 2020, Zalec

- In the US this was picked up as truthful by so many news agencies that the US fact checker Snopes had to get involved to verify that it was not true[6].

- Draw attention to the website URL (tatersgonnatate.com) and the satire clarification ("Pelosi Satire with Mayonnaise").

- Invite learners to reflect on who should be held responsible for this case of disinformation. Can we blame someone who clarified they were writing a joke?

- Invite learners to reflect on how the piece aims to make people feel.

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

- In reality, the plan is for the construction of 'a high-rise condominium complex, [which] will incorporate a Muslim cultural center and prayer space'[6].

- How intentional was this attempt to mislead the readers?

- Invite learnes to reflect on how the piece aims to make people feel. Emphasise the terminology used by the article to frame the project: "sinister project", "triumphal mosque", "buried information".

[6] David Mikkelson, 'Did Nancy Pelosi Say Trump Must Apologize to Iran 'Or Else'?', Snopes, 2020, retrieved on 19.04.2020, https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/trump-apologize-to-iran/.
[7] Bethania Palma, 'Is the 'Ground Zero Mosque' Project Back?', Snopes, 2019, retrieved on 19.04.2020, https://snopes.com/fact-check/muslim-community-center/.

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

— 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 posing as the Belgium newspaper Le Soir. The correct URL for Le Soir is "LeSoir.be".

— Invite learners to reflect on how the piece aims to make people feel.

— What could one do to check the authenticity of the website?

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

— This article claims that Pope Francis supported the candidacy of Donald Trump during the US elections in 2016, which is completely false.

— Invite learners to reflect on how the piece aims to make people feel.

— What could be the motives behind this content?

- **False connection**: when headlines, visuals or captions do not support the content.
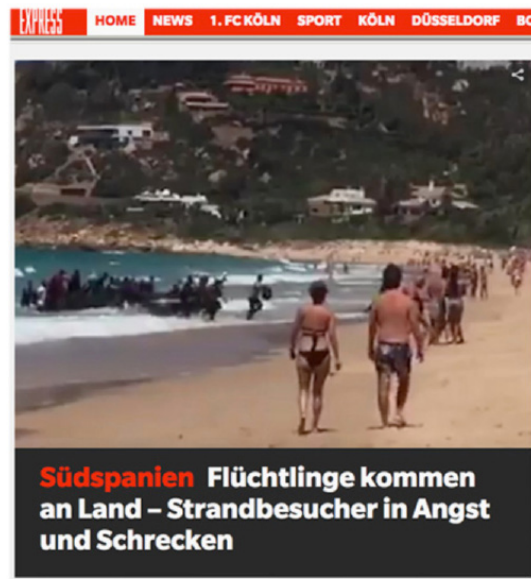
  – This article is titled: "South of Spain: Refugees come ashore – beachgoers in fear and dread". However, the content of the article doesn't support the claim of "tourists in fear and dread" and includes a video which shows that the tourists were not scared at all by the refugees.

  – Ask learners how the picture featured in the article made them feel.

  – Invite learners to reflect on how the piece aims to make people feel.

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

- – 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.

- – Invite learners to reflect on how the piece aims to make people feel.

- – Which topics are addressed in this piece of content and which emotions are played on?

- **Manipulated content**: when genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive.
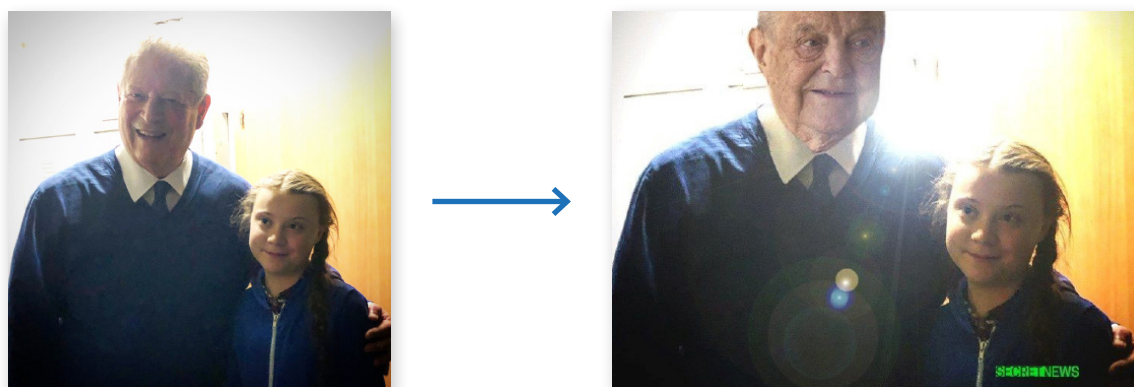
- – The original picture of a meeting between Greta Thunberg and Al Gore was edited to falsely claim that the young Swedish activist met George Soros.

- – Invite learners to reflect on how the piece aims to make people feel.

After presenting the seven categories listed above, invite learners to reflect on:

- Other examples of mis- and disinformation that they would associate with each of the seven categories.

- What types of emotions they thought the examples above were trying to evoke. Answers will probably revolve around fear, anger, sadness, repulsion, worry, etc. Emphasise that strong emotions such as the ones just mentioned tend to provoke an equally strong reaction.

- What type of reaction they think is most natural. Learners will probably mention the urge to talk about it, to share with people, to comment, etc. — essentially, to *contribute to the spread of disinformation*.

CONCEPTUALISING DISINFORMATION: HOW DOES DISINFORMATION WORK?

This is a good moment to focus on the importance of emotional appeal to the success of disinformation. Before naming these emotions, ask participants what they think (brainstorming).

Disinformation always tries to play on your emotions: it aims to make you cry, scream, get angry, become afraid, be repulsed. For this reason, it tends to plays on the topics that people hold most at heart: children, health, money or public finances.

Another frequently exploited topic is that of identity. Identity-related disinformation can relate to:

- National identity (for instance, the EU prohibiting something which is typically national);
- Religious identity (for instance, an article comparing the rights of muslims to the rights of christians);
- Social identity (for instance, a distorted presentation of an event or activity relating to LGBT rights).

A few examples 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 by 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 prominent disinformation tropes)[8].

A particularly effective strategy to counter the spread of disinformation is to always stop and think when you come across a piece which provokes you emotionally. When coming across something that makes you feel angry or afraid, always take a moment to reflect: "Wait! Why does this make me feel this way?". Always remember to double-check with other sources to make sure that that piece is reliable.

!!! This is where the more theoretical part of the session begins. Remember to frequently ask the audience what they think, if they can think of examples or if they think that they might have seen/ experienced something in first person.

---

[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/.
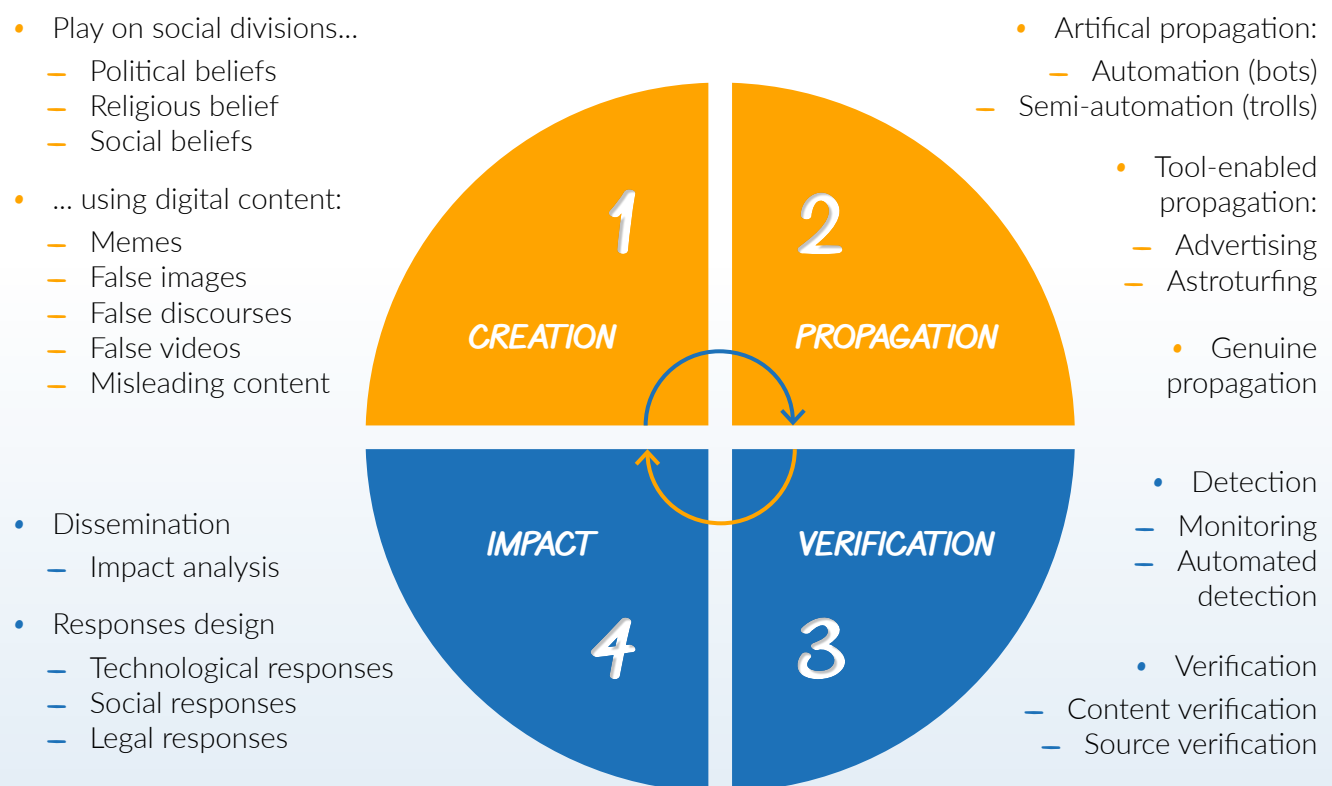
Genuine amplifiers

There are a number of factors related to universal human behaviour which serve as genuine amplifiers to disinformation. These 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**: 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].

The propagation of disinformation

The following graph[12] is a good instrument to conceptualise the propagation of disinformation:

- Play on social divisions...
    - Political beliefs
    - Religious belief
    - Social beliefs

- ... using digital content:
    - Memes
    - False images
    - False discourses
    - False videos
    - Misleading content

- Dissemination
    - Impact analysis

- Responses design
    - Technological responses
    - Social responses
    - Legal responses

1 CREATION

2 PROPAGATION

4 IMPACT

3 VERIFICATION

- Artifical propagation:
    - Automation (bots)
    - Semi-automation (trolls)

- Tool-enabled propagation:
    - Advertising
    - Astroturfing

- Genuine propagation

- Detection
    - Monitoring
    - Automated detection

- Verification
    - Content verification
    - Source verification

---

[9] Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017, p. 50.
[10] Alaphilippe, Gizikis et al., 2019, p. 21.
[11] Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017, p. 50.
[12] Alexandre Alaphilippe, Alexis Gizikis, Clara Hanot, Kalina Bontcheva, 'Automated Tackling of Disinformation', European Parliamentary Research Service, 2019, Brussels, p. 10.

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; these 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 of amplification: artificial propagation (automated bots sharing each other's content to amplify the effect), propagation through tools (e.g. paid advertisement) or genuine propagation (unintentional spread by online users).
- The importance of verifying *both the content and the source*.
- The importance of disseminating findings about disinformation and of raising people's awareness 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 continues to propagate for a very long time before it dies out.

Amplification and Social Media

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

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

engage with the disinformation. Targets are identified on the basis of job titles, membership in groups, residence, etc.

Conclude the session by asking for learners' feedback. Are they more aware of disinformation now? What is the most important point they take home from this session?