**Manipulation and**

**disinformation (online)**

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FACT – Fighting alternative facts with critical thinking (ERASMUS+ KA2)

**This is Bill.** 

**Bill is bombarded daily with an incomprehensible amount of information with questionable credibility.** 

**But Bill does not just passively accept manipulation and disinformation.** 

**Bill is a critical evaluator of information.**

**Be like Bill.**

**… but how (and why)? **

**Outline**

**1. Defining manipulation and disinformation**

Manipulation versus persuasion, common features and tactics used in (media) manipulation

**2. Charismatic leadership: a traditional source of**

**manipulation and disinformation**

Defining charisma and linking it to manipulation,

characteristics of charismatic leaders and their followers, contextual factors

**3. Fake news: a „contemporary“ example of**

**manipulation and disinformation**

Definition, to what extent do we believe them, (potential) consequences, the role of social media, and different ways of battling them (online resources, critical thinking)

**1. Defining manipulation and disinformation**

● **Element #1: Instagram marketing (selling clothes)**

**Activity #1:** 

**similarities and**

**differences (10**

**minutes)**

● **Element #2: political speeches (convincing voters)**

**Activity #1:** 

**similarities and**

**differences (10**

**minutes)**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZBr0Te\_hSa8

● **Element #3: public health campaigns (encouraging physical**

**distancing)**

**Activity #1:** 

**similarities and**

**differences (10**

**minutes)**

● Visit **Padlet** (https://padlet.com/nejcplohl/2k71pbboemwmdlqh)

and try to find **at least one thing that is common** 

to all three elements and **at least one thing that**

**critically separates them**

**Activity #1:** 

**similarities and**

**differences (10** 

**minutes)**

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**Persuasion = manipulation?**

● Many have a **hard time distinguishing between persuasion and manipulation**, but understanding the difference is important 

● A subject of debate for a long time (evenAristotle wrote about it!) Persuasion Manipulation

• Any **attempt to influence** person‘s beliefs, attitudes, intentions, motivations, or behaviors

• Some declare it as **ethically neutral** (neither good nor bad), others even as inherently good (idea is put forth, a person can freely decide what to do with it)

• When persuasion is distorted, it can **become manipulative**, which is

dangerous

• Manipulation is a type of social

influence that aims to change the

behavior or perception of others

through **indirect, deceptive tactics**

(advancing the interests of the

manipulator at another‘s expense)

(Franke & van Rooij, 2015; Hoffeld

group, n. d.)

**Persuasion =**

● In both cases, you are attempting to elicit an individual or group to think or do something they might not do without your influence

● **Similar principles, different results**

● Critical differences include **intention**, and **distorting or witholding truth**

**Activity #2 (4 minutes):** Now,

knowing the difference between

**manipulation?** Is it in the **best interest**

**of others**? Are people

treated as self-directing

human beings? **Is the**

**aim to convince a**

**person into something**

**that will harm them or**

**only benefit one side**?

Are psychological

weaknesses of people

exploited?

Are advantages of a behavior, idea or product exaggerated? **Are people being misled**? **Is the**

**process transparent**? Are arguments

supported by

evidence?

persuasion and manipulation, what do you think about the

three elements presented

earlier? Write „yes“ in the chat if you think the element contains manipulation (or „no“). Why?

**12 3** 

(Cialdini, 1999; Franke & van Rooij, 2015; Hoffeld group, n. d.)

**Media**

**manipulation: some tactics and strategies**

● When manipulation is done via media it can be called **media manipulation**

● Techniques may include psychological manipulations, outright deception (**disinformation**), rhetorical and propaganda techniques, suppression of information, diverting attention, etc.

● Some forms of media manipulation are very old (e.g., propaganda messages**,** public speeches by charismatic authorities) …

● .. New technological advances have made it easier than ever before to **manipulate photos, videos and use different manipulation techniques online** (e.g., deepfakes, fake news on social media)

(Ellul, 1973; Marwick & Lewis, 2017)

**2. Charismatic leadership: a traditional source of manipulation and disinformation**

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● Through manipulation, **con artists, cult leaders and dictators**

have abused, enslaved, and even massacred millions

● A common element to many such leaders is **charisma** 🡪 a 

special charm, magnetism that can inspire devotion in others

● Just like persuasion, charisma is **not necessarily bad** (it is often

ascribed to many great leaders), but it definitely has a **dark side; Leaders who can** outcomes can be positive or disastrous **manipulate**

**masses** „Rightly employed, it works as the greatest blessing; and wrongly

employed, it works as the greatest

harm“



Activity #3 (5 minutes): to find out more about the potential catastrophic consequences of charismatic leaders, read this article:

https://cutt.ly/WlsKtX5

1. What happened in Jonestown?

2. Why did so many people commit suicide? 3. What was the leader of the cult like?



(Albo, 2017; Chamorro-Premuzic, 2012; Williams, 2019)

**Characteristics of charismatic**

**leaders**

● As illustrated by the Jonestown article, charismatic leaders can **manipulate with their followers in a very convincing manner**. Why is that so?

● Relatively **limited insight** into what makes a leader seem charismatic, but their characteristics can be divided into **1) individual**

**characteristics**, and **especially their 2) way of communicating Individual characteristics**

● Often **risk-takers** and **unconventional**

● They set **high goals** and are **willing to make sacrifices**

● **Mysterious**

● Physical features, such as **height**, also seem to be

important

● **Mental speed** 

● Often exhibit **narcissism, psychopathy, and**

**machiavellianism**

(e.g., Frese et al., 2003; House,

1977; Shamir et al., 1994)

**Characteristics of charismatic**

**leaders**

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● Relatively **limited insight** into what makes a leader seem charismatic, but their characteristics can be divided into **1) individual**

**characteristics**, and **especially their 2) way of communicating Communication**

● Use communication and image-building strategies **to seem powerful and confident**

● Know how to communicate in appropriate, **emotionally charged** ways and make their **message easy to understand**

● **Good storytellers**; they know how to use their voice and body gestures 

● **Masters in rhetoric**; they often make use of lists, repetition,

rhetorical questions, and metaphors

● Content focuses on **common goals with followers**

(e.g., Frese et al., 2003; House,

1977; Shamir et al., 1994)

● Besides the characteristics of charismatic leaders, **contextual**

**factors** are also important

● Charismatic leaders **thrive in unstable, uncertain situations,**

**such as in any crisis situations** (financial crises, health crises, **Contextual** migration crises, … ) **factors that give**

**rise to** 

**charismatic**

**leadership**

(Mhatre & Riggio, 2014)

● Leaders are rarely objectively charismatic, not everyone falls for their charm; as a consequence, **some people are more prone to their manipulation attempts than others**

**Why do such leaders attract masses?**

Characteristics of leaders

Characteristics

of followers

**Contextual factors**

● Manipulation strategies employed by charismatic leaders are more likely to be successful when followers:

● **Identify** with the leader (values, ideas, goals, … )

● Are **susceptible to emotionally-charged message**s

● Are **ready to follow authorities**

● Lack confidence, assertiveness, and a clear sense of identity

(Conger & Kanungo, 1988)

**Resisting the influence of manipulative charismatic**

● There are **many reasons to resist charisma**

● Charisma **dilutes judgment** (it is based on emotional manipulation and can trump rational assessment; charmVS reason)

● Charisma can be „**addictive“**

● Charisma **fosters collective narcissism**

● So … What can we do about it?

**leaders Remember Bill? Be critical! **

Analyze the quality of arguments, be focused on the content instead of how the content is

conveyed, verify the accuracy of claims and check whether the claims are supported by

evidence, …

(Chamorro-Premuzic, 2012)

**3. Fake news: a „contemporary“ example of manipulation and disinformation**

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● „**Fake news**“ – a term that we have all heard of (word of the year

in 2017)

● Often **used incorrectly or strategically** 

(to discredit claims that are not fake)

**Fake news:**

**definition**Important to understand,

which ingredients constitute

(actual) fake news

● 3 types of news: 1) news that aims to report 

objectively, 2) news with unintentional

mistakes, **3) news that aims to report false**

**information**

(Allcot & Gentzkow, 2017)

**Fake news:**

● **What does the term „fake news“ thus refer to?**

● Allcot and Gentzkow (2017): news that is not factual but is being presented as factual

● David and colleagues (2018): news that is verifiably false and designed in a way that attracts readers

● **Hunt (2016): news that is written and published to deceive the public, with the goal of harming another person or institution or gaining financial/political benefits**

**definition**Fake news often uses 

sensationalistic, dishonest or

completely made up titles

(**clickbait**) to attract readers,

shares, likes.

**Main goal: profit and/or ideology**

(regardless of credibility)

● Predominantly used in the context of politics, but are 

not constrained to this context

(Allcot & Gentzkow, 2017)

● **Wardle (2017): seven different types of misinformation** that can

be placed on a continuum from least to most harmful

**Fake news:** 

**definition**

**Fake news: do we believe**

**them?**

● But … Does anyone really **believe fake news**?



● Well, research certainly shows that **false information is**

**often perceived as legitimate (in some cases even**

**more than credible sources)**

(Allcot &Gentkow, 2017; Gu et al., 2017; Howell et

al., 2013; Silverman, 2016)

**Fake news: do we believe**

**them?**

● Shellenbarger (2016): individuals (in this study, young individuals) **have problems distinguishing better sources of information from more questionable ones**

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(Allcot &Gentkow, 2017; Gu et al., 2017; Howell et

al., 2013; Silverman, 2016)

**Fake news: do we believe**

**them?**

● Furthermore, Nightingale (2017) reports that people generally **perform poorly when they have to decide whether a**

**photograph is real or fabricated**

• Participants 

**demonstrated limited**

**ability to distinguish**

**between authentic and**

**manipulated images**

• Even when participants

correctly identified the

manipulated

photographs, they **often**

**did not know what was**

**altered** in the picture

(Allcot &Gentkow, 2017; Gu et al., 2017; Howell et

al., 2013; Silverman, 2016)

**Activity #4: can you recognize altered photos when you see them (7**

**minutes)?**

**STILL**

● **Let‘s try it out together**! Raise your Zoom-hand if you think that the photo is altered (and do not raise your hand if you think it isn‘t altered)

● Participate in the discussion: how do you know that the picture is (not) altered?

● Link: https://www.washingtonpost.com/can-you-tell-fake-news when-you-see-it/54143932-efb7-46de-af6b

f92108a329dc\_quiz.html?utm\_term=.75e7861e9cbc 

**Fake news: (potential) consequences**

● Fake news as **a growing global threat**

● As fake news is often perceived as legitimate, it can lead to **misinformation or at least public confusion**. This can, in turn, lead to risky health decisions, risky investments (stock market), misinformed political decisions, … 

● An extreme example of how misinformation can lead to 

serious consequences 🡪 **PIZZAGATE**

● **Declining trust in media and** 

**experts** in some groups

(Ferrara et al., 2016; Hotez, 2016;

Kang &Goldman, 2016)

**Fake news: (potential) consequences**

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● Fake news are **not a new phenomenon**

● In 1835, The New York Sun published a series of articles on the

discovery of life on the moon



**Fake news: the**

● Then **why do we often blame social media**?

**role of social**

● Traditional media, such as newspapers + fake news = bad

reputation; pressure on editors to verify information

**media**

● Social media have a different structure 🡪 **news are spreading**

**among users without third-party filtering, fact-checking, and**

**editorial decision**

● An individual user (about whom we 

know nothing) can reach a huge

readership

(Allcot & Gentzkow, 2017)

**Fake news: the role of social media**

● On social media, the **cost of creating misleading pages and profiles to spread misinformation is very low**

● A large amount of fake news comes from **social bots** – fake accounts that can post content, interact with each other and with real users (programs with predefined responses/comments)

● They accounted for ~15% of allTwitter profiles that were active in discussions about the US 2016 presidential election

● They also appear on Facebook and can be very convicing, exerting incluence on real users



(Shao et al., 2018)

**Fake news: the role of social media**

● Another problem: Facebook algorithms that prioritize posts so that priority is given to news that can attract people and not credible posts 🡪 **social media platforms‘ filtering**

● … And fake news are good at attracting likes, shares, etc.

● In recent years, the algorithms have changed multiple times, but …

● Our individual choices on how to use social media are also problematic 🡪 **social selectivity**

● We choose to interact with other like-minded people and are

selectively exposed to information that are congruent with our pre existing believes 

● Social media platforms‘ filtering + social selectivity = **echo chambers** or **filter bubbles**

● **Activity #5 (3 minutes):** visit https://www.1ka.si/a/328741 and fill out a short qustionnaire to receive individualized feedback regarding your use of social media

(Kaakinen et al., 2020;Salganik et al., 2006; Shao et

al., 2018; Silverman, 2016)

**Fake news: the role of social media**

● Besides the fact that social media have many features that are useful for spreading fake news, they **are also extremely popular**

● Facebook has more than 2 billion users (including bots ☺), Instagram 1 billion users, …

● These numbers are significantly higher than the number of readers of print media / traditional media websites

● Facebook is also **very often used as a news source**; 62% of American adults report getting news from Facebook; among teenagers, Facebook is the main source of news (especially

political)



(Gottried & Shearer, 2016; Pew Research

Center, 2015; Reuters Institute, 2016)

**Fake news:**

**battling fake news with**

**online resources**

I love

Snopes.com

<3

● Due to high prevalence and serious (potential) consequences of fake news, researchers are working hard to **find an answer on how to sucessfully identify fake news** 

● A promising solution are **online resources/websites that can help us verify news** that we see online

● One of the first and most well-known websites is **snopes.com** ● Fact-checks urban legends and fake news circulating on the web ● Final decisions are always based on evidence 

(options: include „unverifiable“ and „indefinite“)

● The website attracts 20 million unique visitors a

month 

● Same standards for all news

● External reviews of the website show that

decisions are not biased and are indeed

based on credible sources

**Fake news:**

**battling fake news with**

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● Similar international websites:

● **PoliFact:** Times journalists and editors check the statements of members of the Congress, the White House, lobbyists and others; they publish the original statement and their evaluation of the statement (Truth-O-Meter). They also choose „lie of the year“

● **FactCheck.org:** A non-profit website that aims to lower the level of deception caused byAmerican politicians. Interesting additional features, such as „Ask FactCheck“



● There are also some „local“ online alternatives

● In Slovenia, these include 24ur.com Dejstva, rtvslo.si podcast „Preverjamo dejstva“

**Fake news: battling fake news with**

**criticalthinking**

● It is very important that one can **critically evaluate the content they see online without using fact-checking websites**

● In the beginning, critical evaluation may require a lot of effort, but becomes much **easier with practice** (sort of a habit)

● As we have already said, we are not inherently good at this; the ability to think critically needs to be **trained and/or developed** (basic knowledge needs to be acquired and put into practice) 🡪 different approaches



This is

exactly what

I often ask

myself!

**Who is behind the information? **

**Fake news:**

**battling fake news with**

**criticalthinking**

● We are often **not very good at assessing which sources are credible**

● Study: two news on climate change (one from the science section of the magazine, the other a sponsored post by an oil company on Facebook) – which source is more reliable? 70% concluded that a sponsored post is more reliable 

● Why? **Consideration of the source is often**

**put aside**; decisions are made based on

attractiveness and simplicity (images, text)

and pre-existing beliefs

(McGrew et al., 2017)

**Fake news:**

**battling fake news with**

**criticalthinking**

**Is the evidence solid?** 

● Online, you can find **maaaany claims – some are backed up by facts, others …. are not**; Example? Comment sections

● Study: participants were shown a comment submitted by Joe Smith, which contained statistics, and were than asked whether they would use this information in a seminar paper

● 40% would use it (impression that information is credible due to the use of statistics)

● Instead, participants should ask themselves **who this**

**commentator is, what is his motivation for writing comments and where are the sources which back up the statistics used** in his comment

(McGrew et al., 2017)

**Fake news:**

**battling fake news with**

**criticalthinking**

**Do other sources tell the same story?** 

● The thing that is probably most useful (but we don‘t

use it enough!) is **finding additional sources**

● Study: participants were provided a link to an article stating that raising wages of American employees would lead to higher food prices and higher unemployment. Students were allowed to use any online resource to assess whether a website is credible or not

● The article contained a lot of things that give the impression of credibility 🡪 if you do not leave the website, everything seems OK, but a simple Google search would reveal that the article was published by a PR company which cooperates with the food industry

● Only 6-9% of students managed to conclude that the article is not credible

● There are numerous websites online that mask their true identity and funders …

(McGrew et al., 2017)

**Fake news:**

**battling fake news with**

**criticalthinking**

● We can learn a lot by **comparing the strategies of experts** (people who professionally engage in fact-checking) **and**

**laypeople** (e.g., students)

● Such comparisons were recently performed in one of the studies; both groups were faced with same online tasks, which were followed by interviews

**Lesson #1: Lateral reading** 

● Students: focused on thoroughly checking the

properties of websites („scanning“ the website, focusing

on its appearance, domain, … ) and reading the article

in detail 🡪 waste of time

● Experts: engaged in lateral thinking; they immediately left

the unknown website, opened new tabs and explored other

websites (left the website to learn more about it)

(McGrew et al., 2017)

**Fake news:**

**battling fake news with**

**criticalthinking**

**Lesson #2: Carefully choosing results on Google**

● When searching for information with browsers, it is very important which website we choose first, because a) we are often satisfied with the first hit or b) we continue searching based on what we found in the first hit

● Both students and experts used Google to search for information ● Students: assumed that the order of Google results correlated with credibility of the source and often chose the very first source

● Experts: exhibited understanding that the order of results on Google can be manipulated. They knew when to hold back . They often

skimmed through the entire first page or even the first three pages before choosing what to read



(McGrew et al., 2017)

**Fake news:**

**battling fake news with**

**criticalthinking**

**Lesson #3: Unlike many who say otherwise … Use Wikipedia (but wisely)**

● It is often pointless to spend 15 minutes on a website to decide whether it is credible, when in a few seconds we can find out on Wikipedia that the website is questionable

● Wikipedia can be very useful (standards of verifiability, sources are cited)

● Experts very often used it and took advantage of the things it offers. In a situation where they were limtied in the amount of time

available to establish facts, experts often used Wikipedia in such a way that they skipped the main article and went diretly to the

reference list at the end



(McGrew et al., 2017)

● Using the „Breakout Rooms“ feature, we will form **six groups with 5-6 participants**

● Each group will have to **verify the validity of one claim using the knowledge acquired earlier** (two groups will share the same task as we will compare the techniques you used to evaluate the credibility of claims)

CLAIM #1: The COVID-19 vaccine should be avoided

**Final group**

**activity #6 (5+5 minutes):**

Room 1 Room 2 Room 3 Room 4

Room 5 Room 6

as it causes female sterilization.

Link : https://cutt.ly/qldwVJH

CLAIM #2: Japan has recently banned 5G technology over health concerns.

Link : http://archive.fo/JBRqf

CLAIM #3: A TikTok video shows that you can restore your sense of smell after COVID-19 by eating charred oranges.

Link: https://bit.ly/2NkmPBo

Is the claim true? How do you know it is true / it is not true? What actions did you take to investigate the validity of claims? After ~5 minutes, we will discuss your findings.

