



Exposed! Intentions & Actors Behind Disinformation

Lesson plan (45 min)



Background:

The internet enables various actors to conduct targeted disinformation campaigns worldwide, aiming to exert political and economic influence, manipulate or intimidate populations, sow distrust, endanger democracies, and pave the way for hatred and polarization. It is crucial for students to understand that disinformation is deliberately created by individuals with specific intentions who obscure both their motives and their identities. An essential aspect of media literacy is learning to protect oneself from disinformation and its harmful effects. Therefore, it is vital to recognize the intentions behind disinformation and identify the actors involved.

Keywords:	Disinformation, manipulation, political and economic actors, influencers, trolls, conspiracy theorists, radical groups, controversial topics, headlines, campaigns
Subjects:	Interdisciplinary application
Subject-Specific Learning Objective:	Recognizing misleading (dis)information regarding the chosen topic
Media Literacy:	Reflection on the intentions and actors behind disinformation; Critical thinking and identifying manipulation
Target Group:	Secondary School Level II
Materials:	Role cards; Teacher's template for selecting the trigger; Colored cards/markers or a digital tool for collaborative visualization
Technology	Laptop and projector; Wi-Fi and students' smartphones (for collaborative visualization)



PREPARATION FOR INTEGRATION INTO TEACHING SUBJECT

1	Choosing the topic	
	Which topic from your subject contains controversial political, economic, or social components and is affected by disinformation? The overview in the appendix lists typical areas and events impacted by disinformation.	
2	Identifying the trigger	
	What (fictional) political decision by a government or (fictional) societal event related to your topic could provoke disinformation by various political, social, and economic actors?	
	Trigger for disinformation:	<input type="checkbox"/> Government decision <input type="checkbox"/> Societal event
3	Selection of roles for actors & intentions behind disinformation	
	Which potential actors could be responsible for triggering disinformation on the chosen topic? Which roles will the students prepare and play in the role-play activity? Add additional roles if needed. Select 4-5 roles suitable for your class.	
	Political actors Possible intention: Power and influence	Influencers Possible intention: Economic benefits
	Media Actors Possible intention: Shaping public opinion	Conspiracy Theorists Possible intention: Manipulating trust
	Trolls Possible intention: Creating confusion	Radical Groups Possible intention: Social division
4	Prepare an example of a disinformation headline	
	Come up with an example of a disinformation headline that you want to use to explain the role play to the students.	
	Headline	



5 Prepare the visualization of the headlines

Think of an appropriate visualization for the groups in the role play and prepare it, for example, using colored cards (offline) or using collaborative digital tools such as Padlet (<https://padlet.com>). This allows color coding for the groups and enables various illustrations, such as the stream (see image).





LESSON PLAN | PROCEDURE

Introduction: 'From Persuasion to Manipulation'		Duration
Plenary	Start the lesson by asking the class who has ever tried to convince their parents of something and why. Then, introduce the topic of the lesson and explain that with disinformation, others are not only convinced, but manipulated. Information is deliberately invented, altered, or hidden. Together, the students will recognize the actors and intentions behind disinformation.	5 min
Elaboration: 'Disinformation! Preparing the Role Play'		Duration
Group work	<p>Present the prepared specific scenario for the role play: a controversial government decision or a shocking event is abused by various disinformation actors to influence the population. Students will take on the roles of disinformation actors, each with specific intentions based on role cards. They will invent false and misleading headlines about the decision or event and attempt to manipulate others in their favor. Provide an example if necessary.</p> <p>The role play will now be prepared in groups. Form the groups, distribute the task sheets, and the (secret) role cards. The students will take on their roles and collect their invented headlines either on cards or on online whiteboards, using different colors.</p>	20 min
Deepening: 'Disinformation! Role Play'		Duration
Role play	Ask one representative from each group to come forward. In a back-and-forth exchange, the students in their (secret) roles, will present the disinformation headlines. The rest of the class listens and tries to figure out which secret intentions and actors are behind the headlines. After the role play, release the representatives from their roles. Together, discuss and visualize which intentions and which actors the different groups represented.	15 min
Conclusion: 'Critical through Everyday Life'		Duration
Plenary	At the end, collect the insights from the students. Emphasize that behind disinformation campaigns are always people or groups of people with specific intentions. Ask how the insights gained can be useful to students in their everyday media consumption. The answers will be gathered in a quick round.	5 min



GLOSSARY

Disinformation

Disinformation refers to false or partially false information that is intended to harm others.

- *'It is still difficult to agree on a definition for the term "disinformation". However, some elements are undisputed. It refers to information which is deliberately inaccurate and spread systematically. Although there was already disinformation before the Internet came into existence, its structured dissemination has taken on alarming proportions in the digital age. The dissemination of disinformation frequently pursues a political or economic objective. Examples of this include unsettling the public with regard to the significance and implications of current events or the weakening of certain political positions, people, or companies and thus ultimately the manipulation of the opinion-forming process. A further example is clickbaiting, which entails provoking a greater number of clicks using sensational titles, thus increasing advertising income. Disinformation comes in many forms. For example, it can be in the form of publishing factually incorrect stories under the guise of journalism. However, buying likes, the mass use of fake accounts, or non-disclosed political advertising are sometimes called disinformation. It is now an important role to learn to detect and distinguish between various facets of disinformation since it is the only way to tackle this problem appropriately.'*

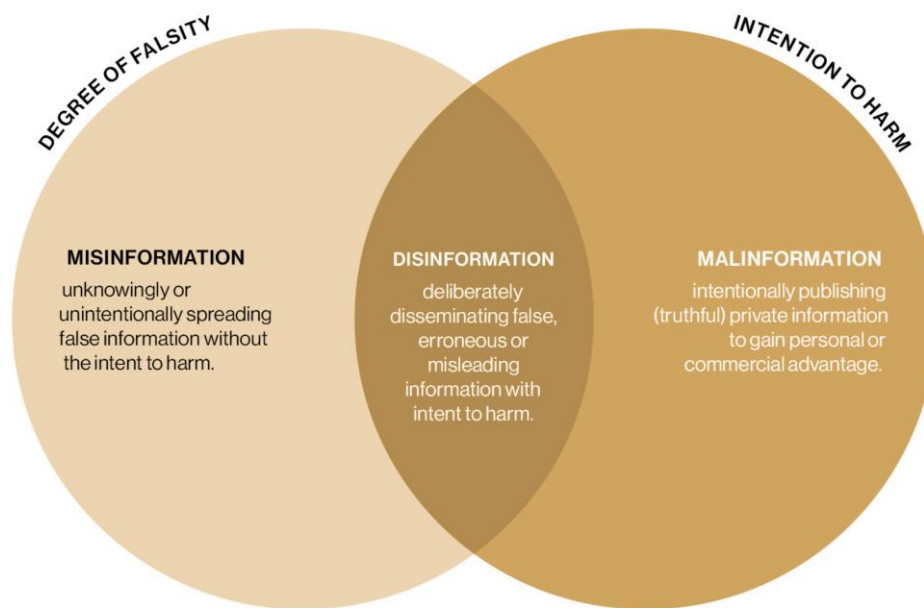
Source: <https://www.medienanstalt-nrw.de/about-us/topics/disinformation.html>

- *Disinformation is a genuine threat, and it can have various harmful effects. Disinformation can:*
 - *disrupt democratic processes such as elections;*
 - *fuel hatred, polarisation, radicalisation and violence;*
 - *encourage distrust of traditional media, researchers and government, among others;*
 - *Undermine our democratic state and its values.*

In addition to disinformation, we distinguish other forms of misleading information based on its nature and intent.

MEDIA ACADEMY

Exposed! Intentions & Actors Behind Disinformation



Source: <https://crisiscenter.be/en/risks-belgium/security-risks/disinformation/disinformation>

MEDIA ACADEMY

Exposed! Intentions & Actors Behind Disinformation



ROLE CARDS

You are
POLITICAL ACTORS
You want
**POWER AND TO CONTROL
PUBLIC OPINION**

You are
RADICAL GROUP
You want
SOCIETAL DIVISION

You are
SENSATIONAL MEDIA
You want
MANY CLICKS

You are
TROLLS
You want
**CREATE CONFUSION AND
HAVE FUN**

You are
INFLUENCER
You want
**BEING POPULAR AND MAKING
MONEY**

You are
CONSPIRACY THEORISTS
You want
TO MANIPULATE TRUST



TEACHER'S TEMPLATE FOR SELECTING THE TRIGGER

Examples of controversial topics and (shocking) events that, depending on the subject, can serve as a starting point to find a (fictional) trigger for the lesson and role play.

Controversial government decision			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Vaccination campaigns and health regulations	<input type="checkbox"/>	Climate protection measures
<input type="checkbox"/>	Migration and asylum policy	<input type="checkbox"/>	Regulations on internet freedom
<input type="checkbox"/>	Tax policy	<input type="checkbox"/>	Education policy
<input type="checkbox"/>	Arms exports and military interventions	<input type="checkbox"/>	Constitutional amendments
<input type="checkbox"/>	Data protection and surveillance laws	<input type="checkbox"/>	Economic sanctions
<input type="checkbox"/>	Genetic engineering	<input type="checkbox"/>	Food regulation
<input type="checkbox"/>	Energy policy	<input type="checkbox"/>	5G and mobile phone technology
<input type="checkbox"/>	Nature and species conservation	<input type="checkbox"/>	Corruption scandals
<input type="checkbox"/>	Water management	<input type="checkbox"/>	Gender-neutral language
<input type="checkbox"/>	Equality policy	<input type="checkbox"/>	LGBTQ+ rights
<input type="checkbox"/>	Promotion of women/minority sports	<input type="checkbox"/>	Cultural funding

Triggering events			
<input type="checkbox"/>	Elections	<input type="checkbox"/>	Protests & demonstrations
<input type="checkbox"/>	Cyberattacks	<input type="checkbox"/>	Conflicts & war
<input type="checkbox"/>	Plane crashes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Terrorist attacks
<input type="checkbox"/>	Bridge collapses	<input type="checkbox"/>	Mass shootings
<input type="checkbox"/>	Stock market crashes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Inflation
<input type="checkbox"/>	Pandemics	<input type="checkbox"/>	Epidemics
<input type="checkbox"/>	Earthquakes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Floods, droughts
<input type="checkbox"/>	Wildfires	<input type="checkbox"/>	(Music) events or major sports events