

# MODULE 1: What is disinformation and fake news?

Developed by MEUS

within the project

MCRE - Media literacy, critical viewing and CREative vision as effective learning  
approach for people with fewer opportunities

THE PARTNERSHIP:



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## 1. AIM AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES

### 1.1. AIM OF THE MODULE

The objective of this Module is to introduce the learner to the basic concepts of disinformation and fake news in such a way that, by understanding them and after training with the following modules of the MCRE e-book, he/she will be able to increase their media literacy and critical viewing.

### 1.2. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this Module the learner will know:

- Key concepts of disinformation and fake news.
- How important is it to live in the truth and to say the truth.
- How to detect fake news

## 2. LEARNING CONTENT

### 2.1. WHAT IS FAKE NEWS?

Misleading news has always existed, but since the emergence of the Internet and new communication and information technologies, Fake News has proliferated across the globe. In this section, you will discover some basic concepts that will help you to delve a little deeper into this type of misleading news.

#### 2.1.1. Concept and types of fake news

Fake news is information that has been intentionally generated to mislead or inform readers. Among other things, they are frequently used to spread misinformation, shape the political agenda, or sway user opinions.

In general, they tend to be impactful news that can circulate quickly, is difficult to stop once it has been recognised, and is vulnerable to virtualization before being contrasted. Even though the public is already aware of this kind of news, it still evolves and spreads in the form of data, images, and even videos.

In the following illustration, we show you some of the types of fake news that exist:

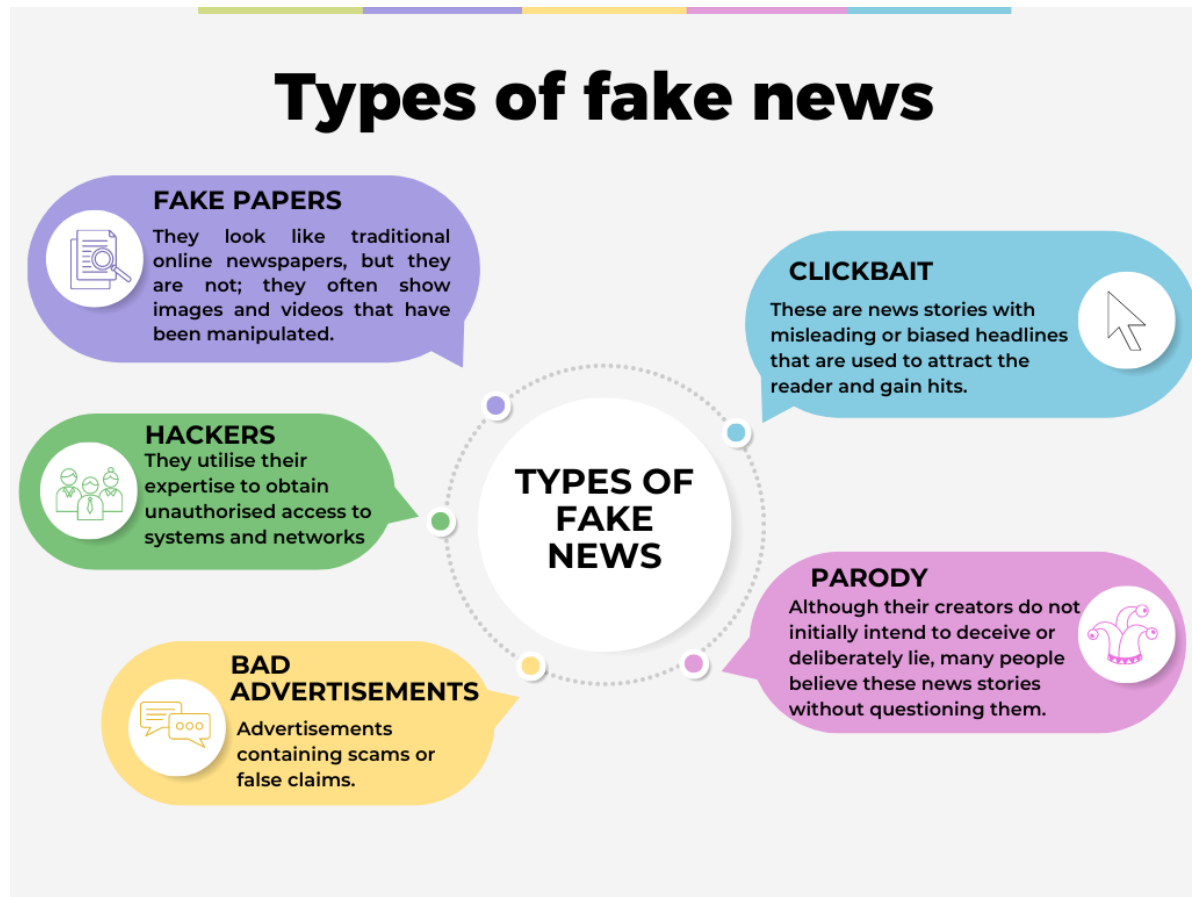


Figure 1 - Developed by MEUS

Just before the US presidential election, millions of people shared on Twitter that Hillary Clinton and her campaign manager had children locked up as sex slaves in the basement of a Washington pizzeria.

A guy armed with a rifle stormed the pizzeria to save the children, but there wasn't even a basement. So, 46% of the people who voted for Donald Trump believed that the so-called "pizzagate" was true.

So there are many examples, which show us that "fake news" is not a joke, it is intentional, and the vast majority of it is intended to change public opinion to achieve a specific goal. In the next section, we will look at some of how fake news is spread.

But why is this type of content created? *First Draft* sets out eight "P's", reasons that help explain it:

1. Poor journalism
2. Parody
3. Provocation
4. Passion



5. Partisanship
6. Profit
7. Political power or influence
8. Propaganda

Each of the types of misinformation and misleading content contains one of the eight "P's" within it.

But fake news is not something of our modern age, although due to new technologies this kind of news is now spreading faster, let's take a look at some history!

# FAKE NEWS: HISTORICAL TIMELINE

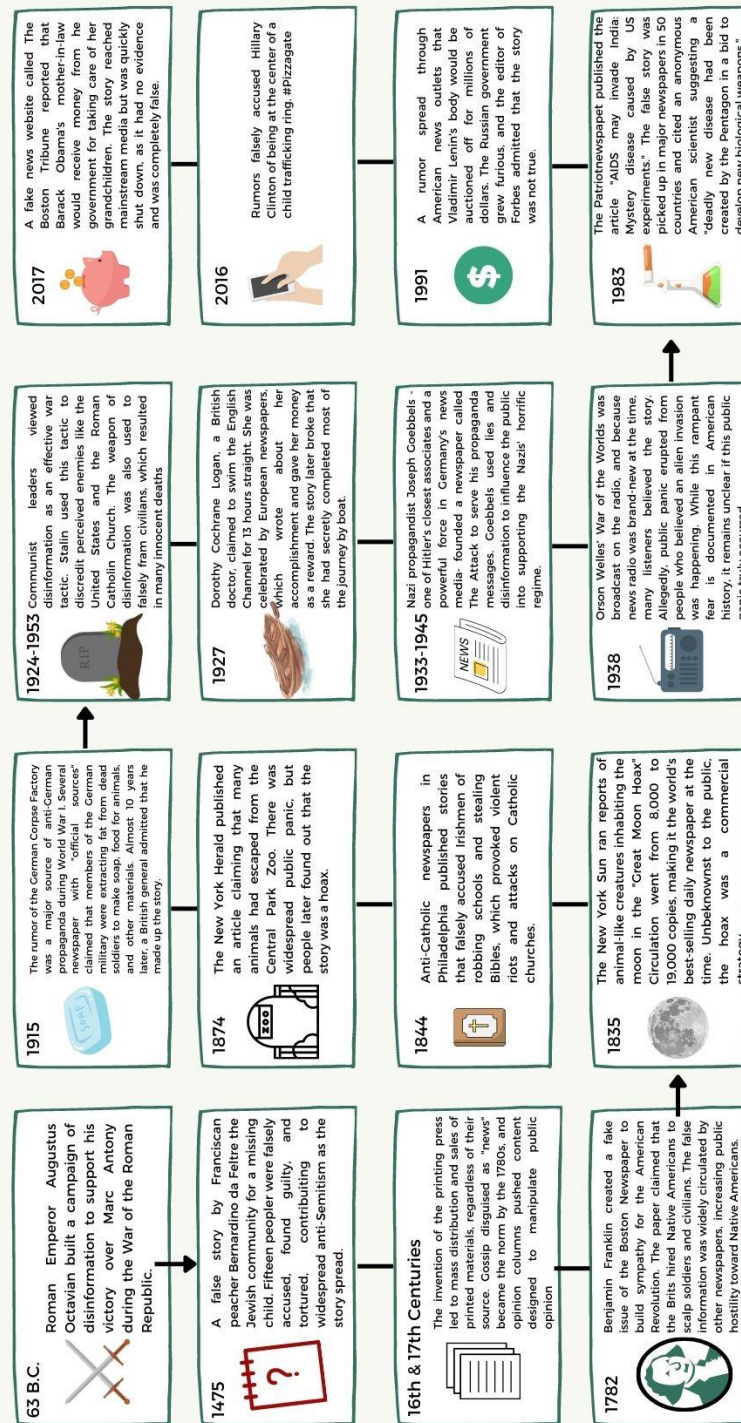


Figure 2 - Image developed by MEUS based on content developed by [www.commonssense.org](http://www.commonssense.org)

And **what does journalism have to say about fake news?** The UNESCO website contains some quotes from journalism professionals, which we share below:

*“With growing evidence of interference in democratic processes around the world, the debate over how to expose and eliminate fake news is certain to intensify. But the discussion is already confused by a misunderstanding about the phenomenon, its origins, and why it poses a threat in the first place.”*

*To try to illustrate the problem, the Ethical Journalism Network (EJN) has developed a definition for fake news: “Information deliberately fabricated and published to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts.” Using this definition, it is easier to separate propaganda, “alternative” facts, and malicious lies from journalism.”*

**Aidan White, Director,  
Ethical Journalism Network**

*“Fake news poisons the atmosphere that we all operate in. Because fake news exists, audiences are now doubtful about all news. It has really damaged the relationship between audience members and the media.”*

**Verashni Pillay, Editor-in-Chief,  
Huffington Post, South Africa**

*“We easily exaggerate the effect of fake news on journalism. I don’t want to be flippant about it – it is a serious challenge to society and institutionality. The point of fake news is not to tell another narrative, the main aim of fake news is to dismantle the credibility of institutions, including journalism, but not only journalism.”*

**Kari Huhta, Diplomatic Editor,  
Helsingin Sanomat, Finland**

*“There has always been fake news – ever since people realized the power of the media to influence public opinion. However, the difference today is that social media and platforms like Google and Facebook enable fake news to spread widely and more quickly than ever before, and that is the problem.”*

*Fake news changes journalism in that it presents a real challenge to journalism because it’s not always that easy to distinguish fake news from real news, but it also makes journalism much more important. Because if anybody is going to call out fake news, it’s the journalist – the responsible journalist, that is. I would say that in the short term, fake news is a problem for journalists. But in the long term, it validates them and gives them increased importance in society.”*

**Ivor Gaber, Professor of Journalism,  
University of Sussex, United Kingdom**



*“Fake news reinforces a traditional mission of journalism, which is trying to shine a light in the dark, for societies and the general public. Our mission has to be reinforced on this core value, trying to illuminate the debate, trying to show the public where the real facts and the real debates are.”*

**Ricardo Gandour, Journalism Director,  
CBN, Brazilian Radio Network, Brazil**

## 2.1.2. How it spreads

Some of the ways through which fake news is spread are:

### **SOCIAL MEDIA**

The channel through which fake news spreads most strongly is social networks, as nowadays anyone can create and share information on the Internet: we are all producers and consumers of information at the same time, which means that anyone can spread a hoax through social networks and it can easily go viral, especially if it alludes to feelings and emotions.

### **VIRALITY**

This is the capacity for some content to circulate quickly online and has a significant psychological component attached to it. On social networks, individuals share content that provokes emotions in them, with which they feel positively identified or towards which they feel an unfavorable emotion.

### **ALGORITHM**

Big Data algorithms analyse consumer data, forecast election outcomes, and are familiar with human preferences. The most well-known algorithm is PageRank, which was developed by Google in 1998. Its success was due to the site crawling and the importance-ranked search results it provided. Since then, the algorithm has changed to incorporate the user's preferences into its calculations (it is not the same to be an adult as a child, or to search in Spain as in the United States).

### **BOTS**

Spreading also comes from organisations that use botnets and troll farms to try to sway public opinion. Bots, computer programs designed to gather data automatically, display which websites are visited and which things are purchased, as well as by whom and how frequently.

In the context of fake news, bots, fake profiles that are the main propagators of false information on Twitter, have burst onto the scene. It is believed that 9-15% of active Twitter accounts are bots. Social and political bots are designed to manipulate populations into a way of thinking, misinform and propagandise about certain people or



issues. The power of these bots has been evidenced in election campaigns, such as the 2016 US presidential election or the Brexit referendum, in the vaccine debate, in spreading false rumors about terrorist attacks, in manipulating financial markets, and recently in the coronavirus crisis. Coordinated, they can make a lot of noise and relegate other news to the background.

According to the consulting firm Gartner, by 2021 more than half of all companies will spend more money each year on creating bots and chatbots than on developing traditional mobile apps.

The speed with which they spread, and the reach they have, reach further, faster, and to more people than real information. A study published in the [journal Science](#) found that false information spread "significantly farther, faster, deeper and wider" than true information "across all categories of information, and the effects were most pronounced for false political news"<sup>1</sup>.

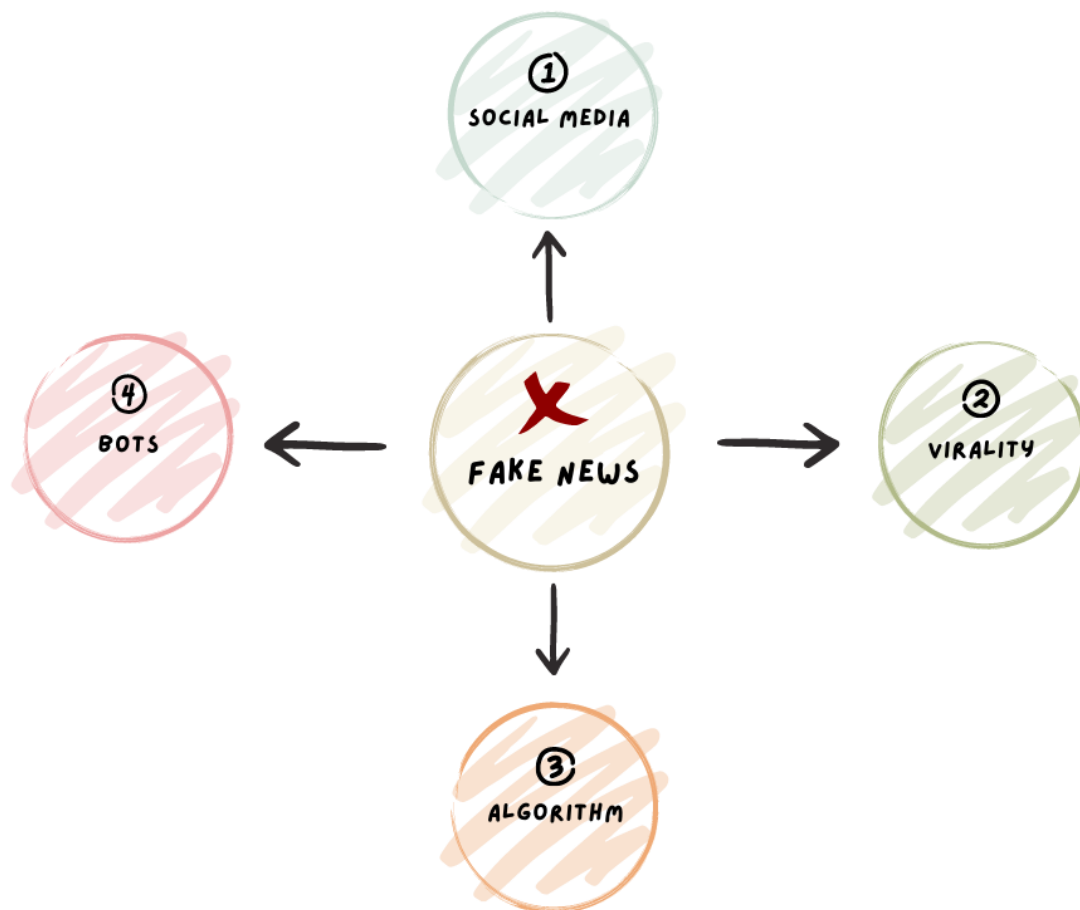


Figure 3 - Image developed by MEUS

<sup>1</sup> Journal Science, "The spread of true and false news online"

### 2.1.3. Why it is believed

A key factor that makes us believe in fake news is the emotions it arouses in us. Fake news plays with our emotions, seeking to generate an emotional and impulsive response that overrides our critical judgment.

An infographic by Eoghan Sweeney summarises very well the feelings that certain content generates in us, we have used his infographic as a basis for developing our infographic, which reflects the same content as the one presented by Eoghan Sweeney:

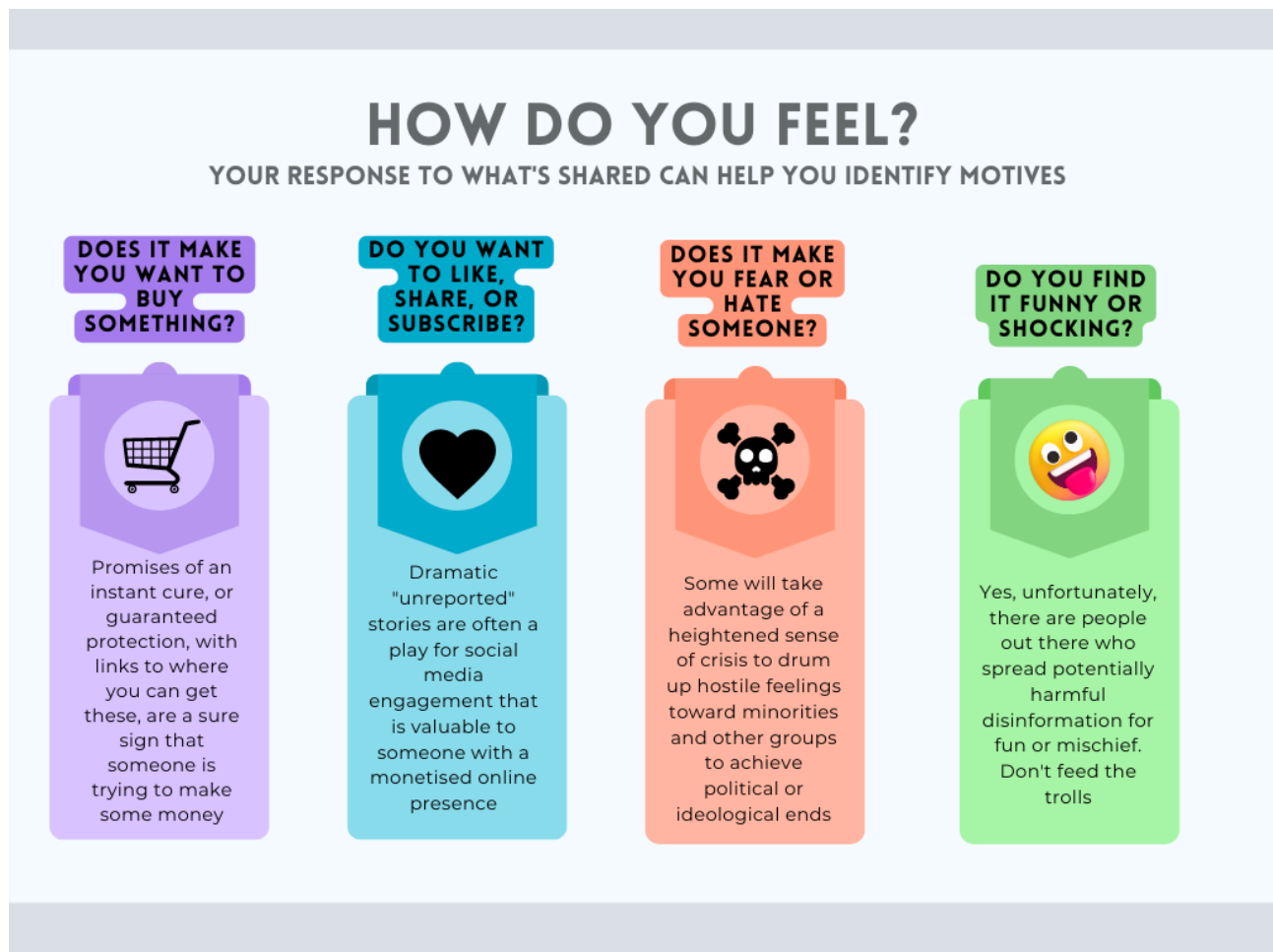


Figure 4 – Image developed by MEUS content of Eoghan Sweeney

But **why do people believe in fake news?** Some factors are:

1. Attribution error: this is what happens when something rings a bell, but we don't remember where we have seen it. It is enough to see a false headline, for example, "immigrants get free flats in Spain", for people to become more sensitive to fake news about immigration in the future.

Moreover, when a lie is repeated, it gives us a false sense of consensus, that everyone thinks this way. This can lead to collective false beliefs, something called the Mandela effect, as some people think that the South African president died in prison in the 1980s. In reality, he died at home in 2013. Or, for example, the famous plastic bag man was not run over by the tank in the Tiananmen Square protests, although many people believe he was.

2. Confirmation bias: this is the brain's natural tendency to believe that what matches our tastes or opinions is real, even if it is false. In addition, when a news item arouses emotions, it is easier to believe it.
3. Social reinforcement or discrediting those who think otherwise. Beliefs linked to strong feelings seek social reinforcement, to support those who think the same as us and to dismiss or discredit those who think the opposite (even when they provide data and evidence). It is easy for this bias to appear in situations in which a topic arouses strong emotional reactions - political topics - and about which we reason more according to the source or who shares the information. Hoaxes emerge under the false illusion that they are shared by many, when in fact they are spread by bots.

At the University of Michigan, they have developed artificial intelligence that identified "fake news" 76% of the time, while people only got it right 50% of the time.

What can we do? Develop our critical thinking! This is why the MCRE project was born, which will help you develop the necessary skills and competences to detect fake news, and analyse who the source is, in which channel they are distributed, etc. before hitting the forward button.

## 2.2. CONCEPTS SURROUNDING FAKE NEWS

In this section, we present a glossary of concepts related to disinformation. The more you know about these concepts, the easier it will be to detect fake news.

### 2.2.1. Disinformation

False information is deliberately disseminated to mislead.

Because there is no universal agreement on its definition, disinformation is currently preferable to fake news. This is recommended by the European Commission's Expert Group Report ["A multidisciplinary approach to disinformation"](#), which rejects the use of the term "fake news". To put an end to the inaccuracy of the term, the European Commission (EC) coined the concept of "information disorder", a term that includes:

- “Misinformation”, i.e. false information shared on networks but with no intention of causing any harm.
- “Disinformation” or false information, is shared intending to inflict harm.
- “Mal-information”, where truthful information is shared to cause harm, such as by revealing private information in the public sphere.

### 2.2.2. Postruth

Oxford defines it as the phenomenon that occurs when "objective facts have less influence in defining public opinion than those appealing to emotion and personal beliefs", and it has been a term widely used during President Trump's election campaign and also with the Brexit campaign in the UK. Post-truth was voted word of the year 2016 by The English Oxford Dictionary, with its use having shot up by 2000%.

### 2.2.3. Infodemics

The World Health Organisation (WHO) uses the word infodemic to refer to the overabundance of false information and its rapid spread, which makes it difficult to find reliable and trustworthy resources.

### 2.2.4. Hoaxes

Although hoaxes are not new phenomena, modern technology has given these lies a capacity for dissemination and a viral influence that was before unimaginable, even having an impact on how democratic countries conduct elections. Because it makes it easier to produce and distribute false information, the Internet has contributed to the spread of fake news.

### 2.2.5. Deepfakes

According to Andrés Visus, Professor of Undergraduate, Postgraduate, and Executive Education at ESIC, “a deep fake is a video that displays synthetic images, typically of a person's rook, that appear to be real and were created using artificial intelligence. In this case, it refers to machine learning techniques called deep learning, which use neural network algorithmic techniques.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.esic.edu/rethink/tecnologia/deep-fakes-que-es-como-se-crean-primeros-y-futuros>

### 2.2.6. Scams

In an online scam, criminals utilise online platforms to coerce a victim into revealing personal information like bank account logins or account login credentials. Scams can occur on any online service.

Some examples are:

- **Phishing emails or messages** sent to a personal device that demand money or ask for personal information. These can occasionally be made to appear to be coming from reputable organisations or companies.
- **Promotion of products or misleading advertisements**, where they encourage you to buy products that offer things they can't actually offer.
- **Competitions or quizzes** that make you believe that there will be a prize if you participate.
- **Catfishing** where some will pretend to be someone else to trick them into doing something.
- **Identity theft** where people are tricked into sharing personal information to help them hack other accounts.

### 2.2.7. Online challenges

An online challenge is a task that typically entails posting an image or video of your performance of the assigned assignment. They can occur on almost all online platforms, but YouTube and TikTok are where they happen the most frequently.

Young individuals may enjoy taking part in several online challenges. For instance, contests that include dancing or ones that support charitable causes. However, when they include risky stunts or activities that could hurt a young person or others physically or psychologically, online challenges can turn dangerous. Creators of videos can easily modify their work to make it appear as though they took a risk or did something harmful when in fact they didn't.

## 2.3. HOW TO SPOT FAKE NEWS

Now that you know the basics, in this last section of the module, we will discuss the importance of truth, and give you the tools you need to detect fake news.

### 2.3.1. The importance of truth

Lying and disinterest in telling the whole truth have become part of our culture, which has enormous consequences because we are used to accepting information as it comes in without bothering to always seek the truth. We hear information that is later

disproved, but this has no repercussions for the person who has not told the truth, nor is it usually corrected.

Truth, because it gives meaning to respect for others, is an ethical value, one of the fundamental pillars underpinning the moral conscience of a community, and encompasses all spheres of human life.

Telling the truth helps us to empathise and build strong and lasting relationships. It makes us more human, and closer and allows us to relate more and better to the people we love.

This also happens on a personal level. We have been educated to be politically correct and when faced with the opportunity, to be honest, and confront a specific problem, we run away feeding the lie over and over again. Not only on a personal level but especially in the workplace. We run away from conflicts and miss opportunities, to tell the truth. When, by expressing value judgments, politely, we can help one another to build lasting relationships.

The consequences of not being truthful cause problems to grow infinitely because we have not dared to speak the truth. If we all sought to live in truth and seek the truth, less fake news would be generated, or at least we would have the spirit to fight against lies, to constantly seek the truth.

### **And what does truth have to do with journalism?**

Most codes of ethics consider respect for the truth as the first ethical principle that must inspire the behaviour of all information professionals. However, the daily practice of journalism too often departs from this moral criterion. The journalist, as an individual, is pressured by all kinds of pressures: the businessman or editor sets the lines of information, and the political or economic interests to which his medium is beholden promote the behaviour of poor moral quality...

In many cases, the truth is not the fundamental objective of journalistic information. Sometimes it is achieved by omitting essential information about a fact, distorting the informative material, not to mention the occasions when the aim is to indoctrinate, manipulate and, in short, deceive rather than to transmit the complexity of the facts with the utmost rigor.

For journalists, the word truth means fidelity to the facts they report. That is why their truths are provisional, that is, penultimate words because the facts evolve and there will always be something to add to them. The journalist is therefore always ready to correct, add or clarify his or her information about the facts, but this is not always the case.

If we educated citizens and helped them to be "truthful" if we had a society that demands and values the truth, journalists, companies, and all those who use fake news to achieve certain interests would change their minds and at least consider whether it is worth living in a society of lies.

### **Dare to be honest!**

If you have already understood why the value of sincerity is important, you may be interested in knowing how to be a sincere person. You should know that it will take time.

You don't become a sincere person overnight, because it is not enough to reduce the number of lies or to express frankly what you think.

You can start being honest with small steps, which will guide you to gradually integrate the characteristics of a sincere and honest person. To get started, we recommend following the tips below:



# How to be a sincere person

Dare to be honest!



## Acknowledge your own dishonesty

If you want to improve, you first have to acknowledge the problem, so think about the times you have been dishonest with someone in the past and admit that, in some circumstances, you have behaved dishonestly.



## Put yourself in the shoes of others.

Imagine being in the shoes of people with whom you have often been disingenuous, how would you feel about being cheated?



## Face your fears

If you have sometimes been dishonest with others, perhaps it is because you were afraid of exposing yourself to negative judgement from them.



## Be honest in the small things

To get into the habit of being honest, start with the little things.



## Use the right words

There are ways and means of expressing a sincere thought. It all depends on the words we use. Try to be assertive!

Figure 5 – Developed by MEUS

### 2.3.2. Learning to refute fake news

We need to develop the practise of healthy skepticism to counter these hoaxes and false information. To verify information, bear the following in mind:

1. **Verify the author and source's credibility.** Verify the news's signature. Better yet, if information such as an email address, Twitter account, or profile on a website or social network is provided in addition to the complete name because this will show that there is a person behind the information who is capable of taking responsibility for it.
2. **Do not stop at the headline.** It is advisable to read the whole story. Alarmist headlines are looking for our clicks, it is necessary to read the whole content of those news items that are very striking to you.
3. **Be wary of simplistic, exaggerated language,** or language that is more focused on the emotional than on transmitting reliable information.
4. **Does the news item have data, graphs, and statements?** Check that the data must have links to the sources consulted and the statements must come from an identifiable person.
5. **Ignore WhatsApp chains,** and above all, do not continue them! In the same vein, do not take into account audios or videos whose origin we do not know. Find the original content to find out where and when it was generated and by whom. We should ask ourselves how this news reached us: our friends and family can also make the mistake of not checking dubious content and forwarding it to their closest circle.
6. Is the news so shocking that you can't believe it? Or is it so shocking that you believe it? **Analyse your emotional response.** Both reactions are warning signs. Many fake news stories play on our pre-existing beliefs.
7. **Look it up and cross-reference** it with other reliable sources of information if you have any doubts about a piece of information. Compare the outcomes when you Google it.
8. Consider the **ideological bias of excessively politicised content.** In situations of extreme uncertainty such as the one we live in, disinformation is of interest for political gain or economic benefit.
9. **Beware of pseudo-therapies.** Science can be proven with facts and its publication is subject to a system of control, while pseudoscience is based on unproven hypotheses and theories.
10. We will **check the veracity of suspicious images** and videos we receive using Google's reverse image search. Find a tutorial in Chapter 3 Further reading and also following this [link](#).

### 2.3.3. What is doing Europe regarding fake news?

The "Action Plan Against Disinformation" was produced by the European Commission in 2019.

The European Council requested between June and October 2018 that an action plan be developed to address the issues in this area, particularly in light of the upcoming European elections. How to combat misinformation is a key topic, both within the EU and in its surrounding countries.

The Action Plan Against Disinformation aims at:

- Improving detection, analysis, and exposure of disinformation.
- Strengthening cooperation and joint responses to disinformation.
- Mobilizing the private sector to tackle disinformation.
- Raising awareness and improving societal resilience.

In this Action Plan, disinformation is defined 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.

According to a survey conducted for developing this Action Plan, 83% of Europeans think fake news is a threat to democracy and 73% of internet users are concerned about disinformation online in the pre-election period.

In addition to the European disinformation plan, many actions have been taken in Europe to fight disinformation. Below is a chronology of the actions that have been carried out by the European Union institutions, which are shared on the [Commission's website](#).

## **Chronology of EU's actions against disinformation**

From 2015 onwards, the EU and Member States reinforced their approach against disinformation.

### **March 2015**

Launch of the East StratCom Taskforce in the European External Action Service

### **April 2016**

#### **Joint Framework on countering hybrid threats**

A comprehensive approach to improve the common response to the challenges posed by hybrid threats to Member States, citizens and the collective security of Europe.

### **March 2018**

Report of the independent High-Level Expert Group on fake news and online disinformation recommending to tackle pressing problems and longer-term responses to increase societal resilience to disinformation

### **April 2018**

Communication on tackling online disinformation inter alia announcing the code of Practice on Disinformation

### **September 2018**

Communication on securing free and fair European elections

### **October 2018**

#### **Code of practice on disinformation**

An innovative self-regulatory tool to ensure greater transparency and accountability of online platforms, and a framework to monitor and improve online platforms' policies on disinformation.

### **December 2018**

#### **Action Plan against disinformation**

Sets the framework of the EU's actions by improving detection and analysis capabilities, raising awareness, strengthening societal resilience, increasing coordinated responses, and mobilising online platforms and the advertising sector.



## March 2019

Launch of the Rapid Alert System against disinformation.

## June 2020

- **Communication: Tackling COVID-19 disinformation and launch of the COVID-19 disinformation monitoring programme**  
A transparency measure to ensure accountability towards the public of the efforts made by the Code's signatories to limit online disinformation related to COVID-19.
- **Launch of the European Digital Media Observatory**  
Creates and supports a multidisciplinary community, including fact-checkers, academic researchers and other relevant stakeholders contributing to addressing disinformation.
- **Report on the 2019 elections to the European Parliament**

## December 2020

- **Proposal for a Digital Services Act**  
Defines clearer responsibilities and accountability for online platforms tailored to their respective role, size and impact in the online ecosystem.
- **European Democracy Action Plan**  
Includes actions to improve the EU's existing toolbox for countering foreign interference, such as imposing fines and the guidance to strengthen the Code of Practice on Disinformation.

## May 2021

- **Guidance for Strengthening the Code of Practice on Disinformation**  
Commission's views on how platforms should address gaps and shortcomings in the Code and create a more transparent, safe and trustworthy online environment.
- **Launch of the European Digital Media Observatory national hubs**  
To increase the capacity of detecting, analysing and exposing disinformation campaigns.

## June 2021

Launch of the revision process by the signatories to the 2018 Code and additional new prospective signatories.

## November 2021

- Legislative proposal on the transparency and targeting of political advertising

## June 2022

- Strengthened Code of Practice

Disinformation is a cause for concern for European citizens and for democratic governments, since behind fake news there is always an interest in manipulating public opinion and destabilising states and their institutions, endangering democracy and freedom, which is why the European Commission is working on it.

### 3. FURTHER READING

Here we provide you with extra content to go deeper in the topic of this Module:

#### VIDEOS

- [Google Image Search: How can I verify, track, or find information about an image?](#)
- [Here's How Fake News Works \(and How the Internet Can Stop It\)](#)
- [Why Do Our Brains Love Fake News?](#)
- [How Does "Fake" News Become News?](#)
- [5 ways to spot fake news](#)
- [How do fake news sites make money?](#)
- [How to choose your news?](#)

#### FACT CHECKING WEBSITES:

- [FactCheck.org](#)
- [Politifact.com](#)
- [Snopes](#)
- [TruthorFiction](#)
- [Hoax-Slayer](#)

#### Action Plan Against Disinformation

### 4. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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[A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation](#)

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<https://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/analisis/desinformacion-concepto-y-perspectivas/>

[https://uned.libguides.com/noticias\\_falsas/herramientas/cajas](https://uned.libguides.com/noticias_falsas/herramientas/cajas)