Being Alone Together: Developing Fake News Immunity

Presents:

The Fake News Immunity Booklet

What's inside?

1. Manipulations on the internet.
2. The (mis)information ecosystem.
3. Examples from the (social) media.
4. Data literacy.
5. Rhetoric and misinformation
6. Tips on what you can do.
7. Useful links.

1.   <u>Manipulations on the internet</u>

Between a global pandemic, climate crisis, polarised politics and confusing media landscape it is very difficult to make sense of the world today. Fake news, misinformation, conspiracy theories and hoaxes are distributed fast and more effectively than truth, facts and context. It can be sometimes overwhelming to try and understand, cope and engage with the news and social media today. We are here to help.

Hello! We are a group of researchers from Liverpool University and Dundee University, coming from various backgrounds such as media studies, rhetoric and computational reasoning, and we want to help you make sense from all the noise. We designed this booklet based on our UKRI funded project "Being Alone Together: Developing Fake News Immunity" where we examine how news is being checked by fact-checking websites. We are also designing a chat-bot you can talk to and explore the different examples we examined and learn how to spot misinformation on the way.

We hope you enjoy this online exhibition and that your family, friends and community are safe and informed.

Check out our website: https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/humanities-and-social-sciences/research/coronavirus-research/fake-news-immunity/

Keep safe and take care!

Elena Musi, Elinor Carmi, Myrto Aloumpi, Kay O'Halloran, Chris Reed, Simeon Yates, James Etheridge.

2.   The (mis)information ecosystem

We live in a complicated information ecosystem. From Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp and of course the news that we read - it has become difficult to understand what we are reading and engaging with. Is it true? Is it False? And what about all those grey areas? It is all going so fast, what is going on?

We want to make things clearer and help you engage with these types of information in a better way for you. So in this section we want to clear some of the confusion and explain what all these things that you see mean. As we will show in the examples in the next section, the information we engage with, whether text, videos, images or gifs is not so clear cut. There may be **several types** of information manipulations in one newspaper article/tweet/post/video. But to know what each of these types are let's understand what we are dealing with here. Below we give you brief definitions of the types of information manipulations you may have encountered reading about the infodemic:

Mis-information - Information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm.

Dis-information - Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country.

Mal-information - Information that is based in reality, but is used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country.

Satire/Parody - Using humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticise people.

Imposter content - Content that pretends to be a legitimate news media when it is not.

Fabricated content - Inventing content that is not true.

False connection - Making connections between two things that are not connected.

False context - Providing a context to a story that is not true.

Manipulated content - Images and videos that have been deliberately manipulated.

Fake news - Stories which are presented as news while they are not.

Propaganda - Biased or misleading information used to promote a political cause or point of view.

Pseudoscience - Misrepresenting real scientific studies with exaggerated, inaccurate or false claims.

Conspiracy theories - A belief that some covert organisation is responsible for an unexplained event.

Motivation

When we encounter a problematic news, tweet or post it is important to think - what might be the motivation behind it?
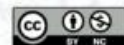
1. Money.
2. Politics/power.
3. Humour/fun.
4. Passion.
5. Provocation.

Source: https://eavi.eu/beyond-fake-news-10-types-misleading-info/

However, misinformation can be unintentional, especially in situations such as the pandemic where knowledge about the virus is constantly evolving and conflicting.

3. Examples of information manipulation

Let's check - Are some news more fake than others?

Example 1

https://ab-tc.com/china-seek-for-courts-approval-to-kill-the-over-20000-coronavirus-patients-to-avoid-further-spread-of-the-virus/
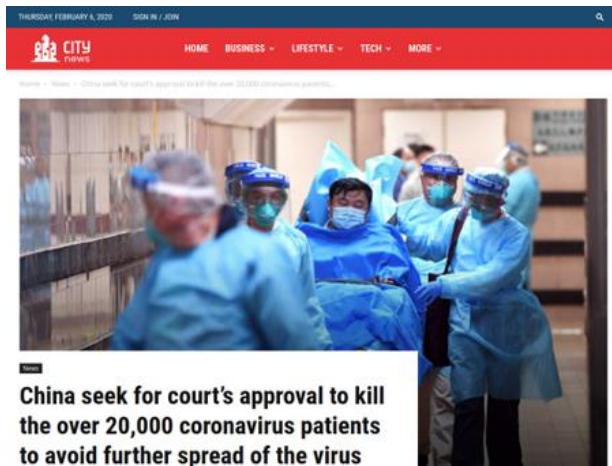
On Feb. 5, 2020, the website AB-TC (aka City News) published an article that said that Chinese officials are seeking approval to start the mass killing of 20,000 people in order to stop the spread of new coronavirus.

Snopes.com found this to be fake news from a source which lacks credibility. They mentioned that the website has a history of fake news creation despite their website not carrying any disclaimers labelling its content as fiction.
   https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/china-kill-coronavirus-patients/?collection-id=240818

Example 2

https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8184259/Malaria-drug-hydroxychloroquine-effective-coronavirus-treatment-currently-available.html

According to MailOnline, 3 April 2020 "Trump-backed anti-malaria drug hydroxychloroquine is the most effective coronavirus treatment currently available". "Majority of 6,200 doctors from 30 nations said malaria drug was most effective."

However, the poll the data relies on is not representative of all doctors. Only 37% of the doctors said hydroxychloroquine was among the most effective treatments. Therefore, the news article can be seen to be 'Cherry Picking' (more about this below) preferable

information to provide their argument with evidence.

How "social" is this news?

https://fullfact.org/health/covid-19-hydroxychloroquine-chloroquine-treatment/

Facebook Interactions	Facebook Reactions	Facebook Shares	Facebook Comments
119543	65712	27045	26786

Example 3

https://www.express.co.uk/life-style/health/1266040/coronavirus-symptoms-signs-covid-19-infection-blood-type-a

News articles and social media posts reported there was a link between those with blood type A and more severe symptoms of coronavirus.

However, according to Ferret Fact Checker (2020), there is not sufficient scientific evidence for this to be proven. Thus, the argument remains unproven and can be classified as Evading the Burden of Proof (more on this below).

Example 4

This photo shows the words "Center for Global Human Population Reduction" inscribed on a Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation building. (http://archive.vn/KkSiu)

Although this is a real picture taken of the Bill & Melinda Gates foundation, the 'Center for Global Human Population Reduction' has been added to the photo using photo editing technologies (Snopes, 2020).
https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/gates-foundation-building/?collection-id=254522

How "social" is this news?

Facebook Interactions	Facebook Reactions	Facebook Shares	Facebook Comments
31526	13556	10287	7683

4.   <u>Data literacies</u>

In order to be able to understand the information manipulations that happen on the news, search results, Twitter/Facebook/Instagram posts, WhatsApp messages you need to have data literacies. That means that you need to understand how things work, what are other options to experience different platforms (for example, using the privacy friendly search engine DuckDuck Go rather than Google Search) and what types of manipulations are happening. This will enable you to make your own decisions about how to interpret different things that happen online and what to do with them.

In our [Me and My Big Data](#) project we developed the [*Data Citizenship*](#) which is a data literacies framework that has three dimensions: Data doing (Citizens' everyday engagements with data), data thinking (citizens' critical understanding of data) and data participating (Citizens' proactive engagement with data and their networks of literacy). As digital data have become the inseparable from our everyday lives, *data citizenship* explores links between data, power and contextuality.

In this booklet we focus on *data thinking*, meaning that citizens learn about different aspects of the online environment and gain knowledge about what they can do to engage in a critical and active way. Developing critical understanding is not necessarily an individual experience, and sharing and teaching your understanding with your family, friends and community can help in establishing healthier environments. This is what we call *networks of literacy* - how people engage with others, where and with which media to gain the understanding, skills and competencies in a way that fits them.

To become a data citizen, we are going to teach you a few tricks drawn from rhetoric. More specifically, in the following pages we will provide you with an easy way to identify potential information manipulations, through a series of common rhetorical strategies around false information called fallacies.

5.   <u>Rhetoric and misinformation</u>

Rhetoric is as old as language itself and the beginning of social and political life. In fact, rhetoric is inseparable from the use of language: when people wanted to impress their audiences and persuade them towards a particular course of action using specific strategies of speech, rhetoric came into use. In addition, rhetoric encapsulates the relationship between language and power: we use language not merely to communicate information, but also to steer the emotions of our audience, to create boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, to shape and reshape social norms.

In the world of (social) media, the power of rhetoric is amplified and whether news becomes viral is ultimately a matter of persuasion. In this contemporary "agora" ('public square'), being able to reach a broader audience can quickly become a valuable asset. At the same time, it can also be harmful when what is rapidly spread is misinformation. Ultimately, rhetoric is a double-edged sword as it can be employed in order to convey information in ways that are persuasive yet flawed, i.e., fallacious.

Language is powerful, and policing information is a challenging task! Being aware of the power of rhetoric and its many ways can make us better speakers and more critical citizens. Getting to know how rhetorical persuasion works can be an invaluable weapon in the fight against misinformation and disinformation.

Tips - How to spot fallacious news?

These are the most frequent fallacies found in COVID-19 news:

1. **No proof** - saying something without providing proof.

   Example: A politician tweeting that a vaccine for Covid19 was found without providing proof.

   Question: Is there any evidence apart from the author's personal guarantee?

2. **Strawman** - intentionally misrepresenting the other side.

   Example: A politician arguing that the he does not have to follow the advice of the World Health Organisation (WHO) since it did not give positive results in the past, even though that piece of advice was good at that time and context.

   Question: Is the other side's opinion misrepresented (e.g. exaggerated)?

3. **False Authority** - trying to claim authority when the person/source lacks credibility.

Example: When a politician says he knows that the climate crisis does not exist because he did research on it.

Question: Is the authority a genuine and impartial source?

4. **Red Herring** - giving misleading/distracting/irrelevant arguments for a standpoint.

Example: When a politician is asked to assess the seriousness of the Covid19 pandemic and replies that corruption is a worse problem.

Question: Are the provided arguments relevant for the standpoint?

5. **Cherry picking** - choosing information that supports a given position, while ignoring or dismissing information which does not support it.

Example: When a politician announces that schools should be open because one research indicates that kids are less affected by a virus, while other research suggests otherwise.

Question: Is there any other data available which would bring to a different news?

6. **False analogy** - making comparisons which are not true.

Example: When someone compares Covid19 with regular flu.

Questions: Are the two situations alike for real?

7. **(Hasty) Generalisation** - making an inference from a specific case onto a broader context.

Example: Arguing that all people from a specific race are more likely to refuse to wear face-masks because of one incident.

Question: Is the specific case representative of the broader context?

8. **Post hoc** - making a causal argument when a simple correlation is at stake.

Example: Claiming that 5G is causing covid19.

Question: Is it possible that the situations co-occur by coincidence?

9. **False cause** - claiming a false cause for a particular thing.

Example: When someone claims that ibuprofen makes Covid19 worse.

10. **Ambiguity/Vagueness** - providing vague and ambiguous information.

Example: A council stating that there is a fair number of available swabs without specifying what "fair" means

<u>Question</u>: Are there words with an ambiguous or vague meaning?

6. Useful links

Information about covid-19

https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019
https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/
https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus

Information about dis/mis/information

https://firstdraftnews.org/
https://www.disinfo.eu/
https://fakenews.publicdatalab.org/

Fact-checkers

https://www.factcheck.org/
https://www.snopes.com/
https://www.reuters.com/fact-check
https://fullfact.org/

Digital literacy

https://eavi.eu/
https://www.theguardian.com/newswise
https://literacytrust.org.uk/