

## MODULE 2

### Thinking about 'information disorder': formats of misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information

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#### Synopsis

*There have been many uses of the term 'fake news' and even 'fake media' to describe reporting with which the claimant does not agree. A Google Trends map shows that people began searching for the term extensively in the second half of 2016.<sup>54</sup> In this module participants will learn why that term is a) inadequate for explaining the scale of information pollution, and b) why the term has become so problematic that we should avoid using it.*

Unfortunately, the phrase is inherently vulnerable to being politicised and deployed as a weapon against the news industry, as a way of undermining reporting that people in power do not like. Instead, it is recommended to use the terms misinformation and disinformation. This module will examine the different types that exist and where these types sit on the spectrum of 'information disorder'.

This covers satire and parody, click-bait headlines, and the misleading use of captions, visuals or statistics, as well as the genuine content that is shared out of context, imposter content (when a journalist's name or a newsroom logo is used by people with no connections to them), and manipulated and fabricated content. From all this, it emerges that this crisis is much more complex than the term 'fake news' suggests.

If we want to think about solutions to these types of information polluting our social media streams and stopping them from flowing into traditional media outputs, we need to start thinking about the problem much more carefully. We also need to think about the people who are creating this type of content, and what is motivating them to do this. What types of content are they producing, and how are they being received by audiences? And when those same audience members decide to re-share those posts, what's motivating them to do that? There are many aspects to this issue, and many of the debates are not grasping this complexity. By the end of this module, learners should feel able to use terminology and definitions that are appropriate for discussing the problems associated with 'information disorder'.

<sup>54</sup> Google Trend Map of the term Fake News <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=today%205-y&q=fake%20news> [accessed 06/04/2018].



## Outline

This handbook generally uses the terms “disinformation” and “misinformation” to contrast with the verifiable information, in the public interest, which is what authentic journalism gives rise to. In this module, focus is put on the distinctiveness of disinformation.

Much of the discourse on ‘fake news’ conflates two notions: misinformation and disinformation. It can be helpful, however, to propose that misinformation is information that is false, but the person who is disseminating it believes that it is true. Disinformation is information that is false, and the person who is disseminating it knows it is false. It is a deliberate, intentional lie, and points to people being actively disinformationed by malicious actors.<sup>55</sup>

A third category could be termed mal-information; information, that is based on reality, but used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country. An example is a report that reveals a person’s sexual orientation without public interest justification. It is important to distinguish messages that are true from those that are false, but also those that are true (and those messages with some truth) but which are created, produced or distributed by “agents” who intend to harm rather than serve the public interest. Such mal-information – like true information that violates a person’s privacy without public interest justification - goes against the standards and ethics of journalism.

Notwithstanding the distinctions above, the consequences on the information environment and society may be similar (e.g. corrupting the integrity of democratic process, reducing vaccination rates). In addition, particular cases may exhibit combinations of these three conceptualisations, and there is evidence that individual examples of one are often accompanied by the others (e.g. on different platforms or in sequence) as part of

a broader information strategy by particular actors. Nevertheless, it is helpful to keep the distinctions in mind because the causes, techniques and remedies can vary accordingly.

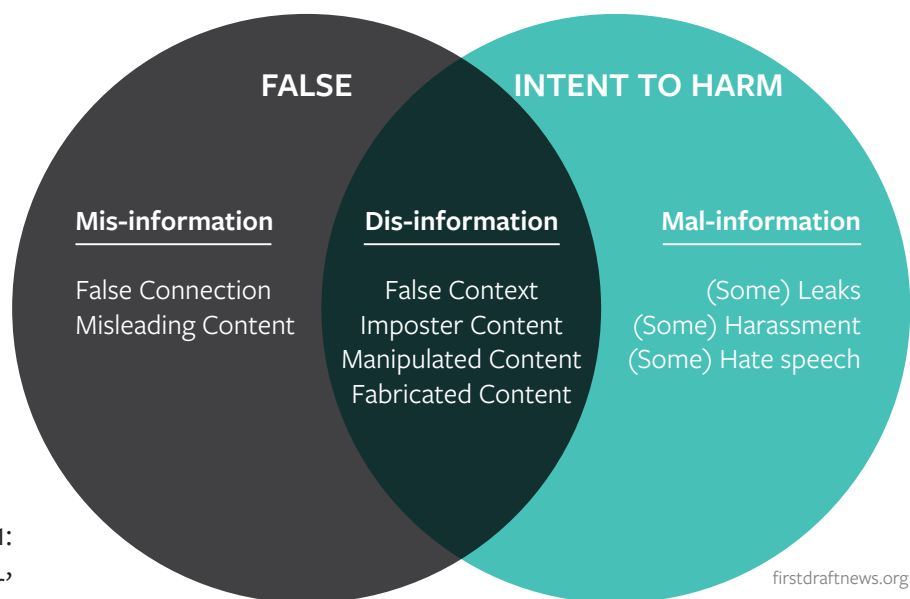


Figure 1:  
‘Information disorder’

<sup>55</sup> Further insight into definitions can be observed in the study by Karlova and Fisher (2012).

The 2017 French presidential election provided examples that illustrate all three types of 'information disorder'.

### 1. Examples of disinformation:

One of the attempted hoaxes of the French election campaign, was the creation of a sophisticated duplicate version of the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir*<sup>56</sup> with a false article claiming that the presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron was being funded by Saudi Arabia. Another example was the circulation of documents online claiming falsely that he had opened an offshore bank account in the Bahamas.<sup>57</sup> And finally, disinformation circulated via 'Twitter raids' in which loosely connected networks of individuals simultaneously took to Twitter with identical hashtags and messages to spread rumours about the candidate's personal life.

### 2. Examples of misinformation:

A terror attack on the Champs Elysees in Paris on 20 April 2017 inspired a great deal of misinformation<sup>58</sup> as is the case in almost all breaking news situations. Individuals on social media unwittingly published a number of rumours, including the news that a second policeman had been killed, for example. The people sharing this type of content are rarely doing so to cause harm. Rather, they are caught up in the moment, trying to be helpful, but fail to adequately inspect and verify the information they are sharing.

### 3. Examples of mal-information:

One striking example of mal-information occurred when Emmanuel Macron's emails were leaked just before the run-off vote on 7 May. The emails were regarded as genuine. However, by releasing private information into the public sphere minutes before the standard electoral ban on any coverage immediately ahead of polling, the leak was designed to cause maximum harm to the Macron campaign.

The term propaganda is not synonymous with disinformation, although disinformation can serve the interests of propaganda. But propaganda is usually more overtly manipulative than disinformation, typically because it traffics in emotional rather than informational messaging.<sup>59</sup>

In this module, we concentrate on misinformation and particularly disinformation, and share some examples of further different types.

56 CrossCheck, 2017. *Was Macron's campaign for French Presidency financed by Saudi Arabia?* Available at <https://crosscheck.firstdraftnews.org/checked-french/macrons-campaign-french-presidency-financed-saudi-arabia/> [accessed 03/04/2018].

57 CrossCheck, 2017. *Did Emmanuel Macron Open an Offshore Account?* CrossCheck, Available at <https://crosscheck.firstdraftnews.org/checked-french/emmanuel-macron-open-offshore-account/> [accessed 03/04/2018].

58 One example was the rumour that Muslims in the UK celebrated the attack. This was debunked by the CrossCheck project: CrossCheck, (April 22, 2017) *Did London Muslims 'celebrate' a terrorist attack on the Champs-Elysees?* CrossCheck, Available at <https://crosscheck.firstdraftnews.com/checked-french/london-muslims-celebrate-terrorist-attack-champs-elysees/> [accessed 03/04/2018].

59 Neale, S. (1977). *Propaganda*. Screen 18-3, pp 9-40

The categories of disinformation, misinformation and mal-information outlined above should not be conflated with different orientations with genuine news narratives.

For example, one journalist may write, “While not in the league of Bernie Madoff, the alleged fraud in this new case has hit small investors hard”. Another writer could legitimately put it the other way around: “The alleged fraud in this new case has hit small investors hard, but it is not in the league of Bernie Madoff”. The second phrasing does more to minimise the comparative significance of the new case. The matter of differing emphasis in these examples does not per se amount to perpetuating misinformation or disinformation in the senses described below. These could be two legitimate ways of interpreting the same situation.

The point is that narrative is present in news, as well as in disinformation, misinformation and mal-information. Thus narrative is embedded in what facts are selected as salient in the news (or in what facts are made up or taken out of context in toxic communications). A news report on crime, that is not disinformation or its cousins, may see it as relevant to mention the presumed race or nationality of a perpetrator and victim. It may be a fact that an alleged mugger is a migrant and a male, and the apparent victim a national who is female; whether any of that is actually salient to the story, however, is a function of investigative power of the journalist, and particularly part of the ideology, perspective and narrative of significance and causality that the reporter consciously or unconsciously puts ‘on the table’. This is one reason why “fact-checking” can be profitably accompanied by “narrative unpacking” – examining the structures of meaning within which facts and non-facts are mobilised for particular purposes. Narratives within legitimate journalism may vary, and their existence does not mean that journalism loses its distinctiveness when compared to narratives in other forms of communication, such as the seven listed below:

### 1. *Satire and Parody*

Including satire in a typology about disinformation and misinformation, is perhaps surprising. Satire and parody could be considered as a form of art. However, in a world where people increasingly receive information via their social feeds, there has been confusion when it is not understood a site is satirical. An example is from *The Khabaristan Times*, a satirical column and site that were part of the news site *Pakistan Today*.<sup>60</sup> In January 2017, the site was blocked in Pakistan and therefore stopped publishing.<sup>61</sup>

60 Pakistan Today (2018). *Anthropologists make contact with remote cut-off tribe still thanking Raheel Sharif*. [online] p.Khabaristan Today. Available at: <https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2017/01/11/anthropologists-make-contact-with-remote-cut-off-tribe-still-thanking-raheel-sharif/> [accessed 06/04/2018].

61 Among the resources for consultation here is one written by co-editor of this book, Julie Posetti, along with Alice Mathews, available at: (TBA)

## 2. False Connection

When headlines, visuals or captions do not support the content, this is an example of false connection. The most common example of this type of content is clickbait headlines. With the increased competition for audience attention, editors increasingly have to write headlines to attract clicks, even if when people read the article they feel that they have been deceived. A particularly egregious example can be found on *The Political Insider* website<sup>62</sup>. This can also happen when visuals or captions are used, particularly on sites like Facebook, to give a certain impression, which is not backed up by the text. But when people scroll through feeds on their social accounts without clicking through to articles (which often happens), misleading visuals and captions can be especially deceptive.

## 3. Misleading Content

This type of content is when there is a misleading use of information to frame issues or individuals in certain ways by cropping photos, or choosing quotes or statistics selectively. This is called Framing Theory<sup>63</sup>. Some examples have been exposed on Rappler.com.<sup>64</sup> Visuals are particularly powerful vehicles for disseminating misleading information, as our brains are less likely to be critical of visuals.<sup>65</sup> “Native’ or paid advertising that mimics editorial content also falls into this category when it is insufficiently identified as sponsored.<sup>66</sup>

## 4. False Context

One of the reasons the term ‘fake news’ is so unhelpful, is because genuine content is often seen being re-circulated out of its original context. For example, an image from Vietnam, captured in 2007, re-circulated seven years later, was shared under the guise that it was a photograph from Nepal in the aftermath of the earthquake in 2015.<sup>67</sup>

## 5. Imposter Content

There are real issues with journalists having their bylines used alongside articles they did not write, or organisations’ logos used in videos or images that they did not create. For example, ahead of the Kenyan elections in 2017, *BBC Africa* found out that someone had created a video with a photoshopped BBC logo and strap line, and it was circulating

62 The Political Insider (2015). *First time voter waited 92 years to meet Trump... what happened next is AMAZING!* [online] Available at: <https://thepoliticalinsider.com/first-time-voter-waited-92-years-to-meet-trump-what-happened-next-is-amazing/> [accessed 06/04/2018].

63 Entman, R., Matthes, J. and Pellicano, L. (2009). Nature, sources, and effects of news framing. In: K. Wahl-Jorgensen and T. Hanitzsch (Contributor), ed., *Handbook of Journalism studies*. [online] New York: Routledge, pp.196-211. Available at: <https://centreforjournalism.co.uk/sites/default/files/richardpendry/Handbook%20of%20Journalism%20Studies.pdf> [accessed 03/04/ 2018].

64 Punongbayan, J. (2017). *Has change really come? Misleading graphs and how to spot them*. Rappler.com. [online] Available at: <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/20177731-duterte-change-fake-news-graphs-spot> [accessed 06/04/2018].

65 See article by Hannah Guy in required reading section of this lesson

66 See Module Three

67 Pham, N. (2018). *Haunting ‘Nepal quake victims photo’ from Vietnam*. BBC. [online] Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-32579598> <https://www.rappler.com/thought-leaders/20177731-duterte-change-fake-news-graphs-spot> [accessed 06/04/2018].

on *WhatsApp*.<sup>68</sup> They therefore had to make a video that they shared on social media, warning people not to be fooled by the fabricated video.

### 6. Manipulated Content

Manipulated content is when genuine content is manipulated to deceive. An example from South Africa shows manipulated images of HuffPost Editor-at-Large Ferial Haffajee – in one case, sitting on the lap of a businessman, Johan Rupert – imputing a personal relationship with him.<sup>69</sup>

### 7. Fabricated Content

This type of content can be text format, such as the completely fabricated 'news sites', like WTOE5 News, the self-proclaimed fantasy news site which published an article suggesting that the Pope had endorsed Donald Trump for President. Or it can be visual, as was the case when a graphic was created which incorrectly suggested that people could vote for Hillary Clinton via SMS<sup>70</sup>. These graphics targeted minority communities on social networks in the lead up to the Presidential election in the USA.

The public in general, and journalists especially, need to separately examine the 'elements' of 'information disorder': the agent, messages and interpreters. In this matrix, there are questions that need to be asked of each element. The agent who creates a fabricated message might be different to the agent who produces that message—who might also be different from the 'agent' who distributes the message. Similarly, there is a need for a thorough understanding of who these agents are and what motivates them. The different types of messages being distributed by agents also need to be understood, so that we can start estimating the scale of each and begin addressing them. (The debate to date has been overwhelmingly focused on fabricated text news sites, but visual content is just as widespread and much harder to identify and debunk.)

Finally, there is a need to consider the three different 'phases' of 'information disorder': creation, production, and distribution (Figure 2). It is important to consider the different phases of an instance of 'information disorder' alongside its elements because the agent who masterminds the content is often separate from the producers and disseminators.

68 BBC (2017). *Kenya election: Fake CNN and BBC news reports circulate*. [Online] Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-40762796> [accessed 06/04/2018].

69 Haffajee, F. (2017). *Ferial Haffajee: The Gupta fake news factory and me*. HuffPost South Africa. [online] Available at: [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.za/2017/06/05/ferial-haffajee-the-gupta-fake-news-factory-and-me\\_a\\_22126282/](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.za/2017/06/05/ferial-haffajee-the-gupta-fake-news-factory-and-me_a_22126282/) [accessed 06/04/2018].

70 Haltiwanger, J. (2016). *Trump Trolls Tell Hillary Clinton Supporters They Can Vote Via Text*. Elite Daily. Available at <https://www.elitedaily.com/news/politics/trump-trolls-hillary-clinton-voting-text-message/1680338> [accessed on 23/03/2018].

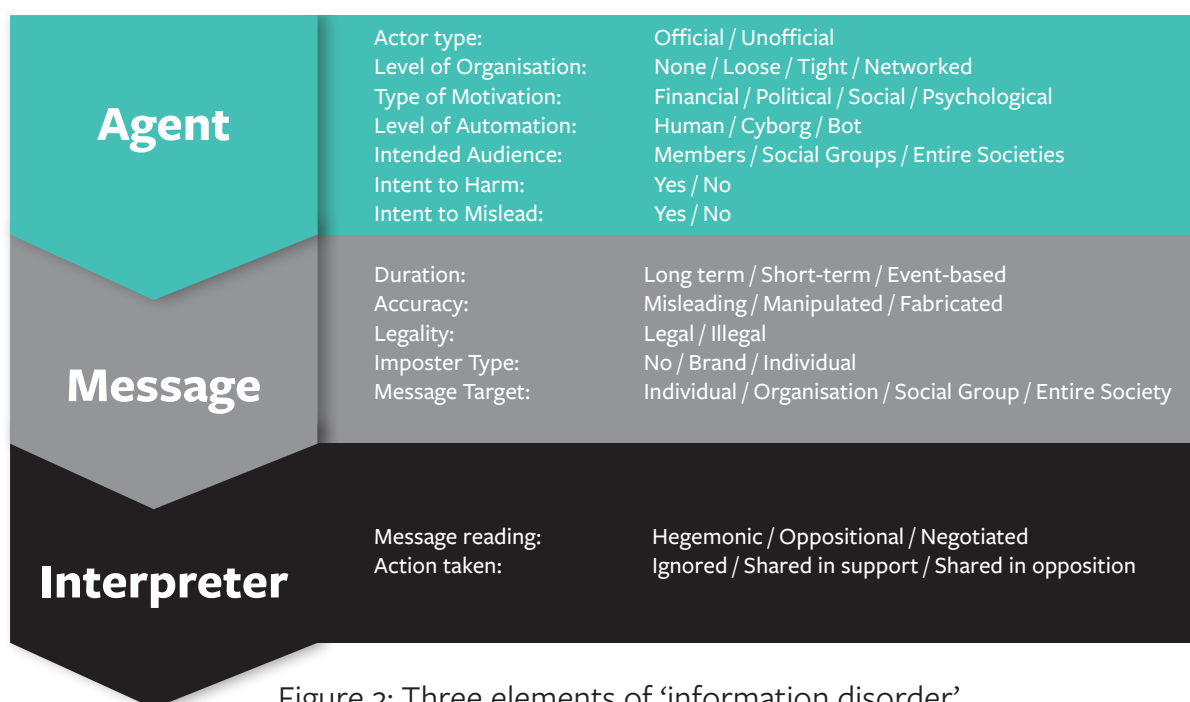


Figure 2: Three elements of 'information disorder'

For example, the motivations of the mastermind who 'creates' a state-sponsored disinformation campaign are very different from those of the low-paid 'trolls' tasked with turning the campaign's themes into specific posts. And once a message has been distributed, it can be reproduced and redistributed endlessly, by many different actors, all with different motivations. For example, a social media post can be distributed by several communities, leading its message to be picked up and reproduced by the mainstream media (operating without sufficient scrutiny) and further distributed to still other communities. Only by dissecting 'information disorder' in this manner can we begin to understand these nuances.<sup>71</sup>

71 Note from the Editors: A further graphic that may be considered is reproduced below:

	<b>Actors: Governments, psy-ops, political parties, entrepreneurs, PR firms, individuals, media</b>	<b>Software enablement</b>
<b>Create content</b> – eg. stories, comments, "likes", videos, memes.	Often with concealed or stolen or false ID	Interactive interfaces
<b>Circulate content</b> such as by sharing and linking	Harnessing bots to help	Bots
<b>"Edit" content:</b> alter/amend, moderate & curate	Hacking and gaming	Algorithms

Table: Framework for toxicity – how the integrity of information can be corrupted

Source: Berger, G. 2017. [https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/fake\\_news\\_berger.pdf](https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/fake_news_berger.pdf) [accessed 22/04/2018].

The example of the site that published a viral story that the Pope endorsed presidential candidate Donald Trump is one of the most famous.<sup>72</sup> It is a useful case study for thinking about the different phases of 'information disorder' (See Figure 3).

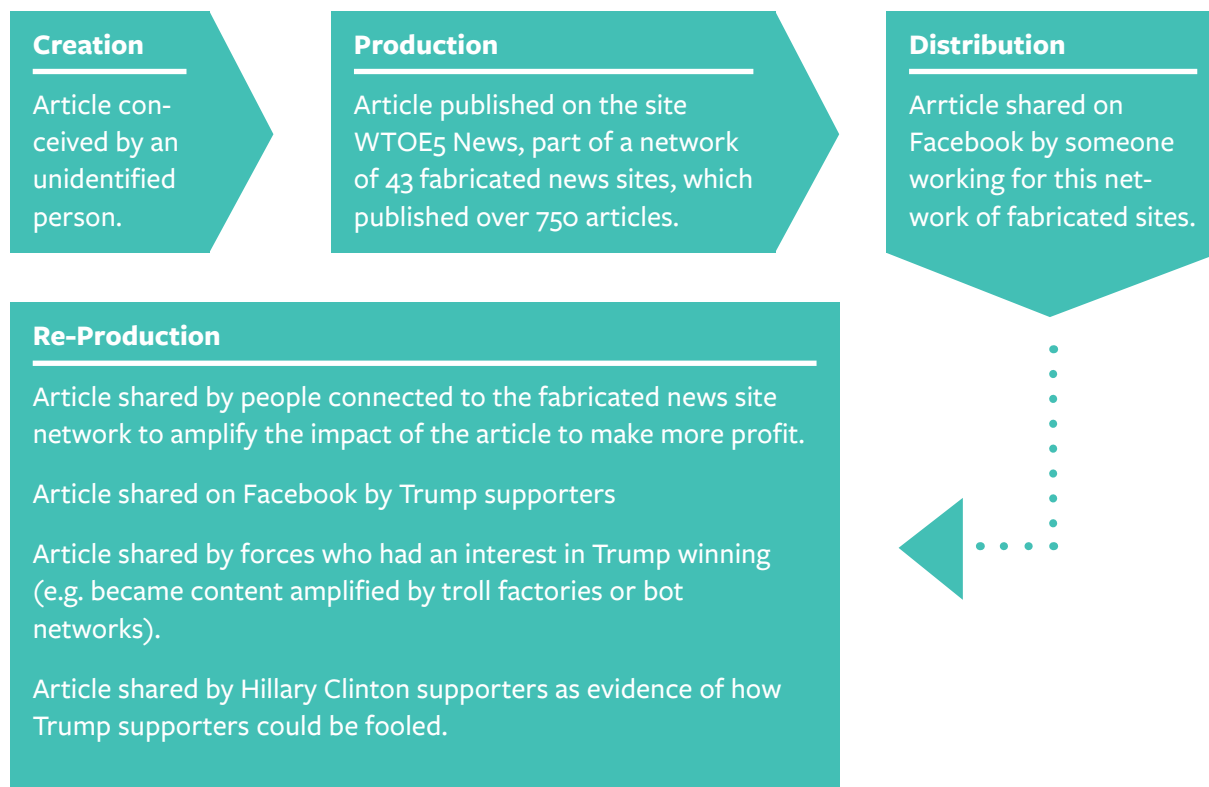


Figure 3: Phases of 'information disorder'



## Module Aims

- ▶ To be a more discerning consumer of information found online, by thinking about the broad spectrum of disinformation and misinformation.
- ▶ To think critically about the (often anonymous or imposter) people who create these types of information, what formats it takes, how it may be interpreted and how it spreads.
- ▶ To understand the complexities of 'information disorder', particularly the need to differentiate between those who create these types of information, the formats they use and the way that audiences may share those messages.
- ▶ To be able to consider the difficulties we have in terms of addressing the challenges of disinformation and misinformation.
- ▶ To underline the issue of how the 'information disorder' affects democracies and open societies – the subject of the previous module.

<sup>72</sup> WTOE 5News (2016). *Pope Francis shocks world, endorses Donald Trump for President, releases statement*. [online] Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20161115024211/http://wtoe5news.com/us-election/pope-francis-shocks-world-endorses-donald-trump-for-president-releases-statement/> [accessed 06/04/2018].





## Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, participants will be able to:

1. Appreciate the ways in which this topic has been discussed and shaped by politicians, the news media and academics.
2. Understand how harm and falsity are ways of thinking about 'information disorder'.
3. Understand the types of misinformation and disinformation and apply them to different examples.
4. Think critically about an example of disinformation, breaking down who initiated and/or created it, what the message looked like and how it might have been interpreted by audiences.
5. Explain to someone else why it is important that we think about this issue carefully.



## Module Format

### **Theoretical Lecture & Practical Workshop:**

The slides for this Module<sup>73</sup> are designed to support a longer-form interactive workshop.

However, for the purpose of this curriculum, the text above is suggested as the basis for a theoretical lecture. The practical exercises contained within the slides have been extracted for a 90-minute tutorial. Educators should work through the slides, using the discussion questions and exercises.

Exercise 1: Look at Figure 4 below, which explains '7 types of disinformation and misinformation'. In pairs or small groups, participants can be asked to provide examples that fit into these categories.

<sup>73</sup> Slides available to download at: [https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/fake\\_news\\_syllabus\\_-\\_model\\_course\\_1\\_-\\_slide\\_deck.pdf](https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/fake_news_syllabus_-_model_course_1_-_slide_deck.pdf)

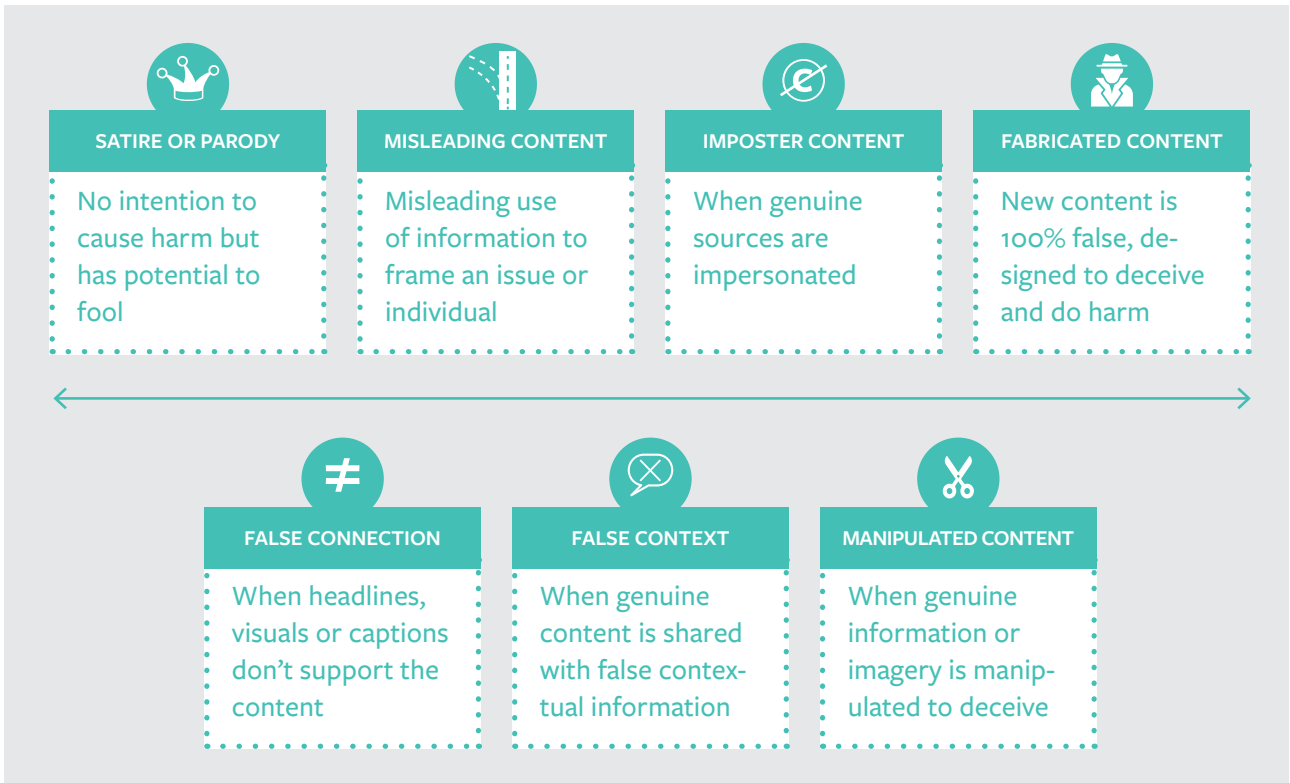


Figure 4: Seven categories of 'information disorder' - [firstdraftnews.org](http://firstdraftnews.org)

Exercise 2: Examine the Venn diagram (Figure 1), which explains the differences between misinformation, disinformation and malinformation. Do you agree with it? What's missing? Is there anything that you would challenge?

### Linking Plan to Learning Outcomes

#### A. Theoretical

Lecture	Number of hours	Learning Outcomes
Presentation and class discussions: Sharing previous knowledge about recent cases of disinformation and misinformation	90 mins	1

#### B. Practical

Lecture	Number of hours	Learning Outcomes
Exercise 1: Look at Figure 4, which explains types of disinformation and misinformation, and in pairs or small groups, find examples that fit into these categories.	45 mins	2

Exercise 2: Examine Figure 1, which explains the differences between misinformation, disinformation and 'malinformation'. Do you agree with it? What's missing? Is there anything that you would challenge?	45 mins	3
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### Suggested Assignment

Create a storyboard<sup>74</sup> for an explanatory video that a social media company could run at the top of the Newsfeed to educate their users about what they should watch out for when they are consuming information on the site. Participants could include examples of disinformation and misinformation that they have encountered in the course of this module to highlight the risks of simply 'liking', 'sharing', and commenting on posts where the reader has not ascertained whether it is likely to be true or not. A simple storyboarding tool can be found here: <http://www.storyboardthat.com/>



### Materials

Slides: [https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/fake\\_news\\_syllabus\\_-\\_model\\_course\\_1\\_-\\_slide\\_deck.pdf](https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/fake_news_syllabus_-_model_course_1_-_slide_deck.pdf)



### Reading

Berger, G. 2017. Fake news and the future of professional and ethical journalism.

Presentation at conference organized by the Joint Extremism/Digital Europe Working Group Conference of the European Parliament on 6 September 2017 [https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/fake\\_news\\_berger.pdf](https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/fake_news_berger.pdf)

Busby, M. I. Khan & E. Watling (2017) *Types of Misinformation During the UK Election*, First Draft News, Available at <https://firstdraftnews.com/misinfo-types-uk-election/>

Guy, H. (2017) *Why we need to understand misinformation through visuals*, First Draft News, Available at <https://firstdraftnews.com/understanding-visual-misinfo/>

<sup>74</sup> Note: Storyboarding is the creative planning process used in advertising, film, documentary-making and journalism that presents a frame-by-frame pictorial representation of the flow of text, video or audio content

- Karlova, N.A. and Fisher, K.E. (2012) "Plz RT": A Social Diffusion Model of Misinformation and Disinformation for Understanding Human Information Behaviour. Proceedings of the ISIC2012 (Tokyo). Available at [https://www.hastac.org/sites/default/files/documents/karlova\\_12\\_isic\\_misdismodel.pdf](https://www.hastac.org/sites/default/files/documents/karlova_12_isic_misdismodel.pdf)
- Silverman, C. (2017) *This is How your Hyperpartisan Political News Get Made*, BuzzFeed News, Available at <https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/how-the-hyperpartisan-sausage-is-made?>
- Wardle, C. & H. Derakhshan (2017) *Information Disorder: Towards an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy-Making*. Council of Europe. Available at <https://firstdraftnews.com/resource/coe-report/>
- Wardle, C. & H. Derakhshan (2017) *One year on, we're still not recognizing the complexity of information disorder online*, First Draft News, Available at [https://firstdraftnews.org/coe\\_infodisorder/](https://firstdraftnews.org/coe_infodisorder/)
- Zuckerman, E. (2017) *Stop Saying Fake News, It's Not Helping*, My Heart's in Accra, Available at <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2017/01/30/stop-saying-fake-news-its-not-helping/>