Report
Fake News Hunters



Training course
18-24 June 2023
Varna, Bulgaria

Funded by
the European Union

The purpose of this report about the Fake News Hunters training course is to motivate other non-governmental organisations and youth workers to develop similar projects and initiatives to connect, engage and empower young people and journalists in the sphere of media literacy, citizen journalism and the combat of the spread of disinformation and fake news.

The training course took place in Golden Sands seaside resort on the Northen Bulgarian Black Sea coast. The chosen accommodation was Detelina Hotel, which once again proved to be an ideal place for conducting the activities as it is located away from the big city, making it easy to work outside and enjoy the first days of summertime.

18 youth workers and journalists took part in the training course, from 6 European Countries: Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia. The participants arrived at the hotel on 18 June in the evening and left on 24 June in the early morning.

Host organisation:

Foundation for Entrepreneurship, Culture and Education, Bulgaria

Partners:

Multi Kulti, Romania
Fundacja Inkubator Innowacji, Poland
Youth for Equality, Slovakia
Društvo Mladi Evropejci, Slovenia
Organizacija kreativnog okupljanja, Serbia

The spread of disinformation and misinformation can have harmful effects, create polarising debates, spread propaganda and challenges our societies and democracies. The European Commission, jointly with the other institutions, is promoting the fight against disinformation through a number of action plans, large-scale disinformation campaigns and launching observatories for fact-checking across Member States.

To tackle these negative phenomena, the EU promotes media literacy education, raising skills and competences for critical and analytical thinking and promoting recommendations to combat the spread of fake news and propaganda. The project *Fake News Hunters* is a training course aimed at youth workers and journalists who wish to raise skills and competences for critical thinking and media literacy, learn new ways for fact-checking and jointly combat the spread of disinformation and fake news. Participants in the training have improved their competences to effectively participate in society by making informed choices, have become hunters of fake news and have been able to objectively report on news and events that are important for them.

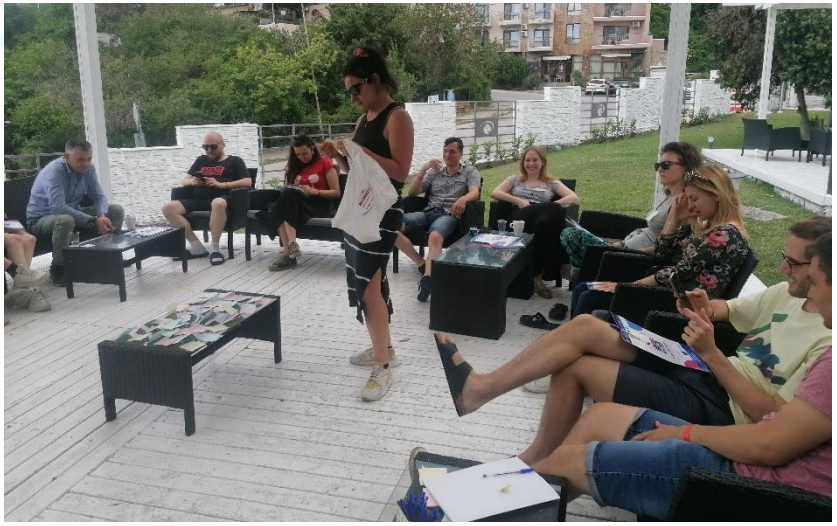


Specific objectives:

- To get acquainted with the European Commission's actions plans in the field of the fight against disinformation
- To get new knowledge on media literacy and critical thinking
- To raise skills and competences to effectively fact-check the objectivity and biasness of media and news they consume
- To learn ways on how to report objectively and with an attention to detail
- To make sound decisions when decoding media messages and contribute to public discourse

Training methods:

- Energizers, ice-breakers games
- Role-playing games, simulations, teamwork
- Discussions, brainstorming and reflection
- Intercultural and experiential learning



The reached results of the project are:

- Participants increased their understanding of European Commission's action plans in the field of fight against disinformation
- Participants acquired new knowledge on media literacy and enhanced their critical and analytical thinking skills
- Participants deepened their knowledge on fact-checking platforms and now are more aware of the media they consume, as well as, learned ways how to report objectively and with attention to detail
- Empowered youth workers to become active European citizens and make sound decisions when decoding media messages and contribute to public discourse
- Learned about the possibilities that are offered by the Erasmus+ Programme



Developed skills during the 5 days of training:

Information and data literacy: To analyse, compare and critically evaluate the credibility and reliability of sources of data, information and digital content. To analyse, interpret and critically evaluate the data, information and digital content.

Communication and collaboration: Improving interpersonal skills and learning to communicate ideas effectively and work with others. To adapt communication strategies to the specific audience and to be aware of cultural and generational diversity in digital environments.

Digital content creation: To modify, refine and integrate new information and content into an existing body of knowledge and resources to create new, original and relevant content and knowledge.

Problem solving skills: To engage individually and collectively in cognitive processing to understand and resolve conceptual problems and problem situations in different spheres.

Leadership skills: Abilities or strengths shown by people in management roles that aid in guiding and encouraging a group of people and their team towards achieving a common goal or set of goals.

Critical and analytical thinking skills: These refer to soft skills to use logic and critical thinking to analyse a situation in a given context. This refers to making reasonable judgments that are logical and well thought off.

What is Media Literacy?

To start, participants were encouraged to first come up with an individual definition of media literacy. Then, each of them had to find a pair and come up with one agreed definition between them. Further, participants got in groups of four and later in groups of eight, to debate and come up with one final agreed definition. The definitions of each group are as follows:

1) Media Literacy is achieved by research and critical thinking of a reader and his ability to evaluate the factuality of a message delivered by the media.

2) Media Literacy is the knowledge of how to interpret information, data and opinions, understanding why the article is written the way it is written and to decide the weight of a given information.



Elevator Pitch

As a journalist and hunter of fake news you need “an elevator pitch”. Through the elevator pitch brief, participants created their persuasive speeches, to spark the interest in their works and fields of interest where action is needed.

The Elevator Pitch comes from the idea that you should be able to deliver a succinct, compelling description of what you offer in the time it takes to ride an elevator up a few floors—approximately 30 seconds to two minutes. In the field of journalism, this tool could be used to find sponsors, publishers and even collaborators.



The participants had 45 minutes to prepare for the 30-second speech in groups. While one group was presenting the others were allowed to make a final assessment of whether the speech and the topic had captured their attention. There was room for questions and finally a discussion on what should be improved.

Through the activity **Hood stories** participants were introduced to critical and analytical thinking. They had to work in groups and identify a pressing problem in their communities and report objectively and unbiased on this particular problem. Then, in the second part of the activities, each small group had to nominate two investigative journalists that went to each other group and collected information concerning the issues in the other community. Finally, participants prepared short articles.

To further explore critical and analytical thinking, participants got introduced to the cognitive mechanisms study, which can help in decoding media messages and spot fake news.

Cognitive mechanisms *studies how the human brain realises the mental activities of perception, learning, memory, thinking, emotion, and consciousness from the micro, meso, and macro scales. Perception is the process of people's perception and the perception of objective things.*



Then, participants were divided in groups of four and had to prepare a short non-verbal play to present the particular mechanisms.

Confirmation bias

This is the tendency to seek out and believe information that confirms our pre-existing beliefs or values, and to discount or ignore information that contradicts them. People are more likely to believe and share fake news if it aligns with their existing beliefs.

Source credibility bias

This is the tendency to believe information that comes from sources that we perceive as credible or trustworthy. Fake news can be more persuasive if it is presented by a source that is perceived as credible, such as a respected news organisation or public figure, but also from figures/sources that people think are credible, but are not.

Novelty effect

People are often attracted to news that is new or unusual. Fake news exploits this cognitive mechanism by presenting sensationalistic news that captures people's attention.

Emotional contagion effect

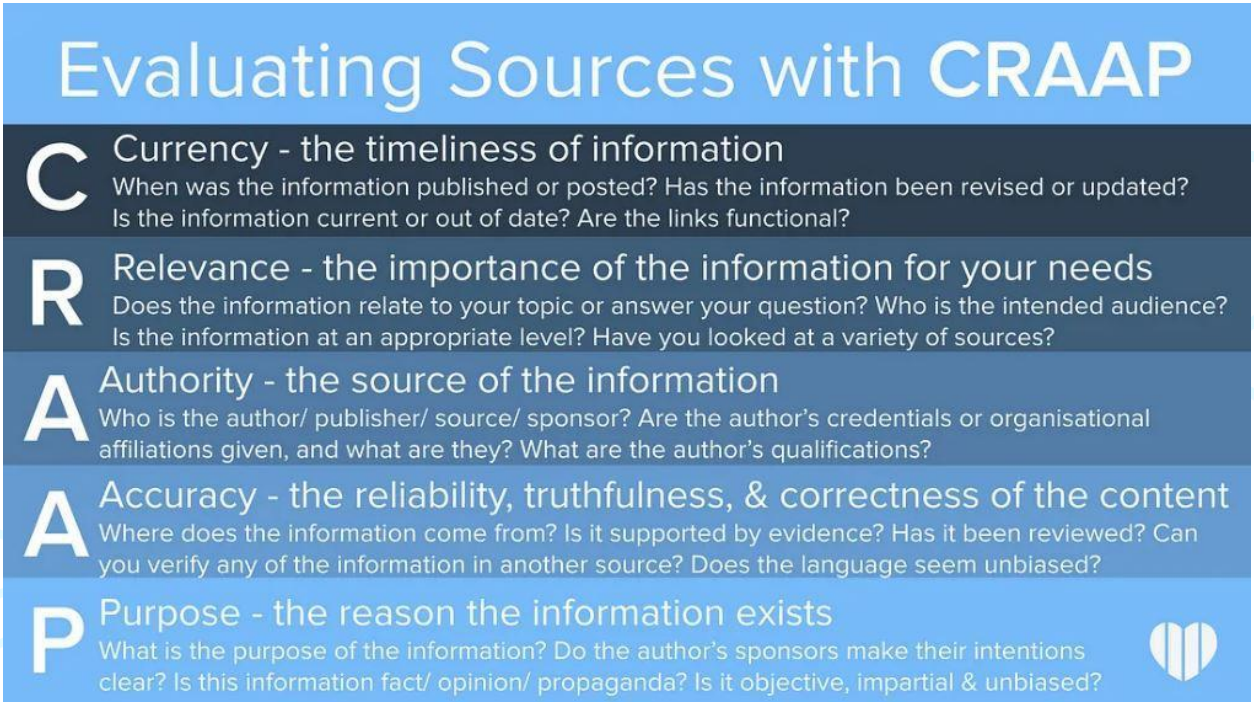
People tend to share news that evokes strong emotions such as anger, fear, or joy. Fake news exploits this cognitive mechanism by creating news that elicits intense emotions and compels people to share it.

Disinformation and fake news are a threat to our European societies. It's common knowledge that that the Internet can be a powerful source of information however, on the flipside, it can also be a powerful *unreliable* source of information. Participants learned of how to further use their critical thinking skills to evaluate different texts and resources to ensure that they are objective and trustworthy.



CRAAP Model

One useful model to detect the credibility and objectivity of a news article is the CRAAP model.



After participants have been introduced to the CRAAP model, they were divided in groups of four and had to evaluate the credibility and accurateness of five news articles. Two were fake and three were real news. Participant only used the CRAAP model to detect the news articles, mainly focusing on the Currency of the news, Relevance and Purpose.

State the truth – an interactive role-play

In the activity *State the truth*, participants increased their knowledge on the different viewpoints in a situation, enhanced their journalistic and communication skills and developed critical thinking skills by exploring the different actors in an imaginate community: NGO representatives, private construction company, city council and citizen journalists. Each groups received a handout with their role in the community.

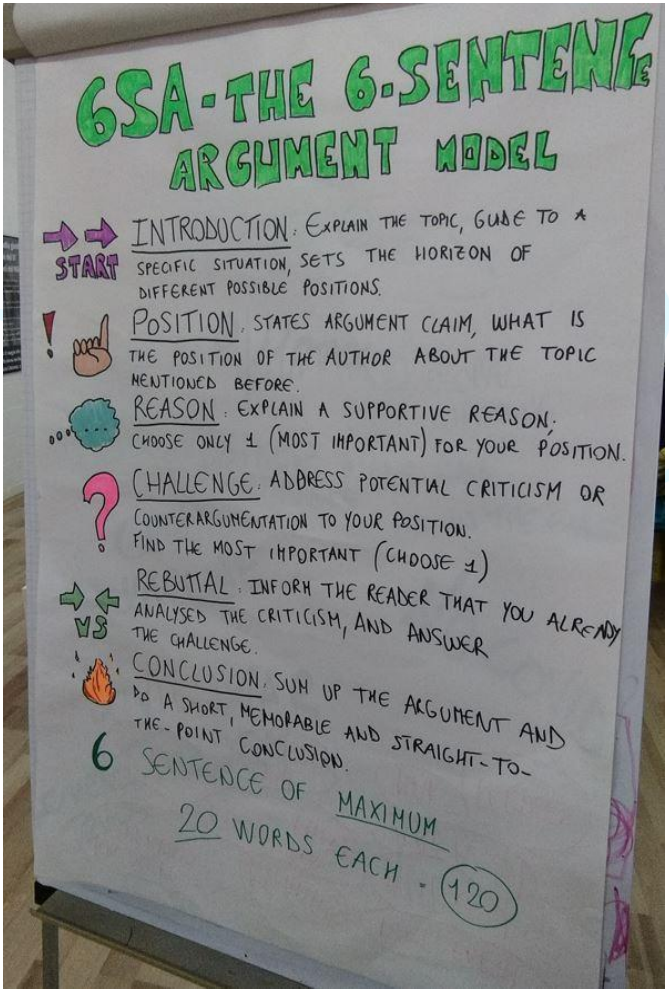
The facilitator presented the general situation:

NGO representatives organise a protest against the construction within the park in the city where you live. Citizen journalist group wants to report the event in their blog. During the protest, citizen journalists divide and each of them meet representatives of the NGO, local council and the construction company and make interviews. Then, the citizen journalists construct their articles.



6 sentences argumentation model

The six sentences argumentation model is a great example of training critical thinking skills. Faced with a decision situation, participants argued their preferred course of action using a logical structure of exactly six sentences, with a maximum of 20 words each.



The 6SA is a mini essay of six sentences that conveys one statement, supports it with one reason, and shows one important challenge, meaning one counterargument. Each sentence in the 6SA fulfils a specific function within an argument, based on Toulmin's (1958) theory of convincing arguments.

After participants drafted their articles, composed of six sentences of twenty words each, they had to evaluate them using a special evaluation grid of 12 points scale. Participants were grouped in groups of two and evaluated their articles in terms of objectivity, credibility and unbiased.

Intercultural Dialogue

By organising cultural presentations, participants had the opportunity to represent their country while learning about other groups' culture, music, cuisine, and interesting facts. The cultural presentations included videos about different countries filled with practical and interesting information, traditional food, music and more music. This cultural presentation promotes the formation of intercultural groups and cultivates a sense of tolerance among participants.

Secret Friend Game:

On the first day of the training course, each participant picked a piece of paper on which was written the name of a different participant. As such, everyone received a secret friend, that remained unknown until the end of the training. The names of everyone were written on envelopes, that were then stuck to the wall. During the week, participants had to leave small gifts varying from notes, candy and souvenirs, to their secret friends, without revealing who it is.



On the last day, an interactive game was played to reveal everyone’s secret friend.

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