NEW TEACHING FIELDS FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF JOURNALISTS

TEACHING GUIDE
DEBUNKING DISINFORMATION

Erasmus+

UNIVERSITATEA DIN BUCUREȘTI
VIRTUTE ET SAPIENTIA

Erich Brost Institute
for International Journalism

hostwriter

iscte
UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE OF LISBON

MASARYK UNIVERSITY

PÉCSI TUDOMÁNYEGYETEM
UNIVERSITY OF PÉCS

About the Newsreel Project

An indispensable ability that journalists need to acquire is the creative and responsible use of digital tools. Journalists should be reliable and trustworthy sources of news amidst the digital din as they need to provide a counterpoint to the wealth of unverified information that affects the raw emotions and tempers of audiences around the world. The target audience of the EU-funded NEWSREEL2 - New Teaching Fields for the Next Generation of Journalists project is the millennial and post-millennial generations of journalists whose lifestyles are inherently linked to digital devices and social media. The primary aim of NEWSREEL2 is to improve their digital skills in a creative and responsible way to enhance the societal benefits of the digital era. To achieve these objectives, the NEWSREEL2 project team developed innovative teaching methods and materials for media and journalism students.

The project is the extension of NEWSREEL - New Skills for the Next Generation of Journalists, widening the scope of the original four journalistic fields covered (data journalism, collaborative journalism, new business models and ethical challenges) with nine new ones: (1) 'Storytelling in social media' enables students to learn how to present journalistic contents on social media networks. (2) 'Graphic journalism' helps students to get to know the basic tools and subgenres of comics journalism. (3) Improving students' 'democratic sensibility' enables them to be aware of their social role and responsibility in the democratic society of the digital age. (4) 'Covering migration' helps to improve their research and reporting skills and understanding migration in a global context. (5) 'Foreign coverage' enables students to contribute to a more balanced coverage of international topics. (6) 'Journalism for voice-activated assistants and devices' teaches students how to use them and see their potential in newsrooms. (7) 'AI and journalism, robot journalism and algorithms' teach their usage, and enables students to clearly see the potential benefits and risks. (8) 'Verifying and analyzing fake news' teaches students to be able to identify information and opinion going viral and to verify information with the help of suitable tools and software. (9) 'Debunking disinformation' helps students to get solid knowledge about the mechanisms used for debunking fake news and disinformation. The project aims to facilitate efficient international cooperation between university-based journalistic ecosystems. All educational materials produced by the project partners are open freely and accessible through open licenses via the NEWSREEL2 website (https://newsreel.pte.hu/).

The project partners are the University of Pécs, in Hungary; the Erich Brost Institute, from the Dortmund Technical University, in Germany; the University Institute of Lisbon (ISCTE-IUL), in Portugal; the University of Bucharest, in Romania; the

Masaryk University, from Brno, in the Czech Republic; and Hostwriter, from Berlin, in Germany.

The Teaching Guides

There is a teaching guide for each field of the NEWSREEL2 project. The main goal of these teaching guides is to give some hints that can help teachers and trainers to implement the developed courses. The guides help future users understand how the courses are structured and showcase the complete courses and the e-learning or other teaching materials available for each course on the online platform. Through the guides you can have access to main goals of the course, for whom it was thought, bibliographical references and other contents that can help you get the most out of the contents the NEWSREEL2 team has prepared.

The structure

Besides the detailed syllabus, this course provides e-learning materials developed to support the teaching process. You can find these e-learning materials in the syllabus and in this teaching guide.

The teaching guides structure is the following:

- The professional field
- Target audience
- General objectives
- Specific objectives
- Professional competences to be enhanced
- Course
    - Complete course
        - Contents according to the Syllabus
        - Advised teaching methods
        - Evaluation suggestion
        - Bibliography suggestions
    - E- Learning or other teaching materials

- Notes to teachers
- General observations
- The team

Debunking disinformation

The professional field

This is a course for Journalism and Communication and Media Studies programmes, at Bachelor and Master's level. While newsgathering and newswriting are basic courses for all journalism training programs, our [NEWSREELresearch data](#) showed there is a lack of academic and even general training resources for professionals in the field of debunking. As we are going to demonstrate in the 'Debunking disinformation' course, special skills for news gathering and news writing are needed, for effectively blocking and preventing disinformation, misinformation and mal-information.

Target audience

We developed this course for undergraduate and/ or postgraduate students in journalism, mass communication and social studies programmes and for long life learning curricula.

General objective of the course

The objective is to teach future journalists to be able to decide what pieces of information are dangerous and should be debunked and how to elaborate a journalistic piece focused on debunking disinformation, which might be effective at least on a fraction of the intended audience.

Specific objectives of the course

- By the end of this course, students will be able to identify viral pieces of disinformation, using the tools accessible for free online.
- Moreover, they will understand the social and psychological mechanisms that lie behind viral mis-, dis- and mal-information and that supports effective debunking.
- The course has also a practical side, designed to help students use online and offline sources and tools to verify information and to create attractive and easy to follow debunking articles and social media posts.

Professional competences to be enhanced

'Debunking disinformation' is a course developed in order to help students discover and understand the main concepts and theories related to disinformation, virality and debunking. The course materials provide solid knowledge regarding the mechanisms used for debunking fake news and disinformation. In addition, the course exercises guide students in developing a portfolio with journalistic pieces, created in order to debunk actual disinformation they identified themselves, and with the skeleton of an inoculation campaign (also known as pre-bunking).

COURSE

Contents

Week 1. Course

What is debunking. Fake news, conspiracy theories, mis, dis and mal-information. The differences among debunking, verifying and fact-checking. Why is debunking important in democratic settings

This meeting lays the conceptual foundations of the course, explaining the main terms used in the academic and professional fields today.

Week 2. Course

Understanding online virality. Filter bubbles and echo chambers. What research says about online audiences

This course is designed to help students understand how the internet and social media changed the news environment.

Week 3. Workshop

A discussion on debunking cases – sources, intended audiences, effects

This first hands-on workshop is used to help students clarify the concepts presented by the course, using real life examples.

Week 4. Course

The psychology behind information disorders. Cognitive biases. Polarisation. The inoculation theory of resistance to influence

Week 4 is based on a short introduction to behavioural economics, to increase the understanding of online publics and possible causes for resistance to debunking.

Week 5. Workshop

Recognising cognitive biases in real life examples

The workshop uses concepts from behavioural economics, presented in the previous meeting, to explain how our minds function in our everyday life.

Week 6. Course

Tracking viral disinformation online: Crowdtangle; poorly curated social networks; online groups, and trolls; video, memes, personal stories, rumours, non-expert advice

This course takes students on a deep dive into viral incorrect content online. They will explore social networks that support 'free, unrestricted speech' and they will learn how to use automated tools, available online, to track viral content.

Week 7. Workshop

Tracking viral disinformation online

This is a hands-on workshop during which students will identify possible viral, dangerous messages online for a given community and will discuss the potential benefits and dangers of actual debunking exercises centred on the information they found.

Week 8. Course

Crossing sources for debunking. The scientific approach. Reverse search; tracker IDs. Finding online and offline sources. Expert interviews. Observation and experimentation.

This course presents the main news gathering techniques useful in debunking.

Week 9. Workshop

Crossing sources for debunking

During this workshop students are practising news gathering techniques for debunking the viral information they found previously.

Week 10. Course

Debunking formats – *written, video, audio, graphics. Proper debunking: Fact – Myth – Fallacy - Fact. Distribution of debunking pieces.* Resilience – *creating messages to inoculate people against disinformation*

Week 10 is centred on news writing techniques for debunking (after a wrong piece of information is getting viral) and pre-bunking (before a possible disinformation campaign reaches a target audience).

Week 11. Workshop

Debunking pieces of news

This workshop, in week 11, is devoted to practising news writing techniques for debunking messages, for which the students already gathered the relevant information, from desk research, interviews, observation or even experimentation.

Week 12. Workshop

Inoculation messages

The last week of the course is also devoted to practising news writing techniques for debunking, this time for inoculation campaigns, also known as pre-bunking.

EXAM: Final projects on chosen topic (issue identification; debunking; inoculation strategy)

Teaching methods

The courses are *ex cathedra* lectures, combined with open discussions. Workshops are hand-on experiences, to understand the concepts and to work with actual cases. During the workshops, students develop their debunking and pre-bunking portfolios.

Evaluation

The examination is based on the presentation of the finalized projects on a chosen topic with issue identification; verification and debunking; inoculation strategy and pre-bunking.

Short Bibliography

Adria, M., & Mao, Y. (2016). *Handbook of Research on Citizen Engagement and Public Participation in the Era of New Media*, Hershey: IGI Global.

Colomina, C., Margalef, H. S., Youngs, R., & Jones, K. (2021). *The impact of disinformation on democratic processes and human rights in the world*. Brussels: European Parliament, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU(2021)653635_EN.pdf.

Compton, J. A., & Pfau, M. (2005). Inoculation theory of resistance to influence at maturity: Recent progress in theory development and application and suggestions for future research. *Annals of the International Communication Association 29*(1): 97-146.

Flaxman, S. et alii. (2016). Filter bubbles, echo chambers, and online news consumption. *Public opinion quarterly, 80*(S1), 298-320.

Ireton, C. & Posetti, J. (2018). *Journalism, 'fake news' and disinformation*. UNESCO. https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0.pdf.

Jamieson, K.H. & Capella, J.N. (2008). *Echo Chambers*. Oxford University Press.

Kavanagh, J. & Rich, M. D. (2018). *Truth decay: An initial exploration of the diminishing role of facts and analysis in American public life*. Rand Corporation.

Lewandowsky, S., et alii. (2020). *The Debunking Handbook 2020*. https://sks.to/db2020.

Linvill, D. L., & Warren, P. L. (2020). Troll factories: Manufacturing specialized disinformation on Twitter. *Political Communication, 37*(4), 447-467.

Nemeth, R. & Dragomir, M. (2022). *The Debunking Effect: Recent and Upcoming Challenges for Fact-Checking Organizations*. Center for Media, Data and Society, https://www.comminit.com/global/content/debunking-effect-recent-and-upcoming-challenges-fact-checking-organizations.

Pariser, E. (2011). *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think*. Penguin.

Radu, R., Șercan, E., Preoteasa, M. (2022). Debunking Disinformation. In Bettels-Schwabbauer, T., Leihs, N., Maksa G., Speck, D. and Torbo, A. (ed) *New Skills for Journalists - comparative perspectives from Europe*, Cluj-Napoca: Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület.

Rieger, D., Kümpel, A. S., Wich, M., Kiening, T., & Groh, G. (2021). Assessing the Extent and Types of Hate Speech in Fringe Communities: A Case Study of Alt-Right Communities on 8chan, 4chan, and Reddit. *Social Media+ Society, 7*(4), 1-14.

Striphas, T. (2015). Algorithmic culture. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 18*(4–5), 395–412.

UNHCR (2020). *10 Tips to Minimize the Sharing of Misinformation via Social Media Channels.* https://www.unhcr.org/.

Zollo, F. et alii. (2017). Debunking in a world of tribes. *PloS one, 12*(7), e0181821.

Curated lists of debunking tools:

- Fighting Disinformation Online. A Database of Web Tools. Rand Corporation. https://www.rand.org/research/projects/truth-decay/fighting-disinformation.html

- Digital   Methods   Initiative   Tools. https://wiki.digitalmethods.net/Dmi/ToolDatabase

Additional tool:

- 4cat – a tool for monitoring several social platforms at once (requires some familiarity with GitHub / Docker and Python). https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/cross-platform-conspiracy-theory-construction/   ; https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/climate-change-memes-misinformation/,   https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/tracking-cross-platform-spread/

E-Learning contents

You can find the following classes on the e-learning platform: https://newsreel.pte.hu/debunking_disinformation

- What is debunking. Understanding online virality
- The psychology behind information disorders
- Tracking viral disinformation online
- Crossing sources for debunking. Debunking formats – written, video, audio, graphics

Notes to the teachers

Newsgathering and newswriting techniques are part of the basic training for journalist students. This course, in debunking disinformation, in an advanced course, adapted to the evolutions of our news environments. Recent crises linked to (international) politics, to war, to public affairs and to the public understanding of science showed debunking skills become an essential part of the journalistic training and are essential for today's newsrooms. Research shows that effective debunking is proposed as normal journalistic work, not as a special treatment of news

We created a course to help teachers work with students in understanding the psychology behind the spread of misinformation and in creating pre-bunking and debunking strategies and journalistic materials. We are proposing several tests in the online course, but the best way to practice debunking and pre-bunking techniques is to actually put them in practice. This is why we advise, in this teaching guide, a mixture of ex cathedra courses with hands-on workshops.

General observations

Debunking is a type of fact-checking that targets incorrect and misleading claims and widely helps opinions relevant to a community.

Our news environment changed with the increased usage of the Internet and of social media, which allowed users to become content producers, content that can be massively distributed at negligible costs. As a result, debunking is a process interested in disinformation, misinformation and viral hoaxes that may have as sources and as disseminators not only public figures, but also private individuals, online trolls and fake accounts on social media.

The aim of the debunking process is to warn communities and to provide corrections for misleading information, erroneous claims, false rumours or modified photos or videos. The best sources of debunking are professional media workers, such as journalists and fact-checkers, as they are, in general, perceived by their audiences as neutral sources of reliable information.

The team

Associate Professor **Manuela Preoteasa**, PhD, Department of Journalism, Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies, University of Bucharest, is the co-founder of a media organization active in online media and an active supporter of the quality independent journalism as a form of countering disinformation. Fields of research: media ownership in relation with media independence, media policies, journalism standards.

Professor **Raluca Radu**, PhD, is the Director of the Journalism Department at the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies, University of Bucharest, Romania. She has been teaching and researching, for the last 20 years, in the areas of Media Systems and Comparative Studies, Communication Ethics, Media Economics and Cultural Industries.