AONTAS

The Voice of Adult Learning

THE AONTAS COMMUNITY EDUCATION AGAINST DISINFORMATION WORKBOOK

A digital version of this workbook may be accessed at:
www.aontas.com/publications

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AONTAS – About us

AONTAS are the National Adult Learning Organisation of Ireland, founded in 1969 and passionately working ever since to make education equal and accessible for all. Backed by our robust research and focused community work, we advocate and lobby for quality education for all adults, and raise awareness of the impact of adult learning on people's lives and on society. We work on behalf our members, who connect with all communities across the island of Ireland. Our members and adult learners inform all our research and campaigns for social change. Learn more at www.aontas.com

Community Education Against Disinformation

Background

The overall aim of Community Education Against Disinformation—an AONTAS adult learning programme—is to co-create a community education activity workbook addressing issues of online disinformation. The workbook will support the development of practitioners' leadership capacity to address disinformation in the classroom, fostering changes in learners' understanding of how disinformation impacts affected communities. The workbook aims to support providers in promoting solidarity and inclusion for diverse communities living side by side.

The last number of years has seen an escalation of online disinformation--false information deliberately spread to deceive people--concerning a myriad of social issues such as climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, gender, and migration. In particular, disinformation has intensified about people who come to Ireland to seek safety and a better life, and this has real-life consequences for our communities.

The impact of disinformation is being felt all around Ireland, particularly with the rise in anti-migration protests and the Dublin and Belfast riots, which are leading to challenging discussions among learners in education centres across the country.

AONTAS's network of over 400 members indicates strong demand in the adult education sector to address these challenges. This is further supported by AONTAS' local and national research, particularly through AONTAS' National Further Education and Training Learner Forum (NFLF) and AONTAS' Community Education Network (CEN).

The emphasis of the workbook is on the promotion of digital competencies to ensure participants engage with digital technologies in a critical, collaborative and creative way, and understand how disinformation can impact on minoritised [1] groups. Several groups have been identified as being more susceptible to digital exclusion. These groups include older adults, lone parents, the unemployed, those with lower socio-economic status, those living in rural Ireland, and those with lower levels of education attainment. Moreover, susceptibility to digital exclusion is increasingly exacerbated by polarisation, extreme distrust in mainstream institutions such as major media, and political and social isolation, disproportionately affecting some of the groups mentioned above.

In consultation with adult and community education practitioners and learners representing these groups, the project lead and the workbook developers have listened to the needs of these groups in relation to online disinformation. By engaging in these consultations, the needs of these groups have been reflected in the workbook. In addition, practitioners and tutors will be better informed on how to deliver the workbook in a safe learning environment for all.

The Community Education Against Disinformation (CEAD) project was awarded funding from the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC).

1 This term will be used throughout the workbook in place of “ethnic minorities” as it recognises that rather than being merely a statistical minority in the country they live in, certain ethnic groups have been actively minoritised through racialised social processes. Short Guide to Understanding Race and Ethnicity Language and Terminology Race Equality Action Group. 2024. Queen Mary University of London.

About the Authors

Carmine Rodi Falanga holds a Master's in Business Administration and has been involved in international education and training since 2002. He is a facilitator and consultant in the field of education, specialising in intercultural learning, communication, game-based learning and digital tools for education and learning. He is also an event host, a trained psychotherapist, and a stand-up comedian. As an author, he wrote for the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), SALTO-YOUTH, Eurodesk Italy, Prodeform Armenia, the University of Viterbo. Born in Italy, he lives in Prague with his family and a cat.

Bobby Mc Cormack is the co-founder and CEO of Development Perspectives. From 2006 to 2019 Bobby worked as a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Humanities in Dundalk Institute of Technology. He has an MA in Development Studies, is a qualified mediator, and is the chairperson of the Irish Development Education Association (IDEA). Bobby is a former board member of Dóchas and in 2017 he was the recipient of the Dóchas Global Citizen of the Year award. Bobby loves travelling, the natural world, and is a big United fan (both Manchester and Drogheda).

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CHAPTER 1

What's in This Workbook

Introduction

This workbook offers creative and collaborative approaches to building adult learners' critical understanding of how disinformation works in the context of social media. It aims to build adult educators' confidence and capacity to engage learners in discussions and critical reflections on these issues. The workbook also aims to support providers in promoting solidarity and inclusion for diverse communities learning side by side in adult education settings across Ireland. The workbook was developed to address a significant gap in education on online disinformation within adult and community education.

See "*Building Blocks*" for definitions of terms relating to disinformation.

Disinformation-based messaging strategies have the potential to erode trust in democratic politics and institutions over the long term, as well as undermine faith in democratic processes as a means to achieve social justice. Preventing the further spread of disinformation and increase in social polarisation requires a collective effort. Therefore, AONTAS have established a community of practice among adult educators to support its implementation and validation. The CEAD community of practice is a subset of the Community Education Network (CEN). Established in 2007 by AONTAS, the CEN is a network of independent community education providers dedicated to enhancing the collective impact of community education. The network serves as a platform for members to share information, resources, and practices, as well as to advocate collectively, represent their interests, and express solidarity. If you would like to join the CEAD community of practice network with AONTAS, please contact mail@aontas.com for more details.

Disinformation and Why It Matters

It would appear that the profit-driven interests of social media companies supersede any responsibility these platforms—or our governments—have to protect online users from the rapid spread of disinformation which in recent years has given rise to real world consequences for our communities. There are limited regulatory mechanisms to tackle online disinformation. While the new Digital Services Act marks gradual progress, it is unclear how effective its efforts will be to combat disinformation, which is harmful but not strictly illegal.[2] While some training programmes aimed at increasing digital literacy capacity in primary and secondary schools exist, there is no formal Media and Information Literacy (MIL) education and training within national educational policies and teacher training programmes.[3] Similarly, adult and community education lacks a coordinated approach to enabling adult education practitioners and facilitators to support learners in navigating online disinformation.

Structural causes of inequality, poverty, the climate crisis, the cost of living, the housing crisis, political alienation and stress have led to growing mistrust in traditional institutions, including mainstream media.[4] Those who bear the brunt of these structural inequalities may find themselves going to online platforms and social media forums, in the hope of finding a community they can trust, as well as answers to seemingly unsolvable and rising social problems. Nefarious actors use online communities to peddle disinformation as a way to manipulate issues surrounding these structural inequalities for their own political, monetary and/or ideological agendas. Those online communities, while often desperately seeking answers to social issues our governments are failing to address, contribute to an environment where disinformation can spread rapidly, and in turn, to the rising socio-political polarisation our society is struggling to come to terms with.[5]

Division takes hold in communities when opposing sides are created. Rather than providing solutions that lie with government and policies, blame may be placed on those in our communities who need help most. The problem can be worsened by the absence of meaningful discussion about the negative emotions that arise from engaging with online disinformation. Disinformation is often consumed on our phones when we are alone. There is a lack of brave spaces where individuals can come together to exchange experiences, question beliefs, and develop understanding of different groups. This lack of opportunity for dialogue and mutual understanding adds to feelings of isolation and division, which in turn foster hostility.

2 European Commission. 2024. Questions and answers on the Digital Services Act.

3 Mesquita, L, Pranaityte, L, and Silva, R. 2023. Teacher education: Providing guidance, resources and support to teacher facilitators on media literacy in Europe. D2.1 Report on findings of initial investigations. TeaMLit - Media and Learning Association.

4 Cannon, B., King, R., Munnelly, J. and Moslemany R. Resisting the Far Right: Civil Society Strategies for Countering the Far Right in Ireland. Maynooth University and Crosscare Migrant Project.

5 Lakoff, G. 2004. Don't think of an Elephant. Don't think of an elephant! : Know your values and frame the debate: The essential guide for progressives. White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing.

Whether consciously or not, most of us who use social media create online personas, ones which we often want to look like better versions of ourselves. Devoting so much time to perfecting how these mirror images of ourselves perform online, we may not realise that these personas can become a partition from our real selves. These alternative identities can, as Naomi Klein suggests in her book Doppelganger, "project the unwanted and dangerous parts of themselves onto others, the unenlightened, the problematic, the deplorable. The 'not me' that sharpens the border of the 'me."[6] The disconnected and indifferent ways people can interact with one another online is bolstered by a growing trend that promotes freedom of expression over our sense of responsibility to and care for one another. To thrive in certain online spaces, self-reflection, critical thinking and interconnectedness are not only discarded but discouraged. The activities within this workbook focus on providing opportunities to learners to develop their skills of self-reflection and critical thinking, and revive their sense of connectedness to one another.

This workbook recognises that engaging with activities related to online disinformation can be challenging. Some content on online disinformation is distressing and some of it relates to aspects of marginalisation that may already affect learners. Many adult learners engaging in community education come from marginalised or disadvantaged backgrounds where trauma is more common, whether from childhood adversity, economic hardship, or ongoing social exclusion. Trauma is a frequent undercurrent in adult education classrooms, influencing motivation, concentration, and overall engagement, which add a compounding factor to countering disinformation in these settings. Additionally, the communities in which this workbook will be delivered may already be experiencing divisions which have been exacerbated by online disinformation. The teaching and learning approach used throughout the workbook builds a sense of empowerment and hope. It is important to remember that online disinformation will not affect everyone equally and that it has a disproportionate impact on marginalised communities such as migrants and those from minoritised backgrounds. It is essential to provide adult learners from those communities with a space conducive to open, supportive and safe discussion.

6 Klein, N. 2023. Doppelganger. A Trip into the Mirror World. p. 57. First edition. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

The Role of Adult and Community Education and the Challenge of Disinformation

Community education centres can hold a space to openly critique social injustices and provide a platform to imagine alternative modes of being. Community education is where local, independent education organisations, who are committed to social change, provide all kinds of support and learning opportunities for people in their communities, helping people to become empowered through learning. Community education is rooted in values of equality, justice and empowerment, as showcased in the Charter for Community Education (2021) below. It creates a voice for those who are furthest from the education system. It is based on what people need and is driven by communities. "Community education", as Camilla Fitzsimons eloquently observes, "prides itself on process as much as content with a commonly evoked mantra being the idea of *starting where the person is at*. This does not just mean accommodating the many practical challenges facing adults as they return to education, such as flexibility, affordability and childcare, it also means an awareness of the knowledge, skills and values a person brings to a learning experience. These factors determine subjects and modes of delivery with contents uncovered as much as covered through collective, politicising, bottom-up processes."[7]

Community education centres are ideal spaces where the delivery of a digital capacity building, community empowerment workbook can take place. Community education presents a unique opportunity for participants to have meaningful dialogue in a safe and supportive space where adult educators can validate different emotional responses that come up for the group, challenge their assumptions, and support their learners in connecting with themselves and with one another. The AONTAS CEN Census Report (2020)[8] found that the small-scale nature of community education groups, their provision of accredited and non-accredited options, and their high percentage of female participants made community education appealing and important to those from marginalised and vulnerable demographics. Moreover, community education centres are often located in communities where the worst effects of online disinformation, structural inequality and poverty are felt. It is crucial that learners in adult education are offered educational opportunities to engage with issues relating to online disinformation. With these opportunities, adult learners will be equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to take informed, empowered actions about the information they receive online. For related youth work education and training developments, see these publications by the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI).[9]

7 Fitzsimons, C. 2017. Community Education and Neoliberalism: Philosophies, Practices and Policies in Ireland. p. 4. First edition. Cham, Palgrave Macmillan.

8 AONTAS. 2020. CEN Census Report. CEN Census 2020: Community Education in a Time of COVID-19.

9 NYCI. 2023. Beyond Hate: A Journey with Young People Towards Inclusion. 2nd edition.
NYCI: 2020. 8 Steps to Inclusive Youthwork. 2nd edition.

Figure 1. AONTAS. 2021. A Charter for Community Education.

What's in This Workbook?

The workbook is divided into three sections: How to Use this Workbook, **Building Blocks** and **Critical Issues**.

How to Use This Workbook

This section contains a General Tips for Facilitators and Educators chapter, and a Trauma, Transformation and Resistance chapter which aim to support practitioners in facilitating the difficult knowledge contained in this workbook. If additional guidance or support is required throughout any stage of the workbook delivery, this section outlines a list of organisations and services based in Ireland that can offer psychological and/or psychosocial support.

Building Blocks

The **Building Blocks** section provides practitioners with some background context to the workbook, including an introductory section on disinformation, its prevalence, and how activities in this workbook will supplement fact-checking efforts made by social media companies to counter disinformation.

The **Building Blocks** section include foundational activities to prepare learners to undertake the activities in the **Critical Issues** section. Though **Building Blocks** is a foundational section of this workbook, practitioners are welcome to mix and match activities from these chapters, depending on the needs of your group.

Building Blocks – Activities Explainer

Communications

The activities in the Communication section acknowledge the vulnerabilities that can arise in our learning and social interactions when messages are misheard, misinterpreted, or manipulated – all of which are common tactics used to spread disinformation.

The activities—which include *Whispers*, *Clap Once Twice*, *Paraphrase*, and *Lines of Communication*—promote active listening, clearer expression, and greater awareness of verbal and non-verbal cues. These skills are vital in an age of rapid information consumption, where our attention spans are becoming more limited, and emotionally charged narratives often dominate in news and social media.

Through collaborative and interactive methods, learners begin to understand how easily meaning can be distorted, the importance of verifying collective interpretation, and how to engage respectfully and empathetically with others. The activities in the Communications section are designed for groups who may be unfamiliar with one another and/or the concepts of deep and active listening.

Critical Thinking

The pace at which information is consumed and shared on social media shortens our attention span and also weakens our ability to question assumptions and assess the credibility of information.

This critical thinking activities provide adult learners with essential skills to navigate today's complex information landscape. Through the activities—*the F Card*, *Selective Attention Test*, and *Newspaper Article Comparison*—participants explore how perception is shaped by social conditioning, brain attention functionality, and the media we consume.

Learners discover their own cognitive blind spots, understand how beliefs and biases affect what they notice or ignore, and develop media literacy by assessing how the editorial stance of news outlets and social media content producers shape public opinion.

Values and Frames

These activities help adult education practitioners and facilitators address disinformation by exploring how values and frames shape our understanding of the world. Learners discover how our (often unconsciously held) dominant societal values guide our behaviours, influence our perceptions, and shape our responses to social issues.

Activities such as *Envisioning an Ideal Community and Identifying Dominant Values* allow learners to identify values within themselves and their communities, and understand how these values shape our individual and collective worldviews. The Reframing the Issue activity reveals how the same issue can be framed in often conflicting ways depending on underlying values. Concepts like the "see-saw effect" and "bleed-over effect" show how repeated exposure can strengthen some values while weakening others: this is key to understanding the hidden but powerful way disinformation spreads and gains traction. These activities develop learners' critical thinking by showing that combating disinformation isn't just about facts—it's about shifting the frames and values through which people interpret those facts.

Your Phone – Access to Information and the Risk of Data Leaks

Though not an activity, this section provides a foundational overview of the complex relationship between technology, privacy and disinformation, helping adult learners understand the real-world implications of their online engagement. It provides context for some of the workbook activities that centre on social media feeds and artificial intelligence (AI). As online platforms collect vast amounts of personal data, users face growing risks of data breaches, identity theft, and loss of privacy—often without being fully aware of potential consequences. Current regulations, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), offer limited protection while enforcement remains a challenge. Additionally, many users don't understand how to control tools like cookies or manage personal data effectively.

The rise of facial recognition technology adds new layers of concern, including issues of bias, surveillance, and misuse, especially in the absence of strong oversight. Even more alarming is the rapid spread of deep fake technology, which can convincingly manipulate video content, fuelling disinformation. In the absence of any meaningful regulation, there is an urgent need for stronger digital literacy and greater awareness of how rapidly evolving technologies impact our lives.

Critical Issues

The **Critical Issues** section contains activities and resources on specific themes or issues, directly relating to the creation and spread of disinformation, and the ways these can be countered.

Critical Issues – Activities Explainer

Storytelling and Narrative Construction

This section of the workbook equips adult educators or facilitators with tools to help learners critically engage with the emotional power of storytelling, which is another fundamental element of disinformation's success. The activities highlight how emotionally charged stories can bypass our critical thinking capabilities, especially when framed in "hero *vs* villain" or "us *vs* them" formats.

Learners explore how narratives influence perception and belief, often more strongly than facts alone. The core activity, *Flipping the Narrative*, invites learners to objectively analyse a sensational fictitious news story, helping them identify emotional manipulation, stereotypes, and rhetorical framing.

These activities encourage learners to ask key questions like, "What is this story trying to make me feel?" and to resist the pull of persuasive yet misleading content. Ultimately, this section reinforces the concept that while emotionally charged stories can mislead, they can also empower when approached with cautious curiosity and critical awareness.

Storytelling to Create Change

This section focuses on using digital storytelling as a powerful tool to humanise migration experiences and counteract the divisive effects of disinformation. By centring person-first narratives, adult learners are invited to connect emotionally with diverse lived experiences, challenging harmful stereotypes and building empathy. AONTAS staff facilitated digital storytelling workshops with two migrant groups in Ireland— those new to the country and older Irish emigrants who lived in England during the 1970s. Despite differences in background, the stories shared themes of identity, belonging, resilience, and hope.

A guided reflective activity session, *Reflections on Digital Stories of Migration*, supports learners in exploring their emotional responses to viewing the digital stories. The session aims to have viewers recognise commonalities with the storytellers and to foster dialogue. Grounding techniques and structured discussions are outlined to promote safety, openness, and respectful discussion. This activity not only builds empathy and digital media awareness, but also equips learners to recognise and resist disinformation by fostering real human connections.

Fact-checking

This section provides adult educators with tools and activities to help learners critically assess information and resist disinformation in today's media landscape. The evolving complexity of disinformation, particularly with the rise of AI-generated content, demands that we apply updated techniques and resources to the information we consume as a matter of course.

Using trusted fact-checking resources like Snopes, PolitiFact, Reuters, and Irish-based platforms such as The Journal, learners are guided to question sources, assess motivations, and verify claims of news outlets and social media content. Three activities—*Brexit Headlines*, *True or False*, and *Historical Articles*—build critical thinking and media literacy by challenging participants to distinguish fact from fiction, recognise editorial bias and manipulation used in online content, verify information, and understand how narratives shape opinion. The resources listed in this section can be used to support learners' fact-checking endeavours throughout many of the other activities in this workbook.

Social Media: A Quick Overview of Platforms and Algorithm Dynamics

This section introduces educators to the role of social media in spreading disinformation, focusing on how platform algorithms shape users' feeds. Each platform runs on an ad-based model where attention is currency: the more eyes on the screen, the more ad revenue is generated. This results in filter bubbles and echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs while suppressing diverse viewpoints, leading us to believe that the content we are seeing is supported by the majority, and therefore normalised. Algorithms promote emotionally charged or sensational content for higher engagement, devoid of ethical standards, often amplifying disinformation.

The following activities aim to build learners' resilience to manipulated narratives in their feeds: *Analysing Your Social Media* raises awareness of algorithmic influence and how it leads to echo chambers; *Ad Detective* reveals how targeted ads are shaped by user data; and *Headline Remix* explores how language framing can manipulate our perceptions.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) – What Does the Future Hold?

This section highlights how AI tools can both fuel and fight the spread of false content online. While AI-generated text, images, and even full news articles can mimic human-made content, these tools also pose risks by accelerating the creation of emotionally charged, misleading information which is increasingly indistinguishable from real sources.

To help learners critically navigate this evolving landscape, and gain deeper awareness of how AI is reshaping the information landscape, the workbook presents the following activities: *Spot the AI* builds learners' ability to detect AI-generated content by analysing textual and visual clues; and *AI News: Build It, Debunk It* demonstrates how easily AI can fabricate credible-sounding disinformation.

Group Dynamics and Social Psychology: How "In" and "Out" Groups Take Shape Through Disinformation

The activities in this section help learners understand how group affiliations, which are often based on culture, politics, or identity, can be distorted by false or emotionally charged messaging to create division and bias. These dynamics are increasingly exacerbated by social media and algorithmic echo chambers, where disinformation spreads rapidly and reinforces in-group loyalties.

Grounded in social psychology, this section features two key activities: *Apples and Oranges*, an adaptable role-play activity that reveals how easily group biases can form and be manipulated; and *Bias Busters: Identifying Hidden Messages*, which teaches learners to detect biased language and subtle cues in media.

Resisting Hate Speech - Fostering Empathy

This section empowers adult educators to foster empathy, acceptance and critical awareness in learners as tools to resist disinformation, hate speech, and harmful gossip.

This sections aims to do this by presenting the following activities: *Empathy Mapping* deepens learners' understanding of how harmful narratives impact individuals and highlights how acceptance can reconnect us to groups that disinformation seeks to isolate us from; *Red-Flag Content Analysis* helps learners to recognise emotionally charged or misleading content and discuss how such narratives can misrepresent marginalised groups and fuel misinformation; and *The Panel of Many Voices* emphasises the importance of inclusion, challenges stereotypes, and encourages open, respectful dialogue to combat false or one-sided narratives.

Please see *Appendix 1* for an activity matrix. The matrix highlights which sections of the workbook complement one another. You do not have to use this, but it can guide you when deciding which workbook sections you will deliver to your learners.

How to Use This Workbook

You do not need to have any expertise on online disinformation to facilitate these discussions and activities, which are aimed at NFQ Level 3 learners.

Activities in the **Building Blocks** and **Critical Issues** sections are designed to be mixed and matched together, and adult educators are encouraged to use the material in an order that suits their context. The activities build learning by drawing on people's lived experiences and knowledge. The activities use participatory methodologies, which include group discussions, and are of varying degrees of difficulty. Each activity will be colour coded to denote its level of difficulty:

- Green denotes easy
- Orange denotes moderately difficult
- Red denotes difficult

The three degrees of difficulty relate to the risk of learner conflict posed by engaging with the activity, the level of conceptual comprehension expected of the learner when engaging with the activity and the literacy required of the learner. Depending on the needs of your group, you may want to adapt activities, add or subtract things, vary the timing, or focus on particular aspects. Or you may choose one or two activities to integrate into a class of another subject.

The sessions here do not take into consideration the time needed to form a group. A new group must initially build relationships, establish trust, and participate in activities and discussions. The Communications activities can support newly formed groups to build trust. Furthermore, every group needs ongoing attention. The facilitator should be aware of the group's changing needs and adapt accordingly. The suggested activities encourage dialogue between the educators and their learners. A learner-centred approach acknowledges the importance of people's experiences and knowledge within their communities. When applied to online disinformation, this method also encourages learners to connect their own experiences with those of others around them. The goal is to deepen understanding and foster a sense of solidarity.

Each activity contains:

- An introduction/brief explanation of the purpose and expected outcomes for learners of the session
- A list of the activities with methods and estimated times
- A description of each activity and how it relates to disinformation
- Ideas for exploring further
- Suggestions for facilitators
- Further resources for learners and educators (within text and as footnotes)

To keep activities accessible and to ensure this workbook remains relevant for as long as possible, links to audio-visual material are included. Adult educators can choose material most appropriate to their contexts. Throughout the workbook, external websites and resources are suggested for further follow-up.

General Tips for Facilitators and Educators

As we know, assumptions can be very dangerous and especially out of place in a disinformation-themed workbook. As diverse as the adult learner community is, so too is the educator community. Acknowledging the depth and breadth of the experiences and knowledge that will be utilised in bringing this workbook to life is important, whilst also realising that there may be relatively new facilitators and educators who wish to dive into the content and direction of this educational accompaniment. We felt it was important to outline a few general tips for facilitators and educators who intend to use this resource. Whatever your circumstances, our earnest invitation is to jump in.

The Learning Environment

In any adult or community education setting, it is important to create a learning environment that is conducive to adult learning. We know that life experience is central to andragogical efforts, so having a space that is conducive to sharing experiences and opinions is of the utmost importance.

Circles and Flat rather than Rows or Tiered Seating

Ensuring everyone can see and hear each other as much as possible is vital and shouldn't be underestimated. The "Sage on the Stage" is not the way to go. Where possible, it's best to avoid spaces that have tiered, fixed seating in place as his can have a detrimental impact on sharing and group work.

Heating and Light

Don't skip the basics. If people are physically uncomfortable, this can distract them from their learning. Have a warm and well-lit room ready for when participants arrive.

Welcome, Colour and Smell

Create a space where people feel welcome. Never underestimate the power of tea, coffee and biscuits. Don't be afraid to use scented candles, have colourful visuals on walls and so on. This can add stimulus for the discussions that follow.

Create a Group Contract or Learning Agreement

At the beginning of your session or workshop series, ask the group what they need from each other to be able to learn and engage effectively. Write participants' contributions on a flipchart or similar big paper and keep it hanging throughout the session(s). You may come back to it, when people are not honouring it, or people may want to add aspects over time. Instead of the educator determining the rules, this promotes confidence among the learners to hold each other accountable.

Your Approach

Know Your (Own) Boundaries

Facilitators and educators will know their groups and the context in which they are operating. With that in mind, there may be some boundaries/parameters to the scope and focus of your work. This is no harm. These may be a result of confidence levels or depth of experience. In short, we encourage you to go to the places that may need to be visited as well as realise you don't need to stay there. Come back to more familiar zones if need be. There's no harm in acknowledging with groups that you don't have all or indeed any of the answers and may also feel uncomfortable. This will help build empathy with the group. It's normal to make mistakes — be a model for learners to learn from mistakes with curiosity.

Brave rather than Safe Spaces

Transformative learning involves substantial change and that isn't easy for adult learners; in fact, it can be very challenging. All too often facilitators and educators can become risk averse and focus too heavily on "safe spaces", resulting in the avoidance of challenging conversations, perhaps through a lack of confidence/skills on the behalf of the practitioners. By definition, learning is about change, and adult learners need to be in charge of how much change is involved. Adult learning is an emancipatory process. It doesn't require gatekeepers who feel they know best for others. Rather, encouraging participants to approach sessions with a sense of curiosity and ownership is based on 'challenge by choice'. This also means that facilitators and educators should be brave in admitting when they are wrong or when they don't know something. Extend invitations to change to your participants in the hope that they will respond bravely. After all, what is the worst that can happen? This doesn't mean that cavalier approaches are encouraged but rather that the opportunity to embrace change is welcomed.

Speeds and Depth

Not all learning processes need to be deep. Don't forget to be light-hearted and have fun (at times) by incorporating icebreakers (brief, fun activities) or similar. Like a good DJ, keep the participants on their toes by varying the speed at which things are moving. Have a "slow set" but don't keep it there. Introduce a "stomper" but don't keep the pace too high all the time. No harm to slow down and reflect when needed. In short, vary the pace and depth accordingly.

Open Space for Dialogue and Enquiry

In 2006, the Centre for the Study of Social and Global Justice (CSSGJ) at the University of Nottingham created a resource which outlines a few principles that are worth exploring with adult learners as a primer to any tricky or important discussion or exploration.[10]

1. Every individual brings to the space valid and legitimate knowledge constructed in their own contexts.

Too often, adults confuse what they know with who they are. As educators, we respect who people are but often need to challenge what they know. This process can be tricky. In short, our contexts/histories/conditioning all combine with other factors to co-create who we are and what we know. As all of those factors can be so different and divergent, understanding the difference (between who we are and what we know) needs to be brought into the space(s) we work in.

10 Oliveira Andreotti, V. de. 2006. Critical Literacy in Global Citizenship Education. Open spaces for dialogue and enquiry (OSDE).

Figure 2. Open Spaces for Dialouge and Enquiry Methodology. 2005. Critical Literacy in Global Citizenship Education. Page 4.

2. All knowledge is partial and incomplete: accepting this encourages us to learn from others and to try to understand their perspective. It also helps with humility. None of us knows everything. In fact, acknowledging that we know very little can encourage learning and learners.

3. All knowledge (including educators') can be questioned: this encourages a critical engagement by learners.

Trauma, Transformation, and Resistance

Adult and community education, on tricky topics like Disinformation or Critical Media literacy, is likely to be controversial. Educators may feel tempted to shy away from sensitive issues and situations rather than moving toward them. The nature of the topics is very polarising and may lead to tension, disagreements within the group or with the educators, conflicts, or remind people of traumatic experiences. But avoiding these situations altogether may also deprive the group (and the educators) of some precious moments of growth and insight.

Trauma can be challenging to tackle in the adult education classroom, especially when educators worry that they aren't qualified to address learners' painful experiences. Yet community education often attracts people who've lived through hardships—whether that's generational trauma, racial discrimination, displacement, or the long-term effects of conflict. Instead of tiptoeing around these realities, educators can transform the classroom into a space of possibility and growth. One way is by incorporating trauma-informed approaches that emphasise safety, choice, and collaboration. While you don't need to be a therapist, you can listen actively, validate a learner's story, and link them to additional resources if they need professional help. As facilitators, we cannot guarantee that a space will be safe for everyone all the time, because we will never know all the experiences and vulnerabilities of our learners, or how learners will act in the space. Instead, we encourage you to create a "brave" space – a learning environment that invites people to be vulnerable, to move to the edge of their comfort zone if they wish to and speak up when things don't seem right or are uncomfortable. A brave space can be created and maintained by establishing ground rules and setting a group contract with the learners where everybody's rights and needs are heard and guaranteed. This means that instead of the educators setting out rules, the learners decide what they need from others in order to be brave in the learning space.

Seeing this process unfold can turn an intimidating subject into a moment of connection, helping learners feel more seen and less isolated.

Empowering educators starts with giving them the language and tools to engage with trauma in a supportive way. Workshops or training sessions on trauma awareness can offer practical strategies: setting up clear ground rules, using reflective exercises, and recognising the signs of distress in learners (and educators themselves). Having a plan in place reduces the fear of "doing it wrong" or triggering backlash.

Educators don't have to do it alone, either—community networks, counselling services, and peer support groups can all share the load. Ultimately, when teachers feel prepared to engage with a learner's lived experiences rather than shying away, it can spark moments of real transformation and resistance, both at the personal and the collective level. This way, the classroom becomes not just a place for building skills, but a catalyst for healing and empowerment, reflecting the core values of adult and community education.

A few resources might help:

High Prevalence of Trauma Among Adult Learners

- A 2022 study by AONTAS[11] noted that many adult learners come from marginalised or disadvantaged backgrounds where trauma is more common, whether from childhood adversity, economic hardship, or ongoing social exclusion. While exact figures vary, the takeaway is that trauma is a frequent undercurrent in adult education classrooms, influencing motivation, concentration, and overall engagement.

Trauma-Sensitive Pedagogy Research

- Although not specific to Ireland, Paula Jennings's book, The Trauma-Sensitive Classroom: Building Resilience with *Compassionate Teaching*[12] offers research-based strategies that have been adapted for adult education contexts worldwide. While the focus is often on children, many principles—like creating emotional safety and recognising triggers—apply just as well to adults who bring their life experiences into the learning space.

Practical Strategies and Guidelines

- In the US, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) developed a framework for trauma-informed care[13], which has also been referenced by some European adult education providers. Their "4 Rs" (Realise, Recognise, Respond, and Resist re-traumatisation) align with best practices such as setting clear boundaries, using reflective exercises, and connecting learners to mental health resources when needed.

11 AONTAS. 2023. Lifelong Learning Participation Research Report.

12 Jennings, P.A., 2019. The Trauma-Sensitive Classroom: Building Resilience with Compassionate Teaching. W.W. Norton & Company.

13 SAMHSA. 2014. Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative. 2014. Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach.

Overall, these sources underline that trauma-informed approaches aren't just a "nice idea". They're increasingly seen as essential for anyone working with adult learners, ensuring that educators can validate their learners' life experiences as a whole, lean into tough conversations, and promote healing.
And here are two practical, trauma-informed best practices for adult educators, along with concrete tips to apply in the classroom:

Foster Emotional Safety and Predictability

- Explain the Plan: Start each session by outlining what you'll do and for how long—like giving a quick roadmap of the activities or topics you'll cover. This helps everyone feel more prepared and less anxious about surprises.
- Gentle Check-Ins: Use simple "temperature checks" or casual "How's everyone doing?" moments during sessions. Invite participants to share as much or as little as they want, without pressure to disclose personal details.
- Offer Choice: Wherever possible, let learners decide if they want to participate in group activities or observe quietly. Giving them a sense of control can ease anxiety and build trust.

Why It Works: When learners know what to expect and have the freedom to opt in or out, they're more likely to feel safe, which is essential in a trauma-informed environment.

Practise Inclusive, Non-Judgmental Communication

- Use Person-First Language: Say "an individual who has experienced homelessness" instead of "a homeless person." This underscores respect and acknowledges the person before their circumstance.
- Avoid "Should" Statements: Try not to say things like "You should just forget about it." Instead, offer empathy, e.g., "It's understandable to feel overwhelmed. Let's look at some ways to cope."
- Normalise a Range of Emotions: Emphasise that it's okay to experience sadness, frustration, or fatigue, and provide constructive ways to process or express these feelings (such as journaling or guided reflections).
- Pause Before Responding: When someone shares a vulnerable experience, resist the urge to immediately respond, problem-solve, or justify. Instead, allow for a moment of silence, acknowledge their courage, and validate their experience (e.g., "Thank you for sharing that with us").
- Hold Space Without Rushing to Comfort: If someone becomes emotional, avoid offering an escape ("You can step out if you need to"), as this may signal that their emotions are unwelcome. Instead, validate their experience (e.g., "You've been through something incredibly difficult."). This helps create an environment where emotions are accepted rather than dismissed.

Why It Works: Using respectful, empathetic language sends the message that learners' experiences are valued and validated. It also reduces shame, which can be a big barrier to participation in adult education settings.

Additional Supports

If you are looking for additional guidance or think your learners require additional psychosocial or psychological support, here are some examples of organisations and services based in Ireland that can offer support:

- HSE: Mental health supports and services
- Aware: Depression & Bipolar Disorder Support
- Samaritans
- Jigsaw: Support for learners until 25 years old
- GROW: Peer Support: Mental health support
- Pieta House: Support for people experiencing thoughts of suicide, who engage in self-harm, and those who bereaved by suicide
- Migrant/refugee associations, such as MASI or Doras
- Cairde: Improvement of healthcare inequalities for minority communities in Ireland
- Spirasi: Support for survivors of torture
- Women's Aid: Support for survivors of domestic violence
- Rape Crisis Ireland
- Aoibhneas: Women and Children's Refuge
- GOSHH: Gender, Orientation, Sexual Health, HIV
- LGBT Ireland

This list is not exhaustive, and we recommend education centres compile, regularly review, and update a list of local and national supports.

CHAPTER 2

Building Blocks

Building Blocks

Disinformation and Misinformation

The term “fake news” is a broad, catch-all phrase frequently used in public discourse to label false or misleading stories. While it sounds familiar, it’s not the most precise definition. Fake news can refer to everything from satirical articles to outright disinformation campaigns, and it lumps together distinct phenomena under one vague definition. Because it lacks nuance, it doesn’t properly distinguish between honest errors (misinformation), intentional deceptions (disinformation), or harmful truths (malinformation). Instead, experts encourage using more specific terminology to better address the root causes and effects of misleading content.

Misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation all revolve around false or misleading content, but each term highlights different motivations and consequences.

Misinformation is false or misleading information that’s shared by someone who believes it’s true, making it unintentional. Think of it like an honest mistake—someone passing along a faulty statistic or a rumour without realising it’s incorrect.

Disinformation, on the other hand, is deliberately created or shared falsehoods intended to deceive or manipulate. This type of false content is often crafted to shape opinions, sow confusion, or push an agenda.

Lastly, **malinformation** involves sharing accurate information, but in a way specifically intended to cause harm. This might include deliberately leaking personal data or taking true statements out of context to attack someone.

Together, this is known as “Information Disorder”.[14] It’s difficult to pin down an exact percentage of online news that qualifies as such because definitions, data sources, and research methods vary widely. There is no single, universally accepted figure.

Independent news sites or newspapers can sometimes have a fact-checking component to their organisational structure or efforts. The fact-checking space is changing daily. Meta and X (formerly known as Twitter) have both been in the news recently regarding the changes they have made to their fact-checking approaches or lack thereof.[15] It is important to note that fact-checking is regulated differently in the US and the EU.

14 Council of Europe. 2025. Information Disorder.

15 Aljazeera. 2025. Meta’s move to end fact-checking reflects turn toward freewheeling internet.

In 2023 the EU asked all major online platforms to sign the EU's *Code of Conduct on Disinformation*[16]—all did, except X/Twitter. They publish periodic reports—which are accessible online—about their efforts to combat online disinformation. X/Twitter and Facebook are the two worst offenders, and while X/Twitter doesn't publish results, Meta's are astounding:

> **"Over 40 million pieces of content received a fact-checking label on Facebook and over 1.1 million on Instagram. 95% of users encountering content with a warning label [...] choose not to click on it, and 37% of users on Facebook and 38% on Instagram [...] opt to cancel their sharing action when receiving the warning."**[17]

Similarly, TikTok reported that:

> **"29.93% of users cancel their sharing action when encountering an 'unverified content' label on the platform."**[18]

Hence, fact-checking serves as an important safeguard for platforms and an essential skill in media literacy for users. But it's not enough.

A well-known study published in *Science*[19] found that false stories on X/Twitter were 70% more likely to be retweeted than true ones, suggesting that misinformation travels faster and reaches more people than accurate information. After analysing millions of X/Twitter posts, they discovered that false stories were more likely to be retweeted than true ones—often at a much quicker rate. One key reason is that made-up claims tend to be shocking or sensational, triggering stronger emotional responses (like surprise or fear) that motivate users to share them instantly. This "wow" factor can overshadow the more measured or nuanced nature of factual reporting. Major public events—like elections, pandemics, and social movements—tend to amplify the reach of this phenomenon. The Pew Research Center indicated that 8 in 10 Americans encountered misinformation about national news topics like COVID-19 or the 2020 election.[20]

16 Transparency Centre. 2022. Discover the Code of Conduct on Disinformation.

17 European Commission. 2023. EU's Code of Practice on Disinformation: new reports available in the Transparency Centre.

18 Ibid.

19 Vosoughi S, Roy D, Aral S. 2018. The spread of true and false news online.

20 Pew Research Center. 2021. Misinformation and competing views of reality abounded throughout 2020. Americans Navigated the News in 2020: A Tumultuous Year in Review.

Actually, fact-checking on social media can inadvertently contribute to polarisation. While these studies don't claim fact-checking is futile, they highlight scenarios in which it backfires or reinforces existing biases rather than fostering common ground.

See *Fact Checking* for related resources and activities.

1. Nyhan & Reifler. When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions.[21]

- This influential study examines how fact-checking and corrective information can actually reinforce the very misconceptions they aim to dispel, particularly when they challenge deeply held beliefs. The authors describe the so-called "backfire effect", where individuals double down on mistaken views when confronted with facts that contradict their ideological positions.

2. Walter et al. Fact-Checking: A Meta-Analysis of What Works and for Whom.[22]

- This meta-analysis consolidates findings from various fact-checking studies and shows that while fact-checking can be effective under certain conditions, it often has limited impact on strongly partisan groups. In some cases, attempts to correct misinformation can heighten defensiveness and polarisation, particularly in high-stakes political or social debates.

In conclusion, fact-checking studies and efforts on the platforms' side are an essential contribution, but alone they won't solve the problem. Learners need to develop their own crucial Media Literacy and Critical Thinking skills because they are key actors in the process.

21 Nyhan, B., & Reifler, J. (2010). When Corrections Fail: The Persistence of Political Misperceptions. Political Behavior.

22 Walter, N., Cohen, J., Holbert, R. L., & Morag, Y. 2020. Fact-Checking: A Meta-Analysis of What Works and for Whom: Political Communication.

Communication

Too often, facilitators, educators and learners can assume that the basic ingredients and conditions for learning are in place. One of the more important variables at play in that mix is communication. Good communication is essential for creating effective education and training environments for both the educator and adult learner.

Messages can often be misheard, misinterpreted or misrepresented. In the context of disinformation, communication is the vehicle through which fear, hate or simply confusion is sown and spread. In an online environment, where communication consists of the rapid consumption of social media content, only messages that immediately capture our attention stand out. Jonah Sachs describes this competition for engagement as the "story wars"[23] where the most evocative, emotionally charged, or provocative narratives dominate.

> For more about the power of stories and storytelling, see the workbook section *Storytelling and Narrative Construction* and *Storytelling to Create Change*.

Disinformation and misinformation precisely make use of this dynamic by creating and propagating provocative and outrageous content to attract people's attention.

Outlined below is a range of communication exercises that are interactive and participatory whilst also ranging in degrees of difficulty. The activities in this section try to elicit the importance of listening and encourage effective communication. When practiced, good communication principles can help buffer individuals and communities against disinformation.

Note for facilitator: The activities in the Communications section are designed for groups who may be unfamiliar with one another and/or the concepts of deep and active listening.

23 Sachs, J. 2012. Winning the Story Wars: Why those who tell (and live) the best stories will rule the future. Harvard Business Review Press.

Activity: Whispers

Aim

- To explore communication in a fun and participatory and inclusive manner whilst highlighting some challenges associated with receiving and interpreting messages we only glance at.

Method (20 – 30 mins)

- **Divide the participants into groups** of 6-8 people. Put them into a line (arm's length apart) so that one person is looking at the back of the next person's head. The last person in line will have a flipchart pad / whiteboard in front of them.
- T**he first person writes down a basic sentence** on a card, and then whispers that sentence into the ear of the person in front of them. They tap the person on the shoulder to indicate that they can pass the message on. This process continues until the last person receives the whispered sentence.
- **The last person then writes down the sentence** on the flip chart and compares it to the original sentence on the card. The first and last sentence should be the same but often are not … why?
- A debrief ensues to draw out the learning.

Variation Activity - The same exercise as above is attempted but this time, images are used rather than sentences and you draw/feel the image rather than say/hear it. The image is drawn on the back of the person in front of each participant. This is done using a finger as a pen and the back of the person as the paper. You tap the shoulder of the person in front to indicate that you are starting and tap again to indicate that you are finished. This process continues until the last person receives the image. They then draw the image and compare it to the original image. The first and last image should be the same but often are not.... why? A debrief ensues to draw out the learning. This exercise emphasises that communications is more than speaking/ hearing but can involve touch/feeling etc.

Expected Outcomes

- Understand the importance of active listening.
- Realise that speaking clearly and slowly is crucial.
- Realise how easy it is to misinterpret messages we only glance at.

Suggestions for the Facilitator

- Encourage the group to think of short sentences and feel free to provide examples.
- Ensure that the person writing down the sentence at both ends of the line has basic literacy.
- Ensure that consent is given; taking into account personal, cultural, and religious factors. Offer an alternative for those who do not consent to being touched such as saying a loud, "Yes", instead of touching another's shoulder.

Activity: Clap Once, Twice

Aim

- To build the level of active listening within the group.

Method (10-15 mins)

- This is an exercise that can be played with everyone placed in a medium to big circle. The person to the left of the facilitator claps first and the clap continues in a clockwise direction with each individual clapping in sequence until the clap reaches back to the facilitator.
- The facilitator then explains that any person can change the direction of the clap by clapping twice. This encourages active listening.
- To gamify the activity, the facilitator can encourage the speed to increase or can eliminate people as errors are made: some groups enjoy the added layer of competition.

Expected Outcomes

- The level of active listening in the group will increase.

Suggestions for the Facilitator

- Depending on the performance of the group, feel free to simplify by slowing down the activity or speed it up if need be.

Activity: Paraphrase

Aim

- To demonstrate the importance of paraphrasing when we are actively listening.

Method

- Participants will pair up, with one person acting as the listener and the other as the speaker.
- The speaker will tell a simple story to the listener, which could be about work, personal experiences, news, or any other topic.
- The listener's role is to restate what they heard in their own words, making sure to include all important details without adding their own thoughts or interpretations.
- The speaker will then check if the paraphrase is accurate.
- Once this is done, the participants will switch roles, giving each person a chance to practice both storytelling and paraphrasing.

Expected Outcomes

- Realise how paraphrasing supports empathy and understanding.
- Realise how easy it is to misinterpret a story, especially after hearing it just once.

Suggestions for Facilitators

- As this is a deep listening exercise, participants should avoid sharing anything too personal or sensitive.

Activity: Lines of Communication

Aim

- Explore the importance of body language and eye contact in communication.

Method (25-30 mins)

- **Two lines (Line A and Line B) of people stand facing each other,** with the lines being one metre apart and each person in each line 2-3 metres from the person beside them. In the first part of the exercise, people in both lines A and B are invited to talk about something that is really important to them and the task is to get the person opposite to stop talking and to listen. The facilitator asks all participants to ignore the person standing opposite them. Line A speaks first, with Line B ignoring, and then the lines swap roles.
- The facilitator asks the participants to reveal how they felt during this activity.
- **Additional element**: Line A moves up one partner so everyone has a new partner. Line A talks about a really important issue and Line B needs to ensure that they show line A that the message and story revealed is irrelevant to them. They can yawn, play with their hair, look at their watch or simply avoid eye contact.
- The facilitator asks the participants to reveal how they felt during this activity. This can be repeated with another new partner with Line B revealing their stories.
- **Additional element**: Line A does the same as above but this time the task for Line B is to actively listen and be able to recall the main points of what was said. This process can be repeated and reversed so line B calls out the stories and line A actively listens.
- The facilitator asks the learners/participants to reveal how they felt during this activity.

Expected Outcomes

- Realise the role that body language and eye contact play in communicating effectively.
- Understand the power of empathy in communications.
- We all know what it is like to feel ignored; with this exercise, we get to hear how the other person felt that when both participants were fighting to be heard.
- Feeling heard can strengthen connections between people.

Suggestions for the Facilitator

- Since this exercise consists of participants ignoring one another, they should be encouraged to choose topics that are neutral or fun rather than topics that are deeply personal such as loss or grief.
- Ensure that all voices can be heard during the debriefing.
- Explore feelings of discomfort within the group.

Critical Thinking

> **"We have never been more at the mercy of charlatans and fools, from fraudulent health advice to the emergent phenomena of fake news and viral propaganda."**[24]

Supporting adult learners to think critically should be a core function of all adult and community education. As many societies have moved from an era of broadcast communication to one heavily influenced by digital communication, arguably the need for critical thinking has never been greater. Social media platforms often echo and amplify evidence-free messaging while the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) opens up a different method of providing and spreading disinformation and propaganda.

As the sheer scale of shared information increases, it is now abundantly clear that getting learners to critically question the sources of the data, information and stories they are exposed to is fundamentally important. In parallel, the need to develop the capacity to ask skilled questions regarding the motivation behind the shared information that surrounds us all is also central to effective and relevant educational efforts. Stephen Brookfield says critical thinking "**involves calling into question the assumptions underlying our customary, habitual ways of thinking and acting and then being ready to think and act differently on the basis of this critical questioning**."[25]

Getting learners to question the assumptions that underpin their learning and activity is a valuable exercise at an individual level. However, as we see across the world, the need for critical thinking at a community or state level shouldn't be underestimated.

> **"Fostering critical thinking is crucial to creating and maintaining a healthy democracy."**[26]

24 Grimes, D.R. 2019. The Irrational Ape - Why flawed logic puts us all at risk, and how critical thinking can save the world. p. 16. Simon and Schuster UK Ltd

25 Brookfield, S.D. 1987. p. 1 Developing Critical Thinkers - Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting. Open University Press.

26 Ibid.

Having an informed citizenry has multiple benefits but let's not underestimate how difficult that can be. As a precursor to the three activities outlined below, this video on critical thinking[27] is worth looking at as a brief introduction to critical thinking in the context of adult and community education.

Note for Facilitator: Choose either activity 1, *The F Card* or 2, *Selective Attention Test* (or deliver both if you have time) from the list below but ensure that activity 3, *Newspaper Article Comparison*, is carried out. Learning from activity 1 or 2 can be applied to activity 3, which relates to real world examples.

27 Saolta. 2023. Global Citizenship Education: Critical Thinking. DPTV Documentaries. https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=QnXTbGVKgOM&feature=youtu.be

Activity: The F Card

Aim

- This activity explores how humans think, how blind spots are created and the important role of the reticular activating system (RAS).

Method (45 – 60 mins)

- The facilitator begins by distributing an individual card for each participant and a pen. The sentence below is printed on each card.

  FINISHED FILES ARE THE RESULT

  OF YEARS OF SCIENTIFIC STUDY

  COMBINED WITH THE

  EXPERIENCE OF MANY YEARS

- The facilitator distributes one card to each person face down and reminds the group that "this is an individual exercise … No cheating … Are you ready?"
- The facilitator asks each participant to turn their card over and read the sentence below to themselves (just one time – this is not a memory test). The cards are then turned face down again before a second instruction is given.
- The facilitator asks the group:

  "How many times does the letter F appear in the sentence? The answer is between 1 and 7, depending on the card you have. Please write down your answer."

- Participants can read through the sentence again.
- The participants are encouraged to write down their answer on the back of the card and not share their answer with friends/colleagues.
- The facilitator then asks:

  "Who got the card with one F? Seven? Two? Five? Three? Four? and finally Six?"

- The facilitator can extend the game/intrigue by swapping cards between those who got four and two, three and six, five and six etc. This process begins to reveal that everyone has the same card.
- Ask participants to check their cards once again and see if they can identify six Fs. Ask participants to explain what happened. How can some people see two Fs, four, five, six *etc*. when all the cards are the same? Different solutions are offered.
- The main reason is that the letter "F" may not be seen in the context of the word "OF" which is often perceived as OV. Our formal education system conditions us in many ways and in this example English language lessons encourage us to pronounce the word "OF" as OV. Many learners then create a shortcut and don't see the letter F. This is an example of educational conditioning.

Note: this phenomenon applies primarily to mother-tongue English speakers or those who speak English very fluently. It could be useful to take this into account during discussions and reflect on different blind spots due to various variables.

The Participants Proceed to an Explanation, Debrief and Reflection

Participants have just experienced a visual scotoma (***blind spot***). As humans we pick up information from the world around us through our five senses (sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste). This information is then transferred through an information filter system (Reticular Activating System - RAS) that only allows information that is a value or a threat through to our conscious mind. Essentially, this means that we pick up information through our eyes (in the example above) and this information goes through the filter before it is processed in our brains. In short, ***we see what we want to see or that which we are afraid of***. The RAS is a critical piece of infrastructure as it ensures that we are not overwhelmed by an information overload. The RAS also ensures that we stay sane in the sense that we remain consistent to what we believe and don't re-evaluate all of our views and opinions repeatedly. "Love is blind" is a great example of this in operation. Because we love and care about those closest to us, we often ignore or block out information that could contribute to an alternative view of our children/partners/family. We don't see with our eyes. We pick up visual information with our eyes, which then goes through the RAS before being processed by the brain. The same with the other senses. ***We don't see the world as it is. We see our individual version of it***.

As learners, we all have blind spots in our views and opinions. Where are our blind spots? Where is our worldview holding us back? Where is the evidence for the beliefs we hold? It is important for the facilitator to point out that as adults, many things have contributed to the views and opinions we hold. Family, friends, community, language, media, culture, sport, music, education etc. have all contributed to the way we see the world. The core question is, though, are we brave enough or humble enough to acknowledge that we know relatively little and that what we think we know is full of blind spots?

Expected Outcomes

- Participants realise that we "see" different versions of reality.
- Acknowledge that we all have blind spots – where are mine?
- Acknowledge that blind spots contribute to assumptions?
- We see what we want to see or what we are afraid of, which stops us seeing alternative points of view.
- Understand the role of conditioning in our web of beliefs.

Suggestions for the Facilitator

- Gamify this activity and introduce as much fun as possible to the process.
- Acknowledge that the facilitator can mislead participants (often purposefully).

Activity: Selective Attention Test

Simons and Chabris. The Invisible Gorilla. How Our Intuitions Deceive Us.[28]

Aim

- To understand selective perception and attention.

Method (15 – 25 mins)

- **This activity uses a video (link above).** The facilitator asks the group to identify how many times the players in white pass the basketball? The video is played and is paused at 38 seconds. Ask the group to write down how many passes they identified. The facilitator then plays the video and pauses at 44 seconds. The facilitator asks the group, "who got 15?" The facilitator proceeds to play the remainder of the video.
- The facilitator then hosts a debrief focusing on how the human mind works and the importance and role of selective attention and perception. Put simply, humans are very selective in terms of what they consciously see and by extension what they choose to ignore. The facilitator can expand the debriefing into a broader debate by asking "In what other context, are you/we selectively perceiving"?
- Humans all too often see what they are looking for in order to back up their world view. Football fans look for information to validate their support of a particular team. Members of political parties look for evidence to validate their parties' ideological beliefs. **"The man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest**."[29]

Expected Outcomes

- Understand the process of selective perception and attention.
- Acknowledge the power of perspectives and how perspectives are formed.
- Realise how our peers, family, religion, beliefs etc. might contribute to this phenomenon.

Suggestions for the Facilitator

- Encourage participants to identify areas where they may have selective perception or attention (sport/politics/relationships *etc.*).

28 Chabris, C. and Simons, D. 2011. The Invisible Gorilla. How Our Intuitions Deceive Us. Crown. https://youtu.be/vJG698U2Mvo?si=QB2Nxlytj65zt9YV

29 Simons in Grimes, 2019. The Irrational Ape. p. 13. See footnote 23

Activity: Newspaper Article Comparison

Aims

- Introduce the importance of critical media literacy.
- Analyse the role of the media in shaping public opinion.
- Understand that the news outlets (online and offline) we consume are shaped by the perspectives and intentions of their writers and editors.
- Realise how (social) media algorithms and echo chambers contribute to our perspectives.

Method (50-60 mins)

- **The facilitator asks the group to identify a national issue** (housing, cost of living, migration, gender-based violence, employment etc.) that most of the group find relevant. The facilitator then brings in a range of newspapers and magazines that explore or depict that issue.
- **The facilitator divides the full group into smaller sub-groups** of 3-4 people (each provided with scissors, glue sticks and an A1 sheet of paper).
- The facilitator then invites the groups to **cut out the images, headlines or stories** that are related to the issue that was originally chosen. The key task here is to identify an editorial stance or view in each of the newspapers. What is the core message portrayed by the newspaper or magazine? Is this different from other papers? What is the narrative of the paper? Is it neutral? Is it based on evidence? Who and what is the source of the story?
- As an additional layer, the facilitator will delve into the ownership of the publication and the history of their views and opinions. Migration, housing, welfare, inequality, politics, crime etc. can all be examined using this technique: this is a key part of media literacy. The facilitator can also fact-check stories with the group and possibly explore the stories that newspapers choose to leave out.
- **Adaptation in relation to social media (an additional 30 mins)** - As most people retrieve their news from their social media feeds, an additional and worthwhile adaptation to activity 3 is to examine and explore social media feeds. The facilitator chooses a social media platform and a topic and asks participants to look for content related to that subject or topic in their individual feed.
- The resultant conversation reveals that not all feeds are the same, in fact, they are usually quite different, sometimes even substantially so. In essence, the platform is programmed to give you content that you engage with rather than anything evidential or factual. This last activity connects the function of the RAS (discussed and explored in activity 1) and positions us as the (often unconscious) curator of our own social media feeds.

Expected Outcomes

- Realise that various subjects are treated somewhat differently in terms of editorial angle, language and/or imagery.
- Understand the power of the media in terms of influence.

Suggestions for the Facilitator

- Use subjects that the group have identified as being relevant.
- Repeat the exercise from time to time to reveal deeper editorial positions.
- Use different papers or platforms from time to time.

Values and Frames

Values are understood as deeply ingrained beliefs that guide behaviour, and they often operate unconsciously. They are closely connected to feelings: When values are activated or threatened, strong feelings like despair, anger or happiness emerge. They can be defined by their core characteristics—stable, influential, and shaped by both individual and collective experiences—and often refer to goals that people are motivated to pursue. To demonstrate how values manifest in behaviour, an effective metaphor is the iceberg: much like the bulk of an iceberg is hidden beneath the water's surface, the values of a community often remain unseen yet significantly influence actions and even serve as standards or criteria against which actions are evaluated.

Dominant societal values—those that are most widely accepted—shape the actions and behaviours of individuals and groups within a society. These values influence how people interact with each other, make decisions, and engage with broader social systems. Values have different degrees of importance for people, and this relative importance often guides people's behaviour when they are faced with a trade-off.

While values are guiding principles that influence our beliefs, actions and decisions, frames shape how we perceive and interpret information. In politics, frames shape social policies and form institutions that carry out policies. Describing frames and their relationship to values, Holmes et al. suggest: "We understand things, mostly subconsciously, using frames. In language, for example, our "frame" for a word is not just its dictionary meaning but also all the other things we know, feel or have experienced in relation to it. When we hear a particular word or encounter a specific situation, the dictionary meaning and all those other bits of knowledge and experience are activated in our brains. This is the "frame" for a word or scene – and hence it is thought that frames can activate values." [30]

> **"Economic inequality recently reached a 50-year high, child wellbeing is the lowest-ranked in the developed world and anti-immigrant and Islamophobic sentiment have become widespread—as has disengagement from social justice issues."**[31]

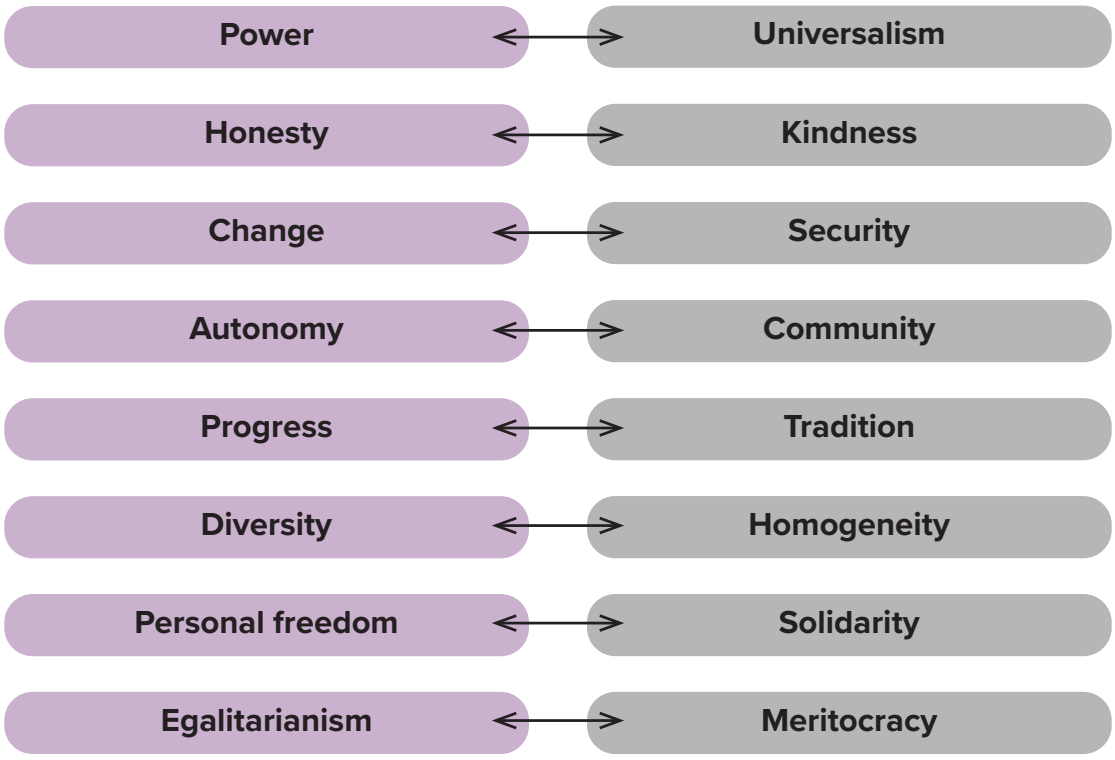
30 Holmes, T. Blackmore, E. Hawkins, R. and Wakeford. T. 2011. p. 7. The Common Cause Handbook.

31 Ibid., p. 5

In 2011 and 2012, interesting and important research began to surface in the UK: it examined bigger-than-self issues such as poverty, the climate crisis, inequality etc. Two documents were central to these efforts: *Finding Frames – New ways to engage the UK public in global poverty*[32] and *The Common Cause Handbook.*[33] The context of this research was the demise of public support for bigger-than-self issues during a time of increasing governmental support for those same issues in the UK. This was a puzzle for those civil society stakeholders who were working and contributing to a more just, equitable and sustainable world. It turns out their own communications and storytelling efforts were unintentionally undermining their espoused missions. The reason for this result lay in the impact that their communications had on underlying values and frames.

The researchers involved in the work came to their findings by basing their efforts in part on the work of Shalom Schwartz who had previously developed a Values Circumplex.[34]

The Circumplex has a set of values that are deemed to be universal. All people and communities have a mix of the values in the Circumplex, and no one value is either positive or negative. It is also important to note that values may change due to life experience. Here is a list of values and their antagonistic or opposing counterparts for facilitators to engage their learners based on the concept of Schwartz' Circumplex:



32 Darnton, A and Kirk, M. 2011. Finding Frames New ways to engage the UK public in global poverty.

33 Holmes et al., The Common Cause Handbook. See footnote 29.

34 Ibid., p. 16.

It is essential to understand how values and frames are reinforced. Values and frames are not static—they are strengthened through repetition and reinforcement. This can be likened to physical training: just as biceps grow stronger through exercises like curls or chin-ups, speaking, writing, and acting in ways that align with specific values helps to reinforce them. In turn, this also weakens values and frames that lie on the opposite end of the value and frame spectrum.[35] This dynamic is known as the "**see-saw effect**". The see-saw effect is of the utmost significance when we speak about disinformation as we can get sucked into arguments that make the disinformation stronger (at a values level) through further and repeated engagement.

The Bleed Over Effect

Imagine a white t-shirt. Now, visualise dropping some red or black ink on to the t-shirt. What happens? The ink begins to bleed out from where it landed. Triggering values is somewhat similar. When one set of values is activated, those values that sit either side in the Schwartz Circumplex also get strengthened.

The "Finding Frames" researchers found that words central to the NGO sector such as "development", "aid" and "charity" fall within a moral superiority frame as they activate values of power over groups considered to be less powerful than the West such as the Global South. The more embedded the moral superiority frame and associated values of power become, the weaker its antagonistic value (universalism) becomes. To engage the public in bigger-than-self issues such as poverty or the climate crisis, for example, the researchers suggest that NGO campaigns develop frames that activate values concerned with the wellbeing of others (universalism).

35 Schwartz, S. 2009. A theory of cultural value orientations: Explication and applications.

Activity: Envisioning an Ideal Community

Aim

- Recognise the role and impact of values in a community.

Method (45-50 mins)

- The facilitator divides the group into small sub-groups of 3-4 people and gives out materials (A1 page, markers, pens). Additional 3D props (for example, buildings, bikes, people *etc.*) can animate the exercise if available.
- Each group needs to draw their ideal community. What would it look like? Ask each group to describe their community. Important to take time to discuss what was included and what was left out.
- The facilitator then asks the groups, what might be the dominant values needed for this community to exist? The ten subsets of the values circumplex are provided to the groups as a resource.
- Each group gets to discuss this question internally before giving feedback.
- The purpose of this activity is to draw attention to the link between dominant values and the resulting characteristics of the communities we currently live in as well as those that we might wish to create.

Expected Outcomes

- Raise awareness of the role of values in shaping communities.
- Understand more about the link between values and behaviour.Acknowledge the See-Saw Effect taking shape when some group members prioritise certain values such as security over their antagonistic values such as openness to change.

Suggestions for the Facilitator

- Start with a spatial community at a local level (town, housing estate *etc.*) and build from there to regions or countries.
- Try to have props (hospital, bikes, road, park *etc.*) and visuals that can help make a 3D model community.

Activity: Identifying Dominant Values

Aim

- Identify the dominant values in a group.

Method (30 mins)

- The facilitator has the eight sets of values (from the Schwartz circumplex) cut out and placed on a table in the middle of the adapted room.
- The facilitator gives out 5 yellow and 5 blue dots to each participant and asks the group to enter into a process of voting. This methodology is known as direct ranking and is part of the suite of participatory learning-in-action methodologies.
- Each participant places the yellow dots on their dominant or strongest value(s) and the blue dots on their perceived least dominant or least important values. Once everyone has placed their dots wherever they wish (by sticking them to the card), the yellow dots are totalled for each card as are the blue dots. The dominant and least dominant values are now evident to all in the room. The facilitator then spends some time de-briefing this activity, exploring the potential consequences. What could this lead to? What kind of values are dominant in peaceful societies? What kind of values are dominant in communities with high rates of crime? Longevity? Social deprivation?

Expected Outcomes

- A deeper understanding of values and how they work as well as their impact.
- Realise the link between values and behaviour.
- Realise that the values we hold can change and can be influenced by our peers, family, social media, a big life event *etc*.
- Realise what values shape the society we live in.

Suggestions for the Facilitator

- Worth mentioning that the values shared and triggered today shape tomorrow.
- Emphasise that values change over time depending on our life experience, that they are neither good nor bad and that they are universal.

Activity: Reframing the Issue

Aim

- To demonstrate how one issue can be framed (and reframed) in different ways.

Method (45 minutes)

- The facilitator describes a conflict (*e.g.* a tenant not paying their rent on time), an event (*e.g.* the COVID-19 pandemic or bird flu), or a societal issue (*e.g.* lack of affordable housing).
- Learners break up into small groups (between 4 and 5 people).
- The facilitator assigns each group a different role and perspective related to the chosen topic e.g. tenant, landlord, minister for housing, housing activist (learners do not have to agree with their role).
- The groups then come together for a plenary discussion, each group arguing their perspectives using their frames.

Expected Outcomes

- Realise that one issue can be framed in many different ways depending on your values, roles and perspectives.
- Taking on a role that a learner wouldn't usually agree with can lead to a broader perspective of a large, societal issue.

Suggestions for Facilitators

- Learners taking on various roles are encouraged to think about the language they are using to frame their argument.

For Group Reflection

Disinformation doesn't take place in a vacuum. It is shaped by underlying values and frames that influence how we perceive information. Some values, such as critical thinking, open-mindedness, and scepticism, can act as buffers against disinformation by helping individuals assess the credibility and intent behind the messages they encounter. When discussing disinformation, the role of values and frames is often overlooked or undervalued. Those who spread disinformation rely on a "**web of belief**". A web of belief could be understood as a network of interconnected ideas that support their narrative. This web can be unravelled more effectively by focusing on the values that shape people's interpretations and decision-making, rather than just addressing their behaviours or the content itself. Engaging with values at a deeper level encourages critical thinking and promotes a more thoughtful, informed approach to evaluating information.

Your phone – Access to Information and the Risk of Data Leaks

Data Protection and Privacy Issues

The digital world makes our personal information way more valuable—and vulnerable—than ever. Every time we go online, use an app, or scroll through social media, we leave digital breadcrumbs that can be scooped up by companies, governments, and even cybercriminals. Sure, tech giants argue that collecting data helps them personalise our online experience and deliver better services. But plenty of privacy advocates worry about what's really going on behind the curtain. How secure are these massive data sets?

It's hard to pin down a precise number of everyday people who've had their personal info swiped, but the estimates are staggering. Take the 2017 Equifax breach, which affected around 147 million people in the US alone, or Yahoo's record-breaking fiasco in 2013—eventually confirmed to have compromised 3 billion user accounts. The Identity Theft Resource Center says the number of data compromises in the US jumped from 1,108 in 2020 to 1,862 in 2021, a whopping 68% leap in just a year.[36]

In Europe there's no shortage of data breach incidents. According to a 2022 report by law firm DLA Piper, European regulators received over **236,000 personal data breach notifications** in a single year (from January 2021 to January 2022: an 8% jump compared to the previous year) from various sectors—health services, finance, retail.

It doesn't help that privacy laws aren't exactly keeping pace with the speed of technological innovation. Regulations like the EU's GDPR and California's CCPA are attempts to clamp down on how organisations collect and use personal data, but enforcement can be tricky. Significant GDPR fines include Amazon's 746 million euros and Google's 50 million euros.

And still, everyday internet users usually aren't fully aware of what's being tracked or how to protect themselves. That's why many experts suggest a mix of stronger legislation and a culture that values data protection—something easier said than done when so much profit is tied up in data.

For example, one small but meaningful way to take control is through **managing cookies**—little data packages that websites store on our device. Cookies keep track of what we do online, from login sessions to items in our shopping cart, but they can also be used to build a profile of our browsing habits. Users have control over which cookies they accept or reject. Taking an extra moment to refine those options helps limit how much of our data ends up in the hands of advertisers or third parties.

36 Identity Theft Resource Centre. 2021. Annual Data Breach Report Sets New Record for Number of Compromises.

Facial Recognition and Security Concerns

Facial recognition is like the shiny new toy that's being used everywhere, from unlocking smartphones to identifying suspects in criminal investigations. The idea of a quick scan replacing passwords and ID cards is understandably appealing. But scratch the surface, and a host of potential problems start to show up. For one, accuracy can vary wildly depending on factors like skin tone, lighting, and even the quality of the training data. This leads to real concerns about bias and discrimination, where certain groups might get misidentified more often.

There's also the nagging question of surveillance. If your face can be scanned anywhere—on the street, at the airport, or while walking into a shop—what happens to your right to privacy? Governments and corporations could, in theory, monitor people's movements and activities around the clock. Proponents argue that facial recognition can help track terrorists or locate missing persons, but critics worry the technology is ripe for abuse, especially if it's deployed without strict regulations or oversight.

Deep Fakes: The Next Level of Information Disorder

Deep fake technology is another jaw-dropping advancement that makes us question the reliability of any video we see online. By using powerful machine-learning algorithms, anyone with the right tools and a bit of know-how can swap faces in videos or make someone appear to say something they never said. At first glance, these can be fun and harmless—think of swapping actors' faces in famous movie scenes for a few laughs. But as technology evolves, it's becoming easier to produce highly convincing, deceptive videos that could be weaponised for political or financial gain.

This technology has exploded in the past few years. One study by the cybersecurity company Sensity (formerly Deeptrace) reported that the number of deep fake videos online skyrocketed from around 15,000 in 2019 to more than 85,000 just a year later. Even more startling: the bulk of these were non-consensual "adult" content, often targeting women without their knowledge or permission. Meanwhile, cases like the viral Tom Cruise deep fakes on TikTok[37] have shown just how easy it is to fool millions of viewers using well-crafted synthetic media. With the rapid evolution of Artificial Intelligence, we can expect this type of disinformation to become more elaborate.

For more information, *see Artificial Intelligence (AI) – What does the future hold?*

37 Metz, R. 2021. How a deep fake Tom Cruise on TikTok turned into a very real AI company. CNN Business.

Where are we going from here? In a nutshell, we're entering an era where personal data is currency, faces can be scanned in real time, and videos can be faked with Hollywood-level precision. Add to that the widespread reach of social media, and you have a recipe for both incredible innovation and massive potential for abuse.

> Please refer to *Social Media: A Quick Overview of Platforms and Algorithm Dynamics* for further details on these terms and concepts.

Some argue we need clearer and stronger regulations—on both national and international levels—to ensure our rights aren't trampled on by unchecked tech. Others believe that market forces, public pressure, and a more educated public will push companies to behave responsibly. Either way, it's not just governments and corporations that have a role to play here. Everyday individuals need to become savvy about their digital footprints, question what they see online, and push back when their rights are being compromised.

Ultimately, technology itself isn't inherently good or bad—it's how we choose to use it that shapes our reality. Balancing innovation with ethical safeguards is going to be one of the biggest challenges of the 21st century. We can't just rely on the tech wizards and lawmakers to figure it out. It's going to take all of us staying informed and asking tough questions to shape the future we want to live in.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CHAPTER 3

Critical Issues

Critical Issues

Storytelling and Narrative Construction

Stories connect us on a deeply emotional level, which is why they're so effective at capturing our attention. Facts alone often fall flat without a compelling narrative that resonates with people's core beliefs and experiences. From traditional Irish folklore to modern European cinema, stories across the continent carry themes of identity, belonging, and struggle. When a message taps into those themes, it can override our logical thinking in a heartbeat.

In this context, a "Narrative" is more than just a story. It refers to a structured way of presenting a series of events, where each event is connected to others through cause-and-effect relationships—whether or not those connections are entirely logical. A narrative shapes how we understand and interpret the world by framing events in a specific way to convey a particular perspective, message, or agenda. "Narrative Analysis" is the work that can be done in media literacy. It "Considers both the individual stories told and the broader cultural narratives that inform them, highlighting how personal experiences are shaped by social contexts."[38]

One of the most cited pieces of research on why stories are so compelling is the work by Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock on "narrative transportation." In their study, titled The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives[39], the authors explore the concept of being so mentally "transported" into a story that we drop our guard and become more open to the ideas and emotions it presents.

They found that when people get lost in a narrative—like when reading a gripping novel or watching a movie—they experience fewer counterarguments and instead focus on the story's emotional and imaginative elements. This phenomenon helps explain why even well-informed individuals can be moved by anecdotes or fictional tales, sometimes more so than by raw facts or statistics. The power of that emotional engagement is precisely what makes storytelling such a strong vehicle for persuasion.

But in darker scenarios, that's also why disinformation can be so powerful: it slips past our mental defences by appealing to our emotions—stirring up fear, anger, or hope—long before we stop to question whether any of it is actually true.

38 Fiveable. 2025. Media Literacy Review: Narrative Analysis.

39 Green, M. C., & Brock, T. C. 2000. The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.

In the context of disinformation, narratives are often constructed around a hero vs villain setup or an "us vs them" mentality. This approach is compelling because it simplifies complex issues and taps into the natural human tendency to frame stories in terms of good vs evil, making them feel intuitively right and easy to understand. A catchy headline or an alarming image can trigger an instant reaction—anger or alarm—leading us to share the content before verifying the facts. Add in the **echo chambers** of social media, where people tend to see views that confirm their existing biases, and that emotional story snowballs into a belief that "feels right" but might be entirely false. This can spark real-world consequences—like targeting minority groups or fuelling anti-immigration sentiment—in ways that spread far beyond one social media post.

It's crucial for adult learners (and everyone else) to recognise these narrative tactics in the news and community discussions. A simple question— "What's the story trying to make me feel and is it manipulating my emotions?"—might be enough to break free from knee-jerk reactions.

Joseph Campbell once remarked that the power of a story lies in the belief behind it rather than whether it is factual. This is an important concept for learners to grasp. Adult and community education can encourage evidence-based arguments and in parallel shine a light on the powerful forces of propaganda that populates the world of politics, education, journalism and communications. The stories shared today shape tomorrow. We therefore need to be very careful regarding what we share. **"Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities."**[40]

Going into deeper critical thinking work—analysing the structure of a story, its characters, and its underlying themes—can help reveal whether a story is grounded in fact or built on shaky claims. Educators can also use real-world examples of disinformation in a way that encourages critical thinking.

Sometimes it helps to look at familiar tales or local issues—such as economic concerns or cultural traditions—as a jumping-off point to show how easy it is to slip from a well-intentioned story into a distorted narrative designed to mislead.

The key is to approach stories with both curiosity and caution. Take this simple exercise for example:

40 Voltaire as cited in Grimes, 2019. The Irrational Ape. p. 14 See footnote 23.

Activity: Flipping the Narrative

Aim

- To demonstrate how powerful emotional narratives are in shaping our opinions and beliefs.

Method (60 minutes)

1. **Create (or adapt) a short fictional news snippet** that claims something outlandish—maybe a rumour about a new immigrant community centre in a local Irish town. This snippet should be written in a sensational tone (using strong emotional language or implying hidden motives) to make it feel like the kind of piece that might spread on social media.
2. **Have learners read it in small groups** and answer questions like: "Which parts grab your emotions?" "What facts are provided, and which are just claims or insinuations?" "Does this story use any stereotypes or scapegoating language?"
3. **Encourage each group to "flip" the narrative** by reconstructing the same facts without the emotional hooks, or by adding balanced viewpoints. This helps them see how easily a seemingly harmless story can veer into alarmist territory when certain words or angles are chosen.

Expected Outcomes

- By walking through this process, learners see for themselves how a slanted narrative is built and how to refocus on truth. They get a concrete example of how disinformation takes shape, plus a chance to practice spotting the language tricks that make a story feel convincing—even when the facts are missing or twisted.
- When learners understand that the best lies often come wrapped in dramatic, gut-wrenching or outrageous stories, they're better equipped to spot disinformation before it takes hold and before they act upon it.

Suggestions for Facilitators

Appreciate the emotional punch the story delivers but help learners to stay alert to the ways those emotions can be exploited. Participants who have been through painful experiences can feel an extra layer of fear or hurt from the stories shared. Facilitators should be aware of this during the process, select the news snippet accordingly, and have an extra word before the session, warning people that this activity could be emotionally triggering, do regular check-ins ("How is everyone doing?") and take time in the debrief discussion to acknowledge the emotional impact of engaging with the news snippet. It is also useful to explicitly inform learners that they can let the facilitator know anytime they feel overwhelmed, need a short break, or would rather not participate in the activity.

Storytelling to Create Change

When disinformation is created about different groups, it creates a divide between people. The purpose of such disinformation is to spread falsehoods about a group that differs from one's own. As a result, our responses to consuming disinformation over time can include fear, suspicion, anger, or even hatred. The false information divides us.

The problem can be worsened by the absence of meaningful discussion about the negative emotions that arise from engaging with online disinformation. Disinformation is often consumed on our phones when we are alone. There is a lack of brave and supportive spaces where individuals can come together to exchange experiences, question beliefs, and develop understanding of different groups. This lack of opportunity for dialogue and mutual understanding adds to feelings of isolation and division, which in turn foster hostility.

Storytelling, however, when told from the first person, can present counter-narratives that challenge dominant stereotypes and biases. Hearing first-hand accounts of an individual's lived reality enables us to humanise people from different backgrounds, reminding us that the inner fears, hopes, and dreams we all experience are often not so different from one another.

Community education presents a unique opportunity for participants to have meaningful dialogue in a brave space where adult educators can validate different emotional responses that come up for the group, challenge their assumptions, and support their learners in connecting with the storytellers.

For this workbook, two workshops on digital storytelling with two different groups around Ireland who have experiences of migration were facilitated.

One group consisted of five people who have recently arrived in Ireland. By highlighting the humanity, resilience, and aspirations of this group, these stories have the potential to dismantle harmful myths and prejudices.

The second group consisted of three people who had experiences of emigration from Ireland to England in the 1970s. Including these stories in the workbook highlights the similarities between the experiences of older Irish emigrants and people who have recently arrived in Ireland. They also show how Irish people were not always made feel welcome in England at that time, and were, at times, objects of disinformation.

Though the stories from both groups demonstrate rich and diverse migrant experiences, similar themes that span the two groups include identity, seeking a better life, belonging, new opportunities and community, as well as justice, fear, discrimination, repression, hope and resilience.

After the digital stories were created, the two groups came together to connect for the first time and to view one another's digital stories. A facilitated discussion took place to explore the groups' experience of the storytelling process. Some participants spoke of feeling heard after sharing their stories, while others felt validated asserting parts of their identities that are often hidden. Participants from different cultural, ethnic and class backgrounds, spoke of a sense of connection to, and empathy with, one another after watching each other's videos.

The resource which supported the facilitation of these workshops is the AONTAS Storytelling for Connecting Communities Handbook[41] which is designed to support adult and community educators in using storytelling to foster empathy and social cohesion. Built on research and evidence-based methodologies, this resource shows how sharing stories can create meaningful connections and challenge harmful stereotypes.

The stories of the Irish migrant participants for this project focus on people who were able to return to Ireland after their time spent away. The stories of hose Irish who left for England in the 1970s and who didn't return to Ireland were not captured. The lives of some of these people, their isolation and experienced stigma, are acknowledged within some of the stories shared by the older Irish people in this section of the workbook. To hear oral stories of Irish migrants who have moved to England since the 1970s, many of whom did not have the opportunity to return for various reasons, visit the Irish in Britain online exhibition.

To access these videos, please visit this link to the eight videos of the digital stories created for this workbook, which are approximately two minutes each in length. It is not necessary to show every video. Facilitators can show a selection of videos from each of the two groups (those newly arrived to Ireland and those Irish who had lived in England in the 1970s).

41 AONTAS. 2024. Storytelling for Connecting Communities Handbook.

Activity: Reflections on Digital Stories of Migration

Aims

- To support participants to reflect on their own emotional responses to viewing the first-hand accounts of the lived experience of migration.
- To support participants' sense of connection and relatability with the storytellers.

Method (10 minutes)

- Facilitators create an environment where participants feel comfortable and supported to reflect on their emotions and reactions—whether positive, negative or neutral—to the videos.
- A grounding exercise like one suggested below can be delivered before the debriefing of the videos:
    - ☐ a mindfulness technique that incorporates deep breathing, encouraging participants to be aware of any physical sensations they are experiencing in their bodies after watching the videos.

    OR

    - ☐ a mindfulness technique that asks participants to doodle circles or lines on a page, encouraging participants to draw at their own pace, whatever feels comfortable to them.

Reflection and Discussion (40 minutes)

- Ask participants what they felt during and after watching the videos.
- Encourage participants to share their reactions to the videos. Validating these feelings will support participants' sense of connection to the storytellers and to each other.
- Ask participants what commonalities they share with the storytellers.
- Ask participants to formulate two or three questions they would ask the storytellers if they were sitting in the room with them.

Expected Outcomes

- Participants witness first-hand accounts of diverse and complex migratory experiences, which offer a more nuanced understanding of people's lived realities than the inaccuracies and oversimplifications that disinformation provides.
- Through a supportive and open discussion, participants gain insight into the diverse responses of others to the stories of migration.
- When participants feel heard and their feelings validated, increased empathy and connection with those from the migrant community can occur.

Suggestions for Facilitators

- The stories demonstrate rich and diverse migrant experiences which are full of hope and resilience, but some also describe the traumatic and harrowing lives participants led which motivated them to leave their countries of origin.

Before delivering this exercise to participants, facilitators are encouraged to refer to the section of this workbook on Trauma, Transformation and Resistance to consider some practical, trauma-informed best practices for adult educators.

- It is normal that individuals may become defensive when viewing stories that are not similar to their own. Maintain a supportive environment and try to see where these feelings are coming from (for example, personal hardships, grievances, or in fact unexpected similar personal and family experiences).
- If one or more participants use offensive, inflammatory, or emotionally charged words during the discussion, or if the discussion becomes heated, refer to the group contract or learning agreement you have with the group.

Fact-checking

Fact-checking is a way of investigating the veracity or level of truth behind a story; it is familiar ground for educators. However, the advanced nature of the disinformation challenge requires all educators to update themselves on how to fact-check, and to find out which tools to introduce to adult learners to equip them for the context they are living through. How does fact-checking work? DW (Deutsche Welle) is a German public broadcast service that has produced a video[42] that summarises what is involved in the process.

DW also has an advanced fact-checking element and employs various tools in their fact-checking.[43] Increasingly, videos and images need to be examined for their veracity and claims. The DW team categorises each fact-checking process into the following verdicts: True/Real/Misleading/False/Fake/Unproven.

Fact-checking now faces a serious challenge in the shape of Artificial Intelligence (AI). As the availability and public proliferation of AI tools and software grow, the likelihood of disinformation will increase, and it will also become increasingly difficult to detect without using other AI tools.

Fact-checking Resources

It may be useful to have a few go-to fact-checking resources that educators and learners can use to sniff out suspicious claims and verify sources. Here is a shortlist:

- Snopes: One of the oldest fact-checking sites around. They tackle everything from viral memes to political hoaxes.
- PolitiFact: Renowned for its "Truth-O-Meter," this site examines the accuracy of US political figures and trending topics.
- Reuters Fact Check: Investigates viral claims, images, and headlines across global news.
- EUvsDisinfo: An EU initiative dedicated to debunking disinformation—especially relevant in the European context.
- The Journal: a well-known Irish-based resource dedicated to verifying claims in the news and on social media.
- Fact Check Northern Ireland has produced an interesting toolkit that is worth checking out .

42 Deutsche Welle. 2025. How DW fact-checks fake news: an interesting video.

43 Deutsche Welle. 2025a. Fact-check. Advanced fact-checking element.

Each platform has its own style and scope, but all strive to present clear evidence, link to original sources, and correct false information without bias. Encouraging learners to check multiple resources, compare their findings, and then draw conclusions is a great way to build robust critical thinking skills.

Encouraging adult learners to use fact-checking websites is a good practice and we would argue that this should be done in parallel with building the important habits of checking references and having a checklist of key questions that can be used in a range of settings (argument or debate/newspaper or radio story/social media).

1. Are references available or provided in the story? This can be tricky in debates or arguments so asking for the source of evidence behind the argument is important.
2. Does an online search confirm the story? Or cause you to have second thoughts? Try to validate the story by using two sources.
3. What or who is the source of the story? Are they reliable? Prone to exaggeration? Newspapers and radio stations often have implicit editorial stances on issues such as migration, politics, welfare, security etc. It is often the same with politicians or NGOs. They too have blind spots and can see things ideologically rather than factually.
4. What is the motivation or power dynamic at play? Who benefits from the story being shared? What is the purpose behind the story?

It is important to build a culture of "***If in doubt, don't share***". Having a healthy dose of scepticism when it comes to stories and narratives is important. The following activities are useful to implement with groups.

Activity: Brexit Headlines

Aim

- Explore the role of media in shaping public opinion.

Method (25-35 minutes)

- The facilitator does a web search of front-page headlines in the lead up to Brexit. This is shown on screen to the full group. "What do you see"? Stories and headlines relating to migration and criminality were often mentioned and used as ways of getting/leveraging support for Brexit. The task for the group is to think about why these stories and images were used. What were the facts of the situation? Do facts resonate with people?

Expected Outcomes

- Deeper understanding of the role of narratives.
- Realise and identify how media can try to shape opinion.
- Understand how various news outlets and media have different political stances that influence how they portray an issue.
- Realise the importance of reviewing several news sources to get a more rounded picture of an issue.

Suggestions for the Facilitator

- Give a brief background to the context and the main characters/politicians involved.

Activity: True or False

Aims

- Distinguish between fact and fiction.
- Raise awareness of groupthink and/or social conditioning.

Method (30 minutes)

The facilitator will give out a sheet with 5-8 scenarios (2-3 sentences each); some of the scenarios will be factual, some fictional and some will be a mix. Participants can use their smartphones to help them distinguish fact from fiction.

An adaptation to be added to this activity, once learners are familiar with the process, is to work in pairs or small groups. During the debriefing, the facilitator can ask if anyone was trying to persuade people in their groups based on their own political beliefs or views. This introduces groupthink and social conditioning into the mix of topics to be discussed.

Expected Outcomes

- Recognise emotive language and how that makes people feel.
- Realise the power of particular individuals in group settings.
- Participants are able to look behind stories for sources/evidence.

Suggestions for the Facilitator

- Try to make the scenarios relevant to the group.
- Start off with a simple example and make the scenarios gradually more complex.
- Encourage curiosity in the group.

Activity: Historical Articles

Aims

- Distinguish between fact and fiction.
- Raise awareness of groupthink and/or social conditioning.

Method (30-40 minutes)

The facilitator provides a one-page sheet to sub-groups (3-4 people in each group) that is focused on a particular historical event. The task for the learners is to check the veracity of the story provided. The facilitator provides slightly different versions of the same story. Some elements of each version are accurate and some aren't. This isn't revealed until the end of the activity.

Expected Outcomes

- Question information and approach all stories with a critical/open mind.
- Fact-checking capacity is increased.
- Realise that misinformation can occur very easily and how disinformation can seem unintentional.

Suggestions for the Facilitator

- Provide a brief context for the activity.
- See if the participants can identify the differences in the stories that were provided without prompting.

Social Media: A Quick Overview of Platforms and Algorithm Dynamics

Social media platforms have grown from networking sites to digital hubs where billions connect, share, and consume content. Facebook, for instance, boasts over two billion monthly active users worldwide; YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) also rake in hundreds of millions to well over a billion. Each platform runs on an ad-based model where attention is currency—more eyes on the screen mean more ad revenue. This is crucial to understand: they were never designed as news outlets or information platforms; their main purpose was (and still is) to engage and entertain.

This dynamic has led social media companies to fine-tune their algorithms, to keep users scrolling and clicking for as long as possible. On the surface, that sounds like a convenient setup, but behind the scenes, this has led to several distortions and has been used for malicious purposes.

How Algorithms Shape Your Feed

Most social media platforms use machine learning to determine what grabs your attention. Let's say you pause on a cat video, give it a thumbs-up, or leave a comment—these seemingly tiny actions teach the system what you might want to see next. More sophisticated algorithms track the time a user is watching a video, down to milliseconds.

Over time, the algorithm becomes more confident about your likes and dislikes, narrowing down the content that lands in your feed. This is known as a "**filter bubble**" and it's the reason why no two users see the same feed at the same time. For platforms like Facebook and TikTok, engagement metrics (likes, comments, shares, watch time) play a massive role in deciding which posts float to the top. X/Twitter and Instagram also prioritise recency, so fresher tweets and posts get pushed forward, but they still rely on signals like who you follow and what you interact with most often.

Another important term to understand is the "**echo chamber**". Since people tend naturally to follow and engage more with creators and users that they like, they will end up surrounded by these voices, and these voices only. This creates a false perception that "everybody is saying the same thing" when really only the people we choose to follow mirror (and eventually shape) our perception on a matter. This is especially tricky because it reinforces prejudices and beliefs and leads to the polarisation of ideas and discourse.

Why It Matters for Disinformation

Because social media algorithms are designed to keep people hooked, they'll often spotlight eye-catching, sensational, or emotionally charged content, even if it's fictional or fabricated. This can make disinformation more visible, especially in times of social or political tension. And since all media outlets are chasing engagement, they have developed a tendency to manipulate language and headlines to amplify emotions -- using emotionally charged terms like "attack", "slam", "shock", "bomb", "destroy" even to describe weather or celebrity news. The result is that the audience is constantly alert, hyper-sensitive, and distressed. This opens the door to disinformation.

When users repeatedly click or comment on misleading headlines, the algorithm sees this as engagement—without distinguishing fact from fiction—and may serve up even more of that content. In an Irish and broader European context, this can amplify polarised debates about migration, economics, or social issues. Understanding how social media platforms curate and prioritise what appears on your feed is a key step in recognising how quickly—and invisibly—false or misleading narratives can gain traction. By spotting these patterns, educators and learners alike can start to break free from digital echo chambers and approach online content with a critical, discerning eye.[44]

Three activities are outlined below which explore and delve into this area in more detail.

44 For a map of the categories of harm to specific social media design elements, see Appendix 2

Activity: Analysing Your Social Media

Aims

- Encourage participants to reflect on how social media algorithms shape the content they see.
- Promote greater awareness of how one's viewpoints and biases can be reinforced—or challenged—by online content.

Method (25-35 minutes)

1. **Individual Examination**
   - Ask participants to take a few minutes to scroll through their preferred social media platform (on their smartphone, tablet, or laptop).
   - Encourage them to focus on the first 10 to 15 posts or stories, noting down the topics, sources, and any emotional reactions they have.
   - No one is required to share screenshots or personal details. They should only disclose what feels comfortable.
2. **Reflection and Discussion**
   - Have participants reflect on their notes: Which posts align with their existing views? Which posts introduce an opposing or different perspective?
   - Invite volunteers to share general observations (not necessarily specifics) about how often they see content that contradicts their own opinions.
   - Spark a short discussion around whether the group feels their feeds are diverse or more like an "echo chamber."
3. **Wrap-Up**
   - Summarise the key points raised, emphasising the importance of recognising how algorithms and personal choices filter the news and opinions we see.
   - Ask participants to consider one change they might make to broaden the perspectives that appear in their feed (e.g. following new sources, adjusting notification settings).

Expected Outcomes

- **Increased Self-Awareness**: Participants gain insight into how their social media feeds may be reinforcing or challenging their worldview.
- **Critical Thinking Skills**: By identifying the sources and emotional triggers in their feeds, participants practice evaluating the credibility and balance of information presented.
- **Openness to Diverse Perspectives**: Recognising potential echo chambers can motivate participants to seek out a wider range of news outlets and opinions.

Suggestions for the Facilitator

- **Set a Comfortable Atmosphere**: Make it clear that participants don't need to expose private details from their feeds. Emphasise personal comfort and voluntary sharing.
- **Avoid Judgment**: If someone finds few (or zero) opposing perspectives in their feed, focus on the learning opportunity rather than critiquing their social media habits.
- **Encourage Honest Reflection**: Remind everyone that there are no "right" or "wrong" discoveries—each person's feed is unique, and that's part of what makes this exercise revealing.
- **Offer Practical Tips**: Suggest ways for participants to diversify their feeds, like following reputable news outlets outside their usual circle or adjusting algorithmic settings.
- **Keep It Relevant**: If a major current event is happening (local elections, national referendums, social movements), tie the discussion to how those topics show up in participants' feeds.

Activity: Ad Detective

Aims

- Help participants spot how algorithms serve up ads and sponsored content based on their browsing habits.
- Highlight how data collection influences what they see and when they see it.

Method (30 – 40 minutes)

- **Warm-Up**: Ask participants to share (in general terms) a recent online purchase or something they've googled. Discuss any ads they started noticing right after.
- **Investigation**: Have them open a social media app or website known for targeted ads (e.g., Facebook, Instagram). Ask them to list the ads that appear in their feed—what's being sold, who is the sponsor, and whether it relates to past searches or interests.
- **Group Reflection**: Compare findings. Are there patterns in the ads (location-based, interest-based)? Do they see ads from major corporations, small businesses, or political groups?
- **Wrap-Up**: Discuss the implications of targeted advertising for privacy and how it might reinforce certain buying or voting behaviours.

Expected Outcomes

- Participants learn to recognise the commercial interests that underlie the content of their feeds.
- Greater awareness of how personal data guides the algorithms to serve them specific ads.

Suggestions for the Facilitator

- Encourage a no-judgement zone when sharing ad experiences.
- Remind participants that everyone's feed is different, so comparing them can be eye-opening.

Activity: Headline Remix

Aims

- Show how simple rewording or selective details in headlines can shift perception.
- Practise critical thinking by rewriting headlines in more balanced ways.

Method (30 minutes)

- **Gather Headlines** (5 minutes): Collect or display a few real headlines that might appear in participants' social feeds (political, social, or local news). Pick ones with emotional or sensational language.
- **Small-Group Rewrite** (15 minutes): Divide participants into groups and have each group pick one headline. They brainstorm alternative ways to phrase it—one version more sensational, another more neutral.
- **Share & Discuss** (10 minutes): Each group reads out their "remixed" headlines. Talk about how tiny tweaks can completely alter the headline's tone and reader reactions.

Expected Outcomes

- Participants realise how easily narrative framing can be manipulated to sway opinion.
- They gain confidence spotting and questioning sensational or biased headlines.

Suggestions for the Facilitator

- Encourage creativity—but keep it relevant.
- If participants spot a real-life disinformation headline, use that as a jumping-off point to talk about algorithmic incentives (more clicks, more shares, etc.).

Artificial Intelligence (AI) – What Does the Future Hold?

Artificial intelligence (AI) has been shaking up the online world in major ways, and its impact on disinformation and "information disorder" is already visible. We will not get into the details because it would require an entire publication on its own, but the main concepts to familiarise yourself with are:

> **LLMs (Large Language Models):** a type of AI system designed to understand and generate human-like text, produce responses, translate languages, summarise, *etc*. Examples include GPT-4 by OpenAI and PaLM by Google.
>
> **GAI (Generative Artificial Intelligence):** systems that can create new content—such as text, images, audio, or even video—based on the patterns they've learned. Rather than just processing information, these models generate fresh outputs that mimic human creativity.

GAI should not be confused with **AGI (Artificial General Intelligence):** an AI system that can understand, learn, and apply knowledge in a broad variety of tasks at a level comparable or beyond human intelligence. Unlike specialised AI that excels in a single domain (like recognising faces or recommending music), AGI would be able to reason and solve problems across multiple fields without being explicitly programmed for each new challenge. This is still a theoretical goal rather than a current reality, but researchers and tech companies are actively working toward it.

According to IBM's *Global AI Adoption Index*[45], roughly 35% of companies worldwide reported using AI to automate certain business processes. This percentage grew to 72% in 2024, as one McKinsey survey found.[46]

ChatGPT was only released in 2022, went through various upgrades, and its current most powerful release is the O1 version, which is several orders of magnitude better than the originals. According to some observers, the acceleration lost its initial momentum, but the progress has been astounding and has revolutionised digital media. Most premium services require a paid subscription and registration, which makes control somewhat possible, but earlier models are available free of charge. This means companies and individuals with modest coding abilities can adapt them to perform a variety of tasks, without safeguards or filters, if they so wish.

45 IBM. 2022. IBM Global AI Adoption Index.

46 McKinsey and Company. 2025. The state of AI: How organizations are rewiring to capture value.

On social media, bots—many powered by AI—can produce and spread false content faster than human fact-checkers can debunk it, creating a real challenge for anyone trying to sort truth from fiction. **Generative AI models are becoming more convincing every day**, and experts predict these tools will be widely accessible to the general public within a few short years.

The risk isn't limited to just eye-catching fakes. AI can be used to churn out thousands of misleading social media posts or news articles[47], with entire news sites being run and generated by AIs[48] which are basically indistinguishable from human sources.

A study by the University of Zurich[49] entitled "***AI models [...] (dis)inform us better than humans***", the authors suggest that AI is great at creating engaging content, and therefore is even better at creating emotionally charged or divisive stories, regardless of how "real" they might be.

On the flip side, AI can also play a role in combating disinformation: some AI tools analyse online content, flagging suspicious patterns or verifying official data sets against emerging news stories. AI can (and is already) be used in various areas of our everyday life, for example: in personalised learning (to adapt lessons to individual learning speeds and styles); in assisting healthcare (offering round-the-clock support, reminding patients to take medication or providing basic guidance before a medical professional can be reached); smart home automation; translation; and finance and budgeting.

These efforts, however, are locked in a high-speed arms race with the more nefarious uses of AI. As progress in natural language processing and image synthesis continues, **educators and media consumers alike will need to sharpen their critical thinking skills**. Recognising AI's role—both positive and negative—in shaping the information landscape will be key to protecting public discourse and maintaining trust in our shared online spaces.

47 Endert, J. 2024. Generative AI is the ultimate disinformation amplifier. Akademie.

48 Cantor, M. 2023. The Guardian. Nearly 50 news websites are 'AI-generated', a study says. Would I be able to tell?

49 Spitale G, Biller-Andorno N, Germani F. 2023. AI model GPT-3 (dis)informs us better than humans. Sci Adv.

Activity: Spot the AI

Aim

- Develop learners' ability to identify AI-generated text or images in everyday online content.

Method (25 minutes)

1. **Preparation**: Collect a few short text samples or images—some generated by AI (*e.g.*, ChatGPT or an image-creation tool like DALL·E), and some created by humans. The facilitator can introduce a game to this activity if more suited to the learners' needs.[50]
2. **Group Challenge**: Divide participants into small groups, giving each group a set of these samples. Ask them to discuss clues that could indicate AI involvement (odd grammar, repetitive phrasing, unnatural image details, *etc.*). They then vote on which pieces they believe are AI-created *versus* human-made.
3. **Debrief**: Reveal the correct answers and discuss which clues were most reliable. Talk about broader implications: if AI can mimic human style, how can we maintain trust in what we see and read?

Expected Outcomes

- Participants sharpen their observation skills and learn to notice tell-tale signs of AI generation.
- They grow more sceptical of everything they see online—an important step in combatting disinformation.

Suggestions for the Facilitator

- Emphasise that AI mistakes can be subtle or glaring. Look for patterns like repetitive vocabulary or oddly framed images.
- Encourage a supportive atmosphere: there are no wrong questions, just a chance to become more discerning together.
- If time allows, invite participants to reflect on how these skills can help them in their everyday digital lives.
- A variation of this exercise can be done by creating a quiz (for example, using kahoot.com or any other tool) asking participants to detect AI-generated images from real ones.

50 Britannica Education. 2024. Real or AI Quiz: Can You Tell the Difference?

Activity: AI News: Build It, Debunk It

Aim

- Demonstrate how easily AI can generate convincing but false information—and how to critically evaluate it.

Method (30 minutes)

1. **Quick Demo**: Use a generative AI tool (like ChatGPT) to create a short, fake "news article" on a local or European event (e.g., a fictitious political statement or social issue). Read it aloud.
2. **Fact-Check**: Provide participants with a few fact-checking resources (official websites, news outlets, or data repositories). In small groups, they investigate the "news" for clues it's fabricated (inconsistent data, no credible sources, suspicious tone).
3. **Group Discussion**: Have groups share the red flags they uncovered. Ask them to compare these findings with real news sources to see how legitimate articles differ in language, sourcing, and tone.
4. **Wrap-Up**: Emphasise the value of verifying information before sharing it. Discuss the broader role AI might play in amplifying disinformation and how critical thinking can be a strong line of defence.

Expected Outcomes

- Learners gain first-hand experience seeing how easily false content is generated, boosting their scepticism.
- They practice simple but effective verification methods, reinforcing the habit of questioning sources.

Suggestions for the Facilitator

- Keep the fake article short and localised, so participants can quickly spot inconsistencies.
- Remind everyone that even real news can have biases—encourage them to look for balanced evidence.
- If participants enjoy the exercise, consider linking it to larger themes like digital literacy or media bias in other parts of your own programme.
- A possible variation could have participants create fake articles or stories with AI tools, with other participants trying to debunk them. Like a "two truths, one lie" played with media. This is a very powerful tool for critical thinking and critical media literacy.

Group Dynamics and Social Psychology: How "In" and "Out" Groups Take Shape Through Disinformation

Social identities play a major role in shaping opinions and behaviours. Our understanding of who we are and what we are worth differs strongly based on the context and the groups we identify with. These identities can be based on cultural, national, political, ethnic, familial, or other social affiliations, providing a sense of connection and belonging. Depending on historical developments, situational changes, and messaging, different identities can become more salient, sometimes overshadowing other group affiliations and intensifying social divisions.

When information disorder enters the picture—spreading fear-based narratives, fueling stereotypes or prejudices, or scapegoating minorities—it can amplify these group distinctions, encouraging individuals to rally around a perceived common enemy or threat. This dynamic is particularly evident online, where echo chambers and curated content feeds make it easy to fall into groupthink and reinforce "***us vs them***" mindsets. These online divisions can have serious real-world consequences. A well-known example is *Muzafer Sherif's 1954 Robbers Cave Experiment*[51], where groups of boys were pitted against each other at a summer camp. Even though they all had similar backgrounds, competition and misleading information about "the other side" fueled hostility. Modern-day social media platforms can have a similar effect: disinformation campaigns exploit hot-button issues—like immigration or public health—to forge stronger in-group ties and demonise the out-group. By repeatedly exposing people to exaggerated or false claims, these campaigns intensify existing biases and magnify feelings of belonging or alienation. Researchers such as Marwick and Lewis, in a report by Data & Society, have documented how online misinformation and strategic manipulation can mobilise groups for political or social objectives, further cementing those in/out boundaries:

> **"Online communities are increasingly turning to conspiracy-driven news sources, whose sensationalist claims are then covered by the mainstream media, which exposes more of the public to these ideas."**[52]

What makes this cycle especially potent is that social identities fulfil deep emotional and psychological needs—like belonging and self-esteem. Information disorder taps directly into those needs, offering a sense of certainty in an uncertain world. By strengthening learners' media literacy and critical thinking skills as well as fostering open dialogue and empathy, educators and community leaders can play a key role in helping individuals recognise how divisive narratives shape perceptions and reinforce group boundaries. By equipping learners with the tools to critically assess and resist manipulative messaging, it becomes possible to move beyond rigid "***in-group vs outgroup***" thinking and engage more constructively with diverse perspectives.

51 McLeod, S. 2023. Robbers Cave Experiment | Realistic Conflict Theory. Simply Psychology.

52 Marwick, A. Lewis, R. 2017. p.19. Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online. Data and Society.

Activity: Apples and Oranges

Aims

- Reveal how quickly in-groups and out-groups can form.
- Highlight how disinformation can deepen the divide between these groups.

Method (40 minutes)

1. Divide participants into two small groups with a simple label or theme (e.g., Group A and Group B, or something playful like “Team Apples” vs “Team Oranges”).
2. Give each group a brief narrative about why their team is superior. This might be a silly story like, “Team Apples have always been smarter” or “Team Oranges are braver.” Include a couple of lines of misleading or unverified statements (disinformation) that hype up each group’s strengths or belittle the other group.
3. For example, (feel free to adjust the details to suit your context or to make them more playful):

   Team Apples Narrative

   “Team Apples has always been known for its quick wits and unmatched creativity. Rumour has it that if you ever need a bright idea, you ask an Apple first! According to recent “studies” (no one’s quite sure which), Team Apples consistently outperforms the other side in puzzles and problem-solving. Some even say that Team Oranges just rides on Apple coattails, copying anything innovative.”

   Team Oranges Narrative

   “Team Oranges prides itself on resilience and boldness—you can’t keep an Orange down for long. Legend says that whenever a challenge arises, it’s the Oranges who step up to lead. In fact, a “confidential survey” found that most major breakthroughs in history started with an Orange’s determination. Meanwhile, Team Apples supposedly loves to take credit for other people’s hard work.”

Feel free to swap out “Apples” and “Oranges” for any labels that resonate with your group, but keep it light-hearted. The important part is providing each side with just enough material to see themselves as superior—and the other side as lacking in some way.

4. Ask each group to devise a two-minute “pitch” for why their side is better, using the narrative/disinformation as inspiration.
5. Present the pitches to the larger group. Encourage them to notice the emotional or manipulative language.
6. Debrief: Discuss how quickly a sense of in-group loyalty and out-group rivalry forms—and how the disinformation (even if ridiculous) contributed to a feeling of “us vs them”. Ask participants, if they were a community leader in “Fruit-town”, where apples and oranges are living together, what they could do to bridge/ overcome the divisions. Encourage them to be creative (e.g., targeting social media, joint youth activities etc.)

Expected Outcomes

- Participants see first-and how minimal cues can spark “us vs them” mind-sets.
- They understand how biased or false statements deepen in-group/out-group divisions.

Activity: Bias Busters: Identifying Hidden Messages

Aims

- Train learners to spot bias or hidden group narratives in various messages.
- Practise distinguishing between fact-based statements and emotionally charged or manipulative language.

Method (30-40 minutes)

1. **Gather Short Texts or Headlines**: Provide participants with a few excerpts (could be social media posts, short articles, headlines) that hint at "us vs them" narratives or contain subtle disinformation.
2. **Individual Analysis**: Each participant reads through the texts, underlining or highlighting words and phrases that convey group bias or marginalise another group.
3. **Group Brainstorm**: In small groups, they discuss what they found. Is the content painting one side as heroic and the other as dangerous or inferior? Does it rely on emotional language to discredit the out-group? Can they identify scapegoating?
4. **Debrief**: Invite participants to share insights. Which parts of the text rely on emotion rather than fact? Could these narratives fuel disinformation or reinforce group divisions?

Expected Outcomes

- Learners improve their ability to identify subtle language cues that amplify in-group/out-group thinking.
- They become more critical consumers of media, applying the same skills when confronted with potential disinformation outside the classroom.

Suggestions for the Facilitator

- Emphasise a judgment-free environment: it's normal to feel defensive when exploring group affiliations.
- Encourage participants to remain open to each other's perspectives—remind them that recognising biases is the first step in bridging divides.
- If the discussion veers into sensitive territory, pivot to the learning objective: illustrating how disinformation can shape or exploit group identities.
- Keep it playful and educational rather than confrontational, so participants can observe group behaviour without feeling threatened.
- Try as much as possible not to take sides in discussions or arguments. But refer to the group contract or learning agreement you have with the group in case the discussion becomes too heated or participants overstep boundaries. You may also ask the entire group to stop and ask everyone to sit silently and take a couple of deep breaths.

Resisting Hate Speech - Fostering Empathy

Acceptance, implying the readiness to respect and embrace individuals without judgment, is vital for creating a safe, inclusive learning space in adult education. It is different from tolerance (introduced in philosophical discourse during the 18th century)[53] which evoked a sense of living together, while coming from places of difference and division. Acceptance is more radical. It entails recognising and appreciating unique qualities, perspectives, and experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and a positive environment for growth.

As we have seen in previous chapters, information disorder stands in stark contrast with an acceptance ethos as it easily sparks phenomena like hate speech and online gossip, rooted in prejudice, exclusion, and distortions of truth.

Disinformation, malformation and misinformation can fuel these harmful dynamics by circulating false or misleading content that amplifies stereotypes, intensifies fear, or fosters divisions. According to the European Commission[54], hate speech incidents have escalated alongside the rising use of social media, with many cases targeting ethnic minorities, migrants, and other marginalised communities. Meanwhile, online gossip—spreading rumours or personal information without consent—can quickly morph into harassment and cyberbullying, eroding trust in group settings.

Adult education can serve as a powerful space to critically examine these dynamics, foster meaningful interactions between groups, and encourage openness to new perspectives—ultimately supporting personal growth and the potential transformation of opinions and beliefs. Representation and equality are also indispensable pieces of the puzzle, ensuring every voice is respected and heard. Studies emphasise that inclusive policies and diverse representation in learning environments help reduce discrimination and cultivate empathy.[55] This might be especially important in the current cultural climate, since the discourse around DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion) has become politically charged and it's seen as divisive by many.[56] But, again, are we making the mistake of playing "us *vs* them"? Why is this topic even divisive? It's probably a distortion of perception. Extending social rights to a group really doesn't erode the position of other groups. A united and just society is a strong society, and this should ultimately be the goal of politics.

53 Locke, J, 1632-1704. 1990. A letter concerning toleration. Buffalo, N.Y: Prometheus Books, and Harvey, S & Masters, B (eds.) 2000. Voltaire: Treatise on Tolerance. 1763 New York: Cambridge University Press.

54 European Commission. 2016. Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online Initiative.

55 Eden, Chima & Onyebuchi, Nneamaka & Adeniyi, Idowu. 2024. Cultural Competence In Education: Strategies For Fostering Inclusivity And Diversity Awareness. International Journal of Applied Research in Social Sciences.

56 CNN. 2025. What is DEI, and why is it dividing America?

A diversity of points of view and pluralism are crucial elements of a healthy society. In the face of disinformation, diverse perspectives also make it easier to spot and challenge misleading claims that target vulnerable groups. A classroom where learners see their identities and experiences genuinely reflected encourages them to participate more fully and fosters deeper understanding. By promoting acceptance, challenging hate speech, curtailing harmful gossip, and embracing equitable representation, educators create the foundation for transformative learning experiences—where individuals can flourish free from the fear of being singled out or misled by harmful narratives.

The following exercises can support learners in practicing empathy and open-mindedness:

Activity: Empathy Mapping

Aim

- Encourage learners to understand and appreciate diverse perspectives.

Method (35-45 minutes)

1. **Form Small Groups:** Assign each group a brief scenario involving negative or prejudicial language—e.g., a social media posts or news article targeting a particular group with disinformation or hateful comments.
2. **Create Empathy Maps:** Each group draws a four-quadrant chart labelled: Feelings, Thoughts, Words, Actions. They fill it in from the perspective of both the target (i.e. the person or group under attack) and the poster/spreader of disinformation.
3. **Share and Discuss:** Groups present their empathy maps, exploring how hate speech and disinformation reinforce the "us vs them" mentality. Ask: "What could reduce these tensions, and how might acceptance of groups that appear different to ourselves counteract misinformation?"

Expected Outcomes

- Learners gain a deeper understanding of how harmful words and false content can affect individuals' emotional well-being.
- They see how cultivating acceptance actively challenges hateful narratives.

Activity: Red-Flag Content Analysis

Aim

- Help participants identify language, images, or narratives that could qualify as hate speech, harmful gossip, or biased representation—especially when fuelled by misinformation.

Method (50-60 minutes)

- **Gather Realistic Samples:** Prepare short excerpts from social media posts, news articles, or comments sections—some containing subtle hate speech, gossip, or misleading information.
- **Group Analysis:** Divide learners into small teams and hand out the samples. Ask them to mark phrases or claims that seem harmful or untrue. Identify especially inflammatory language and words that evoke clash or conflict: they are everywhere, in sport news, entertainment, and even in the weather report.
- **Discussion:** Each team explains why they flagged certain elements. Were there stereotypes, slurs, or unverifiable statements? How might these messages shape a reader's perception? What evidence have they found of emotional and inflammatory language?
- **Tying It to Representation:** Wrap up by asking how underrepresented groups could be unfairly portrayed in these samples. Encourage participants to brainstorm ways educators can promote accurate representation and equality in their own contexts.

Debriefing sample questions:

- ☐ "How did it feel to engage with these perspectives?"
- ☐ "What are some concrete steps we can take when we encounter such content?"

Expected Outcomes

- Learners become more adept at picking out hateful or manipulative language, even when it's subtle.
- They connect biased representation and equality issues to larger patterns of disinformation.

Activity: The Panel of Many Voices)

Aim

- Illustrate the importance of giving a platform to a wide range of perspectives and experiences.

Method (60 minutes)

1. **Set the Stage:** Arrange a mini panel discussion format in the classroom. Select a handful of participants to represent different viewpoints on an issue—for example, integration of a refugee community, minority rights, or addressing hate speech on campus.
2. **Guided Q&A:** The facilitator asks open-ended questions:
    - ☐ "How does misinformation affect public perceptions of your group or issue?"
    - ☐ "What role does acceptance (as opposed to tolerance) play in reducing hate speech?"
    - ☐ "How can equal representation help counter disinformation?"
3. **Audience Reflections:** The rest of the group listens and then shares insights or questions—focusing on how misinformation can fuel hate or misunderstandings, and how genuine acceptance fosters more accurate, humanising narratives.
4. In the reflection, focus the discussion on the effects of misinformation, as it could easily shift to the topic itself.

Expected Outcomes

- Participants witness the power of hearing multiple voices—rather than relying on rumours, gossip, or second-hand disinformation.
- They practise open-minded engagement, which is key to cultivating acceptance and resisting divisive messaging.

Suggestions for the Facilitator

- Maintain a supportive environment: these topics can be personal and intense.
- Encourage participants to consider how information disorders and even the choice of a specific language can inflame tensions, and how genuine acceptance or equitable representation can mitigate these effects.
- When working with hate speech and slurs, be mindful that repeating them can lead to normalising their use. Prepare yourselves and participants adequately, ensure that everybody knows what the aim and content of the activity is, and ask for informed consent before the sessions begin. Make everybody aware of the difference: normalising discussions on a topic doesn't mean to normalise or even condone the topic itself. For example, discussing difficult topics like discrimination, violence, or mental health openly helps society address them more effectively. Avoiding discussion, on the other hand, often allows problems to persist unchecked.
- Emphasise that every participant's viewpoint is valuable—being heard is a core step toward combating exclusion, hate speech, and misinformation.
- Keep your eyes on the bigger picture and don't get trapped in trigger words and political talking points. At the same time, if a term is especially charged and causes controversy in a group, feel free not to use it, focusing on the values it represents instead.

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APPENDIX

Community Education Against Disinformation — Activity Matrix

Matrix of the nine activities in the Community Education Against Disinformation workbook detailing which activities complement one another

Activities	Values and frames	Critical thinking	Storytelling and narrative construction	Storytelling to create change	Fact-checking	Social media: platforms and algorithms	Artificial intelligence	Group dynamics and social psychology	Resisting hate speech - fostering empathy
Values and frames			*		*	*		*	*
Critical thinking			*		*	*		*	*
Storytelling and narrative construction	*	*			*	*		*	*
Storytelling to create change									*
Fact-checking	*	*	*			*	*	*	*
Social media: platforms and algorithms	*	*	*		*				
Artificial intelligence					*				
Group dynamics and social psychology	*	*	*		*				
Resisting hate speech - fostering empathy	*	*	*	*	*				

Appendix 2

Platform Design Taxonomy

The following taxonomy was jointly developed by the **Tech Justice Law Project** (TJLP), the **Knight-Georgetown Institute** (KGI), and the USC Neely Center in preparation for the Platform Design, Section 230, and the First Amendment convening taking place in Washington, D.C. on October 17-18. The taxonomy maps categories of consumer harm to specific social media design elements. This table is a work in progress and participants are encouraged to input to this analysis.

Consumer Harm	Category of Designs by Mechanism of Harm	Specific Design Element	Definition
Unwanted / Harmful Usage	Extended Use	Infinite Scroll	Where content automatically and continously loads at the bottom of a screen (Langvardt 2019)
		Auto Play	Where videos continously play without user engagement (Lukoff et al., 2021)
		Engagement Gamification	Use and timing of rewards including visible indicators of engagement (likes, reactions, like counts, reaction counts), streaks and goals that encourage continuing use (Langvardt 2019, Bernstein 2023)
		Notifications (Platform and User Content)	Use, clustering and timing of notifications that pull the user back to the app or site. Includes automated chatbots that attempt to draw users in.
		Requiring Account Creation	Where the viewing of publicly available content (e.g. from a school club, sports event, or a celebrity) leads to repeated prompts to create a potentially unwanted account.
		Ephemeral Content	Content that is deleted after a set period of time by defauly (Yun et al., 2020). Can lead to urgency of use to view before it is deleted.
		Barriers to Deletion	Barriers to app or account deletion including delayed deletion and design features (Lawrence 2023). Also could include barriers to connection deletion (see Zuckerman Mass Unfollowing lawsuit). Also see Amazon Prime subscription cancellation claims.
	Algorithms (optimized to keep attention)	Attention Optimization	Optimizing algorithmic designs based on time spent or other attention-based engagement metrics
		Personalization	Using personalized data to determine presention of content (vs. wider user population data)

Consumer Harm	Category of Designs by Mechanism of Harm	Specific Design Element	Definition
Unwanted / Harmful Content	User accountability (lack of)	Ephemeral Content	Content that is deleted after a set period time by defauly (Yun et al., 2020)
		Lack of Rate Limits	Lack of daily numerical limits on relevant forms of engagement, such as group invitations to harmful groups, or posting harmful comments / posts by motivated actors.
		Lack of Negative Feedback (Barriers to Reporting)	Design barriers inhibiting reporting or indicating harmful / unwanted content
		Badges and Verification	Using data predictive of your identity to serve a content in a discriminatory manner (more harm or less benefit)
	Algorithms (recommending or incentivizing harmful content)	Lack of Negative Feedback (Barriers to Reporting)	Design barriers inhibiting reporting or indicating harmful / unwanted content
		Discriminatory Algorithms	Using data predictive of your identity to serve content in a discriminatory manner (more harm or less benefit)
		Attention Organization	Optimizing algorithmic designs based on time spent or other attention-based enegagement metrics. Including the timing of when content is sent to exploit vulnerabilities especially for ads and monetized content.
	Facilitating Harmful Content Creation	Profile / Picture Effects	Filters, lenses, bitmojis, or platform-produced geolocation tags, and labeling of these effects
		Generative AI Platform Tools	Platform auto-creating synthetic content (text, chat, images, audio, video) that causes harm.
		Generative AI User Tools	Providing on-platform tools that facilitate users' creation of synthetic content (text, chat, images, audio, video) that causes harm.
Unwanted / Harmful Contact by Others	Facilitating Contact between Users	Lack of Friend/ Connecting/Messaging Rate Limits	Daily numerical limits on friend/connnection requests & unsolicited messages
		Lack of Negative Feedback (Barriers to Reporting)	Design barriers inhibiting reporting or indicating harmful / unwanted contact
	Visibility to Other Users	Default Profile Privacy	Visibility of profile to users outside of the user's network
		Default Post / Comment Privacy	Visibility of posts/comments to users outside of the user's network
Unwanted / Harmful Usage of a Users' Information		User Discoverability (Search or Friending)	Visibility and recommendation of users and content outside of the user's network
		Lack of Age Verification	Process to confirm user meets requirements for accessing products/features and being visible to adult strangers
		Geolocation	Unwanted disclosure of a user's location to others
	Data Usage by Platform	Disproportionate Data Collection by Platform	Collection, use, storage, or disclosure of data beyond that which is necessary to provide the service, including usage in generative AI model training or ad targeting.

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