Handbook on Recognizing Disinformation

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Skopje, 2025

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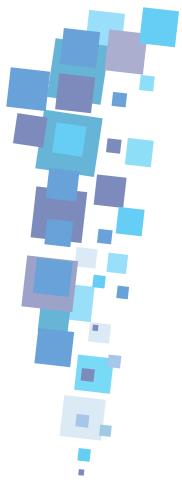„This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the Agency for Audio and AudiovisualMedia Services and can in no way be taken to refl ectthe views of the European Union."

Why another handbook dedicated to disinformation?

The rapid technological development in recent decades has completely changed the way people communicate and access information and has enabled news and information to travel around the world literally in seconds. This development has provided many opportunities for humanity, but also negative consequences that we have to face, such as the spread of disinformation.

The fact that we live in an age where disinformation is on the rise is already common knowledge – as much as the term "fake news" is common knowledge. A little less known is the term "information disorder", although it actually explains why the term "fake news" is not a sufficiently precise description of what we are facing, which is a mixture of three types of information:

Misinformation is information that is inaccurate, but not created maliciously. It can also include satire if the viewer/recipient does not recognize it and forwards it believing it to be true;

Disinformation is information that is false and is intentionally created to inflict harm on a person, group, organization or country. It also includes decontextualization of genuine information in order to intentionally cause harm;
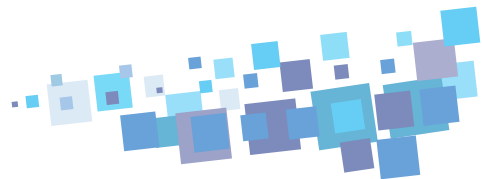
Malinformation is information that is accurate, but is used to inflict harm. For example, publishing private conversations or data or stealing someone's identity – phenomena also known as "doxing"[1] .

Regardless of whether we are familiar with the terms, we are aware that we need to protect ourselves from harmful information. That is why in the past few years, many entities, both foreign and domestic, have made significant efforts to create handbooks, guides, publications, the goal of which is to help us recognize harmful information.

Social media have become the dominant means for spreading disinformation, but traditional media are not immune either. In order to improve the social resistance to disinformation, a greater public awareness of the dimensions of the problem is needed, starting from a better understanding of the sources of disinformation and the intentions, tools and goals behind the disinformation, but also of our own vulnerability (how and why citizens, and sometimes even whole communities, are attracted by disinformation narratives).

Building resistance to disinformation, among other things, also implies improving the media literacy of the citizens in order to recognize and reject disinformation.

However, as some harmful information practices are unmasked, new ones emerge. That is precisely the reason why we are offering another handbook with which we try to

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[1] Adapted from Claire Wardle, PhD and Hossein Derakhshan (2017), Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking, Council of Europe report DGI (2017)09, available at: https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html and from Ann Cathrin Riedel (2020) "Behind Closed Curtains: Disinformation on messenger services", "Friedrich Naumann" Foundation For Freedom, available at: https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-01/zad-spushteni-zavesi.pdf

point out the following in a simple manner:

- What are the simple ways we can check whether/to which extent a certain piece of news/information, photograph, video is authentic;

- How the basic journalistic questions – Who?; When?; Where?; What?; How?; Why?, (which are actually a recipe for writing a news story) can be used to uncover harmful information; and

- What are the techniques for creating disinformation.

The Handbook was prepared within the framework of the Twinning Project 20 IPA JH 01 23 "Enhancement of capacities of the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services and the Public Service Broadcaster", in cooperation with Thomas Rathgeb, Head of the Department of Media Competence, Program and Research at the State Institute for Communication in Baden-Württemberg, Federal Republic of Germany.
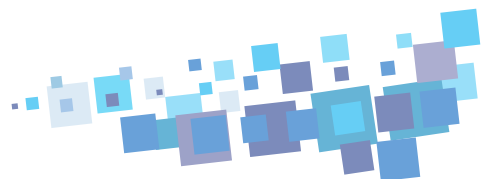
#What is disinformation?

Disinformation is not a new phenomenon, but the problem has taken on a new dimension in the digital age. Disinformation is not only inaccurate information, but in its worst form, it is intended to deceive and is spread to inflict harm. The goal of disinformation is to confuse and manipulate the public; to distract; to divide and demoralize communities; as well as to control the narrative – all for financial, political or ideological gain.

It can be spread by both state and non-state actors, and can affect a wide range of human rights, such as public health, security, the environment, the right to democratic electoral processes, etc.

A variety of deception and manipulation techniques are used to spread disinformation, including, for example, voice and image manipulation ("deepfake"), falsification of official documents, use of online automated software (bots) to spread and amplify shared content and debates on social media, troll attacks on social media profiles, data theft, etc., all designed to affect our emotions and cloud our judgment and decision-making.

Fighting disinformation should not undermine our fundamental right to freedom of expression, which also includes critical speech. That is why we need to distinguish unintentional mistakes, satire, parody or clearly identified partisan news and commentary from disinformation.

#How to recognize disinformation

Knowing how to identify disinformation is key to preventing it. If you come across a controversial claim, regardless of whether it is online, in your mailbox or in the media, the first step is to ask yourself several questions in order to find out who is creating or pushing the information and whether they are trying to manipulate you.

Would you swallow something blindfolded? NO?

Then, do not let them serve you disinformation!

#How to check news/information?

The digital age has made it possible for anyone to create media content. Hence, we do not always know who created something, why they did it, and whether the information is reliable. The ability to think critically and assess whether a piece of content is relevant, authentic and worth sharing involves asking a series of questions, such as:

- Who created this content?
- Why was it created?
- Who is the message intended for?
- Should we trust the information?
- How does this message affect our feelings?

Therefore, in your search for the truth, follow the following steps:

1 **Check the source** – First of all, look at the website where the news was published.

Information source – Who is the source?

If we keep in mind that "Water is purest at its source", then we should think that the journalistic information, i.e., the composition of data that is served before us, must have its own source.

The question: "Who is the source?" is the first sieve. With that sieve, we clarify to a great extent

- Who offers us and what they offer us, and

- Whether we can trust them that they have no intention of inflicting harm on us in any way, even if the harm was our wasted time?

2 **Check the author** – Try to find some information about the author of the text if the name is stated and see what news they have published before.

Impressum

In order to find out who the source (authors/editors) actually is, we need to check the Impressum, which is the seal of trust in a newsroom. The Impressum consists of easily accessible, reliable data about who is included in the team of authors who publish in a certain medium and who are the editors in charge. According to the Law on Media, publishing an Impressum is a mandatory obligation of the media.

3 **Check the content** - Pay attention to the information in the text. If specific percentages, studies, numbers or analyses are listed, try to find them on the official research websites.

"What is a naked lunch? It is that frozen moment when you ask yourself: What is on the end of the fork?" – William Burroughs. Without that question, which exposes what is served through the sub-questions: Who? When? Where? What? How? Why? – we unquestioningly swallow (dis)information.

Централен институт за ревматологија

Грижете се за вашите зглобови

Центар за силни зглобови

Здрави зглобови

За 28 дена ќе заборавите на болки во зглобовите или 'рбетот:гарантирани успеси со сигурни медицински тестови

Јас сум супербаба!

Здраво,

Јас сум професор Николај Лутков, научник и специјалист по молекуларна биологија. На оваа страница, сакам да ви го претставам најголемото достигнување во мојот живот, за кое **бев номиниран за Нобеловата награда**. Развив метод со кој секој може да ја елиминира болката, да ги обнови зглобовите и 'рбетот и да врати 100% подвижност за само 28 дена.

Поради болките во колената и грбот, едвај одев. Апчиња, инјекции и третманите врз мене немаа ефект. Напротив: ми земаа само пари и енергија. И не знаев што да правам. За среќа, дознав за овој третман. Бидејќи ова откритие беше номинирано за Нобелова награда, не се двоумев.Јас сум толку благодарна што го направив тоа! По првата терапија веќе забележав резултати. По околу еден месец **се чувствувам како нова**.Одам на долги прошетки и се грижам за градината што ја засадив со мојот внук. Болката е мината. Ви благодарам!

Доколку сакате, БЕЗ хемиски и неефикасни лекови:

◆ **Се борите против болки во зглобовите и 'рбетот**- забележете го олеснувањето веднаш штом ќе ја примените оваа метода;

◆ **Реконструирајте ги и зајакнете ги зглобовите, тетивите, мускулите и 'рбетот за 87%** за да функционираат како нови;

◆ **100% закрепнете**го здравјето и не плашете се од инвалидитет;

◆ **Отстранете ја вкочанетоста на зглобовите и 'рбетот**, вратете ја удобноста и флуидноста на движењето;

★★★★☆

Ангела,
73 години

- **Who** is "prof. Nikolai Lutkov"?

- **When** was he "nominated for the Nobel Prize"?

- **Where** is the "Central Institute of Rheumatology" located?

- **What** is the medicine he is offering?

- **How** does the medicine he offers work?

- **Why** is his medicine better than other medicines?

# #

In order for us not to swallow disinformation, the next time we read an article, like the one above, we should answer these sub-questions to see that the information is fake and that it uses, for example, **#FAKE EXPERTS.**

Who is: "prof. Nikolai Lutkov"?

In the search engine that we usually use, we enter Nikolai Lutkov and we will immediately see that there is no molecular biologist with this name. We click with the mouse on his photo and check its authenticity using tools, as explained later in this Handbook. For example, with Google Lens, we are going to get a link that leads to the same content in English, where he is introduced as molecular biologist Luis Recio, as well as another link that leads to a Pinterest profile that says that it is a photo of Stanley Kubrick.
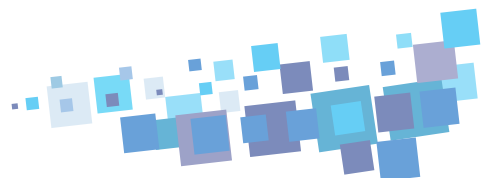
Answer: Nikolai Lutkov is nobody.

When was he: "nominated for the Nobel Prize"?

In the same way we determined through a search engine that Nikolai Lutkov does not exist, we will also determine that he was never nominated for the Nobel Prize.

Answer: Non-existent people cannot be nominated for the Nobel Prize!

Where is the: "Central Institute of Rheumatology" located?

The internet search will show us that – of the entire internet, the Central Institute of Rheumatology is mentioned only on the following website https://greattop-goods.press which leads to this same advertisement.

Answer: The "Central Institute of Rheumatology" does not exist.

What is the "medicine" he is offering?

If we read all the information about the "medicine", we will see that the text talks a lot about the emotional story of the "scientist" who wanted to help his mother, but there is no information anywhere about the composition of that medicine, except for the simple claim that it is based on natural ingredients.

Answer: The gel offered is not a medicine, but a scam.

How does the "medicine" he offers work?

The advertisement for the "miracle medicine" nowhere explains how it restores the cartilage. It even admits that cartilage cells cannot be restored. However, it still claims that it "switches off the electrical impulses of pain at the cellular level" and thus "accelerates regenerative processes". But it is first said that cartilage cannot be restored, or in other words, it does not regenerate?!

Answer: The gel offered does not heal damaged cartilage. The emotional

story of the son who wants to help his mother is full of logical errors and contradictions.

? **Why is his "medicine" better than other medicines?**

The text does not give a clear comparison that this salve is better than the others! It only claims that its effectiveness "has been proven beyond any doubt in the German Research Centre in Dortmund" – but does not say what the exact name of that centre is. It does not even provide a link to the website of the centre. It does not give a link to the research it offers as "proof".

Answer: **The slave is not a medicine, especially not for restoring the cartilage in the joints. The whole text is a simple scam whose goal is to steal 1200 denars from as many people as possible.**

4 **Do not trust the headlines –** Many times on social media we see a news story with a bombastic headline, which simply entices us to click and see the rest of the text. However, when we open it, we realize that the text is completely the opposite or has nothing to do with the headline. This is one of the most common examples of publishing fake news, and the goal is to get more clicks and views. Therefore, never trust the headline alone and make sure you read the rest of the text to avoid jumping to the wrong conclusion. ☞
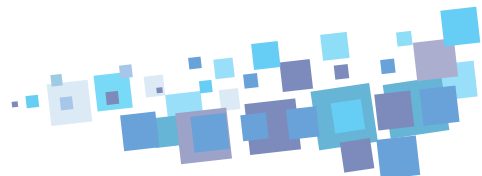
Headline:

"MAJOR OPERATION: Several people ended up behind bars"

АКТУЕЛНО

ГОЛЕМА АКЦИЈА: Повеќе лица завршија зад решетки

In the text below the headline, it is noticeable that there is no major operation as claimed in the headline – the text is a compilation of several daily events that the Ministry of Interior shares with the media on a daily basis. In this specific case, several daily events of 20.09.2024 are mentioned, and in the text, some of them, which are different and unrelated, are shared with the public through the text with a misleading, clickbait headline.

Fact-checking link:
https://vistinomer.mk/klikbejt-naslov-dezinformira-za-navodna-golema-akcija-na-policijata/

5 Emotional reaction – If the news story causes you an emotional reaction, STOP and THINK before sharing it. Fake news/information seek to stir up emotions and trigger an instinctive reaction in the audience.

6 Be aware of your own bias – Fake news usually seek to reinforce prejudices.

7 Expert support – If the text you have read seems unsuitable or not properly communicated, you can check what experts in the field think about the issue, or check if the text has already been analysed by fact checkers who expose disinformation and publish reviews with accurate information.

Finally: think carefully about whether to share the information

If the check shows that the content is disinformation – DO NOT SHARE IT, BUT MARK IT AS DISINFORMATION. Every social network offers such an opportunity.

When you share, react, click or otherwise engage with disinformation on social media, even to debunk it, you are telling the algorithms of the networks that the content is popular and encouraging them to spread it further.
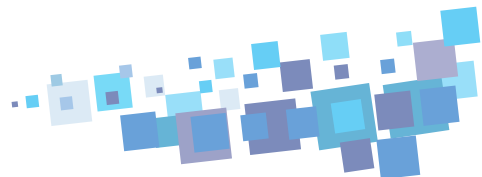
If after the check, you are not sure about the veracity of the content, it is better not to share it. We will successfully deal with disinformation if we all take responsibility for our actions and have a critical approach to receiving and transmitting information both offline and online.

#How to verify photos and videos?

Fake photos and videos and the use of real photos and videos out of context, especially on digital media, are becoming part of our everyday lives. Very often, disinformation and manipulations are based on photos and videos or on their production with the use of **artificial intelligence (AI)**. In other words, the more shocking, unusual or emotionally conveyed the news, the greater the chances that the photo used is actually fake. Also, one of the most common types of manipulation is done by showing real videos/photos out of context because we are more likely to believe disinformation that contains real content.

There are multiple ways and techniques to verify photos and videos online. We can find some of them on the internet, while certain filters are found within ourselves – in our awareness and ability to critically "read" the contents.

Online photo and video verification tools can provide us with data on whether the content is authentic, when and by whom it was created, and where else it

has been used. With the growth and improvement of the quality of fake media content, the number and format of these tools are constantly increasing, but still, some of the best-known tools intended for this purpose are: Google Reverse Image Search, Tineye, Bing and Illuminarty for verifying photos, as well as the InVid extension that runs on Google Chrome for verifying videos. Below we present simple ways to use them.

Before using these tools, we need to know that there is no perfect tool, so we should do several searches using different tools and refrain from sharing if we are not sure about the authenticity of the photo or video.

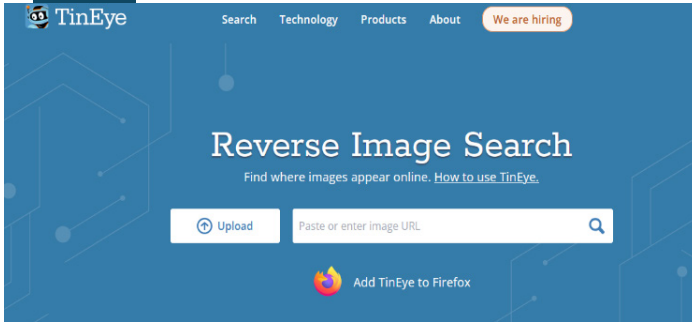## Photo verification tools

Google Reverse Image Search

Step 1: Open https://images.google.com/

Step 2: Click on the icon circled in red in the image

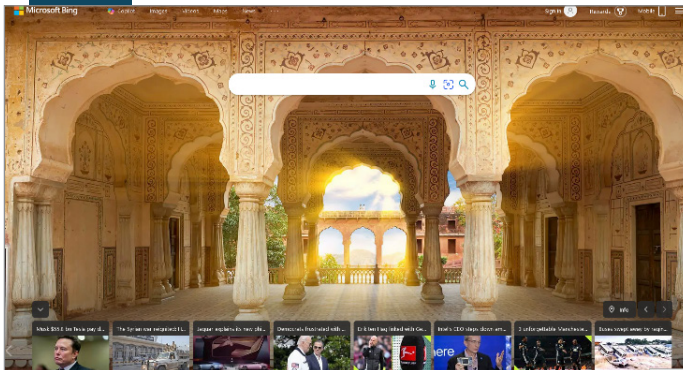**Step 3:** Upload the photo you want to verify (or the link of the photo) and click Search

Tineye

Step 1: Open https://tineye.com/

Step 2: Upload the photo you want to verify (or the link of the photo) and click Search

Bing

Step 1: Open https://www.bing.com/

Step 2: Upload the photo you want to verify

Illuminarty

Step 1: Open https://app.illuminarty.ai/
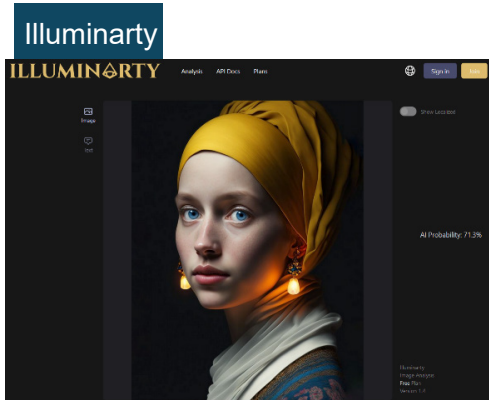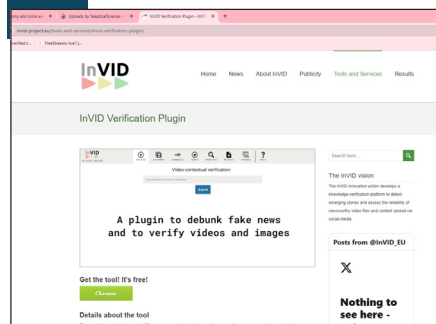
Step 2: Upload the photo you want to verify

Step 3: This AI tool will tell you if and in what percentage the photo is AI generated
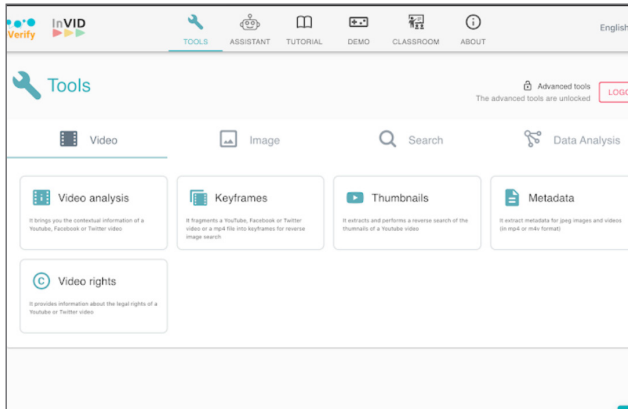
Video verification tool

InVid extension for Google Chrome

Step 1: From your Google Chrome browser, open https://www.invid-project.eu/tools-and-services/invid-verification-plugin/

Step 2: Install the InVid extension

Step 3: In the "Tools" option, select the "Video analysis" tool

Step 4: Paste the link of the video you want to verify

Bonus tricks

If you want to verify if a certain video is authentic or find out more information about where it has been used or by whom it was created, make a Screen shot of the video, and attach it to one of the verification tools.

Additionally, you can use the ChatGPT AI tool for more information about photos and videos

#How to detect a "Deepfake"?

The term "deepfake" was created by combining the words "Deep learning" and "Fake". These are digital forgeries, which can imitate real phenomena and movements with great precision. They include images, videos and sounds, generated by artificial intelligence (AI) that depict something that does not exist in reality or events that never happened. Therefore, verifying the photos and videos that we encounter in our everyday lives has become necessary when creating and/or reading news.

When verifying, apart from using the photo and video verification tools described above, it is necessary to rely on our abilities for critical thinking and perception, i.e. on our awareness and ability to critically "read" the contents.

What we can do at first glance is pay attention to the following details and ask ourselves:

➢ Is this really possible?
➢ Does anything in the photo/video seem strange to us
- The clothing (for example, the uniforms of the police officers)
- The weather (for example, the time of year)
- The street names
- The language and use of alphabets (Cyrillic/Latin)
- The surroundings/buildings/architecture
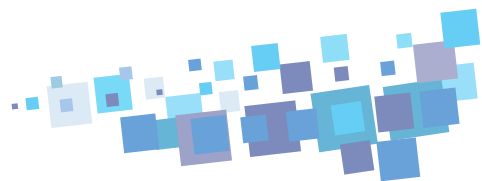
- ➤ Are there any problems with the sound of the videos?
- ➤ Is the source of the content relevant?
- ➤ Does the quality of the photo/video change?
- ➤ Are the videos shortened in an unusual way?
- ➤ What is the language used in the video? Do we notice any dialects and accents?
- ➤ Do we notice strange shadows and reflections?
- ➤ Do we notice strange lip movements when people speak in the video?

Bonus tricks

- ➤ Find another version of the photo or video for comparison.
- ➤ Review the video frame by frame to see if there are any inconsistencies, for example, if the earrings or glasses change from frame to frame, if the person has strange ears, nose or a strange shape of their teeth, hair, chin or fingers.

#How to check fake social media profiles?

A lot of people nowadays use social media to get information, meet new people and share ideas. But

they also harbour numerous scams, for which there are several reasons:

First, they simply have a large number of users.

Second, they are seen as an extension of real life and an opportunity for easier connection.

Third, technology makes it easier for fraudsters to create fake profiles and spread misinformation.

If we are not sure whether a message or information from a social network is real, it is better to check its source.

The following indicators can help us assess whether we are dealing with a fake profile, bot or troll.

Check
- ☐ Does the URL match the profile name.

Confirm
- ☐ Is the profile photo authentic, using the "Reverse Image Search" method
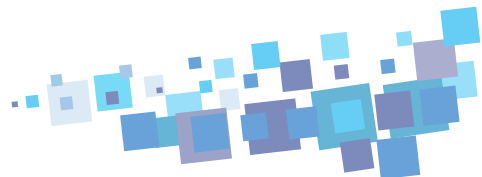
Analyse
- ☐ What is the number of followers, friends and published content.

Check
- ☐ Does the person have other social media profiles?

Doubt
- ☐ See what they post, where, when and how often?

#Primer on disinformation techniques

One of the key skills in the process of critical message evaluation is recognizing techniques for creating disinformation.

Several individuals and groups worked on the unmasking of these techniques, but their elaboration in this Handbook is based on the Taxonomy (i.e., the classification and categorization) developed within the framework of the group "Sceptical Science"[2] created by John Cook[3] in 2007. This is a larger group of scientists whose starting point was to expose the disinformation about climate change and refute it using scientific facts. In doing so, they came to the conclusion that disinformation campaigns on a range of scientific topics, be it climate change, evolution, coronavirus or HIV virus, often use the same disinformation techniques, which relate to several aspects of critical thinking, and are connected in a basic framework of five groups: FAKE EXPERTS, LOGICAL FALLACIES, IMPOSSIBLE EXPECTATIONS, CHERRY PICKING and CONSPIRACY THEORIES. Each of these five groups is further broken down into more specific techniques.

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[2] More information on Skeptical Science, the Taxonomy, as well as the icons and explanations of the various disinformation techniques are available at: https://skepticalscience.com/Fallacy-Taxonomy-Icons-available-Wikimedia. html?fbclid=IwAR1zx_vJO_UBPW_pj4RyG0c6gLf4SGh9nlSTj1SrBmbKCibHaeK5 K2rwCHE

[3] Assistant Research Professor at the Centre for Climate Change Communication at George Mason University in the United States.

In May 2020, a systemized presentation ("FLICC-Poster"[4]) of the techniques was published for the first time, which is the result of a successful collaboration between "Sceptical Science" and their German partner website "Klimafakten". The poster is an attempt to provide accessible information about critical thinking that is also appealing to the general public. The icons and explanations of each of the techniques are detailed in the table below.
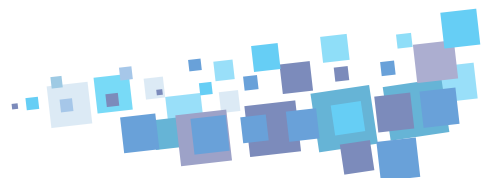
FAKE EXPERTS – presenting themselves as authorities in a certain area, without having professional qualifications. They are often used to create the impression of supporting scientifically unfounded and invalid claims

Bulk Fake Experts

Citing large numbers of seeming experts to argue that there is no scientific consensus on a topic.

Magnified Minority

Uncritical, unprofessional questioning of a scientific consensus by glorifying a minority of scientists simply because they hold a contrary view.

Fake Debate

Presenting a mixture of adversarial (pseudo)science data to give the false impression of a burning ongoing debate.

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[4] The FLICC - Poster (an acronym of the first letters of the English names of the groups of techniques – Fake Experts, Logical Fallacies, Impossible Expectations, Cherry Picking and Conspiracy Theories) is available at: https://www.klimafakten. de/kommunikation/f-l-i-c-c-most-common-disinformation-tricks-science-deniers

LOGICAL FALLACIES – Inconsistencies in the logical flow, deviations of thought that result in a wrong conclusion, with prejudice or an unreasonable attitude, more susceptible to some impression, sensation than based on a reasonable reasoning.

Attacking a Person "Ad Hominem"

Often called – Character Assassination: Attacking the personality of the opponent (his/her physical appearance and/or moral) rather than addressing what he/she is saying (his/her ideas, opinions and arguments). It also often uses the maxim: "Argument of strength versus strength of argument."

Misrepresentation

Misrepresenting a situation or an opponent's position.

Ambiguity

Using vague terms or phrases to cause uncertainty, confusion, misleading conclusions.

Oversimplification

Trivializing a state or situation that is based on complex experiences, data and evidence.

False Analogy

A preconceived notion that because two – things/examples/situations – are alike, the differences between them can be overlooked.

Red Herring

Just like the spinner bait in fishing – it diverts the attention from the important point, and deceives – it flatters and dazzles the audience with anecdotes, confusing or irrelevant data.

Slippery Slope

An unfounded assumption that something, some particular action, will lead to a series of fatal, catastrophic events.

IMPOSSIBLE EXPECTATIONS – Setting unrealistic, unattainable standards by which something should be proven, and the goal, most often, is to relativize and reject existing scientific findings.

Moving Goalpost

Inconsistent and continuous changing of the criteria, even after the proof of a result, which was originally requested, has already been sufficiently argued and properly delivered.

CHERRY PICKING – A fallacy that results from a biased scrutiny of data, evidence, information and viewpoints, aimed at defending selfish, one-sided interest. Deliberately ignoring contradictory aspects. It also includes manipulation of statistics or presenting data out of context

Anecdote

Using personal or other people's experience as a guide through situations and states, instead of sound arguments or compelling evidence.
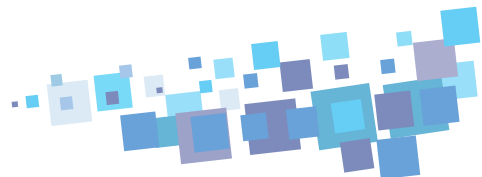
Slothful Induction

An obstinate view, a conclusion drawn by simply ignoring relevant evidence.

Quote Mining

Taking a person's words out-of-context, quoting or attributing statements that were – nowhere and never – said.

CONSPIRACY THEORY – unfounded complex views and claims that important events, situations or states related to humanity are the deliberate result of nefarious plans of secret influential groups.

Contradictory
A point of view derived from evidence, claims, ideas that are mutually contradictory.

Overriding Suspicion
The preconceived notion that any contradictory evidence is always biased or false.

Nefarious Intent
Accusing scientists and experts of having hidden, nefarious motives.

Something Must Be Wrong
Rejecting evidence, only because of persistent suspicion that there is some (mal)intentional omission in it.

Persecuted Victim
Presenting themselves as the victim of social/political persecution in order to deflect criticism or blame.

Immune to Evidence
A mechanism of conspiracy theorists of dismissing all evidence contrary to their claims as groundless.

Re-interpreting Randomness
Taking random events as evidence of alleged premeditated malice.

The taxonomy, i.e., the classification and categorization of disinformation techniques, is not final and closed because, unfortunately, new techniques are constantly appearing. Therefore, this is an ever-growing collection of unmasked techniques that continues to be developed and supplemented by defining new observed features.

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