

# Building resilient communities through media literacy

This resource by Jaroslav Valuch, an experienced practitioner in the field of media literacy, is meant to serve both educators and students interested in MIL.

It comes out of different [Transitions](#) and [SEENPM](#) training initiatives, most notably the project on debunking misinformation, supported by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

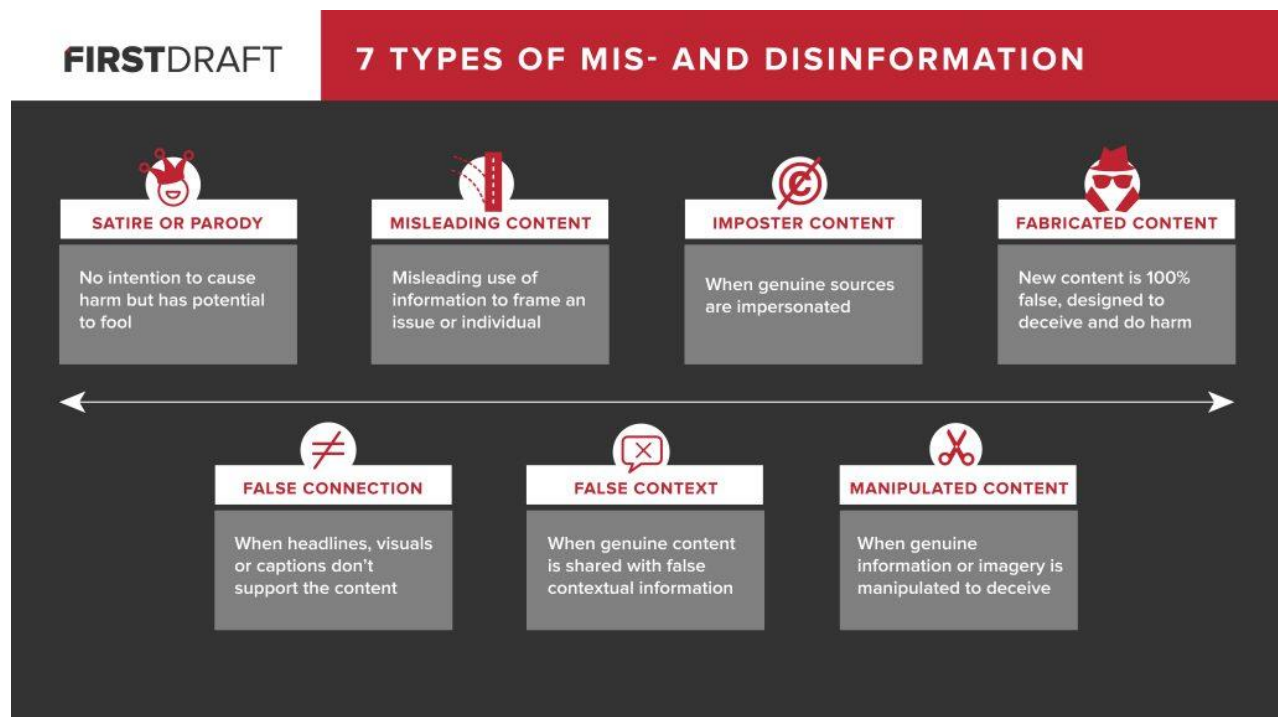
A more elaborate version of this material will be produced as a standalone course within [Transitions' online learning project](#) focused on debunking disinformation through fact-checking and collaboration.

## Introduction

The fake news and disinformation debate sparked immense interest in media and information literacy as one of the potentially most effective antidotes protecting the public from actors who intentionally fabricate content to mislead the public for political, ideological, economic or other reasons.

So while media and information literacy does have an important role to play in the current [information disorder](#), it is often [weaponised](#) in the so-called information warfare or narrowed merely down to the need of individuals' ability to verify, fact-check or crosscheck information.

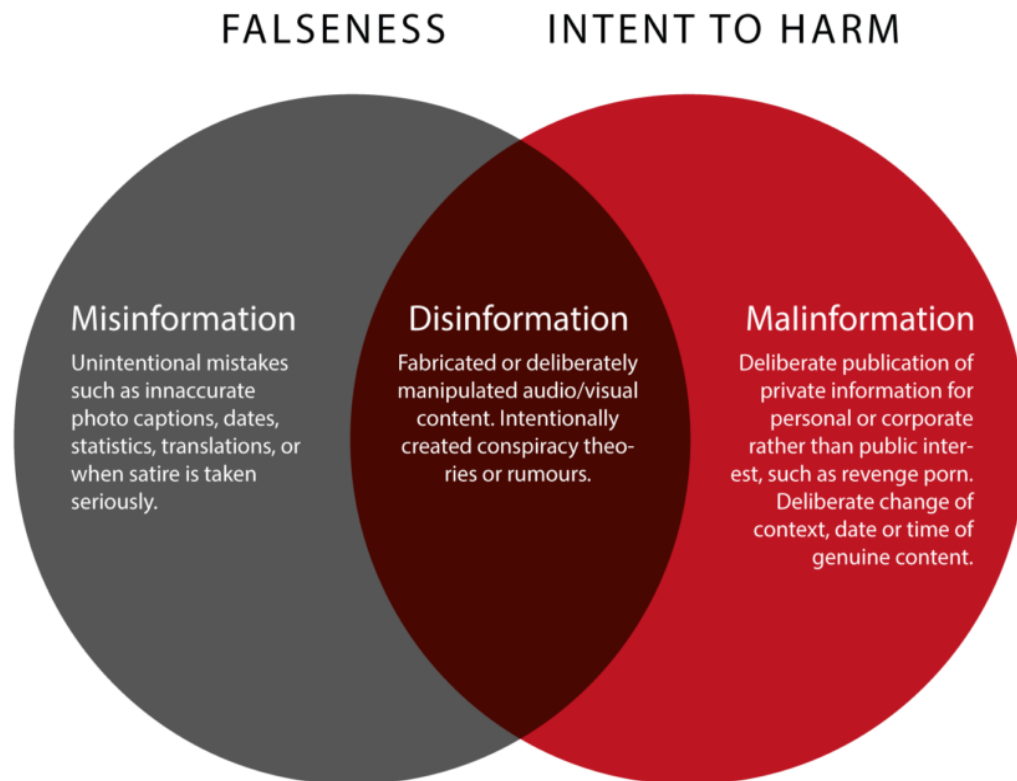
While we still struggle to accurately measure and demonstrate the impact of intentionally false or misleading information on the public, thanks to researches we have been able to [move away from the narrowed focus on fake news](#) towards a better understanding of the problem in the broader



[https://firstdraftnews.org/fake-news-complicated/fdn\\_7types\\_misinfo/](https://firstdraftnews.org/fake-news-complicated/fdn_7types_misinfo/)

context of the “information disorder”. We today also have a better and deeper understanding of motivations behind the spread of fabricated content and the [actors involved](#).

## TYPES OF INFORMATION DISORDER



<https://medium.com/1st-draft/information-disorder-part-3-useful-graphics-2446c7dbb485>

Good understanding of the problem in its context is not just necessary for more effective counter-interventions, but also to avoid traps that could lead to even [more harm and threat](#). The purpose of disinformation is not namely just to spread lies; it is preferably to achieve paralysis:

*“The constant bombardment of tainted leaks, conspiracy theories, and other misinformation in turn fuels cynicism, with citizens growing fatigued as they try to discern objective truth amid the flood of news. Questioning the integrity of all media — one aim of authoritarianism — can, in turn, lead to a kind of fatalism and policy paralysis”. (<http://muse.jhu.edu/article/713720>)*

Imagine the information space (email, social networks but also mainstream media) as a publicly accessible piece of land. Fake news and disinformation are like landmines – planted to that space not to kill, but to injure and paralyse. Once we see someone hit by such landmine – be it a friend, ex-classmate, relative or random fellow citizen - we tend to help them, fix their injury through [fact-checking](#), debunking - we invest much energy into debunking of obvious nonsense and consequently support its reach, visibility. We waste our time, energy, nerves that could be spent

in a more meaningful way. This is like playing a game by the rules someone else have unfairly set.



By asking the public to always crosscheck and fact-check information from multiple sources online often makes them just to run around the minefield again and again. It exposes them to more uncertainty and information chaos, adding to the paralyses, and apathy. Sometimes people just want to take the risk, or they believe they know how to navigate the field, or they just don't believe there is a minefield. Continually attempting to prove them wrong often leads to even more conflicted, polarised societies.

This doesn't mean we should give up. However, we need to understand the rules of the game, and instead set our standards, or play on a different field. What does it mean? Instead of being tricked to just another "fake news - fact-check, fake news – fact-check" game, we should instead support and value good and responsible information processing, good professional journalism. Also, find a way to deliver it to the public. We also do not need to accept the [attention hacking](#) game that social network algorithms play with us to keep us engaged with whatever content is there to collect even more data about our behaviour and sell those to advertisers.

The conflict of “truth” versus “lies” within the information space might be misleading us anyway. Even the liar acknowledges the existence of “truth”. The problem we are dealing with is not necessarily “lies”, but rather “bullshitting”. Watch a video lecture by a psychologist Petrocelli who explains the concept more into the detail.

Truth, Lies and Bullshiting – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VW8uuJjDHcg>

To be able to navigate the ever more complex communication and media ecosystem we need to be better equipped by skills and "media literacy". However, we cannot do it alone. We need professional assistance.

Based on our extensive experience, we would argue, that most effective strategy to combat disinformation is a better understanding of high-quality information processing, knowledge and supporting the excellent journalism, and media literacy, that teaches critical skills without deepening peoples distrust and confusion.

It is the professional news media, journalists, digital investigators and fact-checkers who should provide their skills as a public service. Despite the falling trust in professional journalists often fueled by disinformation campaigns, we need to acknowledge that the quality and motivations of professional media and journalists are not always pure clean and flawless. However, there is a common ground to start. The trust in need of quality and responsible journalism is shared across all the different groups that fight over their versions of truth and reality. That is an essential start in our polarised societies.

### **Media and information literacy – an antidote?**

Despite its current popularity, media and information literacy is [not a new concept](#).

The information ecosystem changes rapidly, and the need to be able to navigate it effectively is higher. Moreover, the ability to [access, analyse, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms](#) - from print to video to the internet, which is what Media literacy means, comes especially handy.

The early argumentation for the need for media literacy is pretty similar to the current one. Initially, it's primary objective was to protect the youth and children from adverse impacts of watching TV, popular culture, advertising and playing violent computer games. However, with the rising popularity of the internet and increased access to technology such as cameras, the media literacy efforts shifted to focus on learning by doing approach. It was based on the assumption that once an individual understands how media messages are created through his or her work, he will be adequately equipped to analyse media content produced distributed by the media critically. The rise of social media and information disorder, the "fake news" frenzy, bring back again the argument of the need to protect the public from unwanted and risky online content and behaviour.

Media literacy in formal education already found its way into the official curriculums and lesson plans. Moreover, quite recently we have witnessed the rise of new media literacy projects and initiatives [across Europe](#) and the world. However, [the implementation is hindered](#) by the often underpaid, understaffed public education systems and lack of systemic support of schools and teachers in this regard.

Furthermore, the primary target of media education efforts is youth and children. However, we tend to [neglect other groups](#) that are more vulnerable than youth. It is the older groups, senior

citizens, who have difficulties adapting to the continually changing information ecosystem and new communication technologies — [becoming easy targets](#) of those who fabricate information.

So while we have public education facilities to implement media literacy into curricula (although with minimal success), we should also be exploring channels on how to help older generations deal with the anxiety and confusion they feel while interacting with media and in the digital space. It is the local community centres, libraries, senior clubs that are best positioned to assist local communities to understand and navigate the ever-changing information ecosystem. We in Transitions [started exploring that potential](#).

The [media and journalists have a role to play as well](#). They are best equipped with verification skills and other information processing expertise. We need more transparency on their side - how they do their work, how the content is produced, what gets published and what not – to generate more trust and to strengthen the general media literacy. There are global initiatives already helping newsrooms in the process, such as [thetrustproject.org](http://thetrustproject.org) or [trustingnews.org](http://trustingnews.org).

Besides formal education approaches we have seen many creative methods that try to deal with the phenomena through a more playful manner.

The “[Bad News Game](#)” suggests that the best antidote to fake news is to become one of their producers first.

“[Fakescape](#)”, an award-winning game of Czech students takes a slightly different approach by imitating favourite escape room games. It equips its players with essential verification skills through a mix of an offline/online game for teams.

The BBC “[iReporter](#)” [game](#) gives you the experience of what it means to work as a journalist in a newsroom. By understanding the difficulty of such work, you should be able to appreciate the responsible information processing over disinformation that doesn’t reach basic journalistic standards.

You can also test your observation and geolocation skills in a series of challenges produced by the First Draft News: [Observation Challenge 1](#), [Observation Challenge 2](#), [Geolocation Challenge](#).

## **Traps of media literacy**

As we suggested in the opening chapter, media literacy is not a silver bullet. Unfortunately, It can also do more harm than good. Here are several traps every media educator should try to avoid.

### **1. "Question everything."**

Asking the right questions about the authors of media messages and their motivations is one of the essential media critical thinking skills. However, this can easily slip into the [complete distrust](#) because everyone, in the end, has specific motivations. Despite that, we can still distinguish an

anonymous hoax and manipulation from an honest attempt to provide accurate news. Make sure while fighting fake news, that people do not end up distrusting any source of information.

## **2. "Always check multiple sources."**

It is indeed important not to fall for every piece of shocking information, mainly if it arrived at us from a questionable source and also check other more reputable sources for confirmation. However, nobody has time and capacity always to cross-check and verify all the pieces of content that we are continually receiving via multiple channels. By encouraging people to seek numerous sources to crosscheck information, we can expose them to even more questionable sources and content, and we could easily deepen their confusion and anxiety.

## **3. "Be careful. Media are there to get you."**

Constantly demonising the media and internet as a source of threats, bad news and other dangers might not earn you positive attention of youth or any other age group. Let's accept the fact that media play a significant role in our lives; they not only inform us but also entertain us, help us relax, not to feel lonely, have fun. Let's not forget to include also in our media literacy efforts a positive approach – teach to enjoy good quality content – great reportage, a well-crafted advert on TV, strong news photography, some celebrity gossip or satire.

## **Psychological aspects, media and information hygiene**

The debate about fake news and disinformation tends to put the focus on those, who produce it and their motivations. Media literacy teaches us to understand how media work, who are the authors, how the information spreads. However, we must not also forget the other side of the equation: us, the audience, our brains, our perceptions. Why is it that we often prefer a questionable content over the high-quality one? Why do we prefer information that supports our beliefs over those that do not? How our brain processes the information overload? Also, how marketing and communication experts use our attention to generate more engagement and advertising revenues?

The success of "fake news" exploits some of our psychological weaknesses. Psychology professor Shyam Sundar [suggests there are three main psychological reasons](#) why we fall for "fake news".

However, fake news is just extreme. It is an essential piece in the media literacy toolbox to understand how the [attention economy](#) works. It is no longer just our money that is the most valuable currency. In the oversaturated media information environment, it is our attention that became the most valuable resource. Moreover, the media, advertisers and technology platforms compete for our attention and our data. The key is not necessary to sell us a product quickly. It is to keep us as long as possible engaged on a particular site or a social network. Almost at any cost – by offering us engaging content, emotional, attractive, entertaining, shocking and not necessarily high-quality content.

Under such conditions, asking people to crosscheck and fact-check the information they consume leads only to more information chaos exposure, and additional confusion and anxiety. More information does not necessarily lead to a better understanding and certainly not to better well-being. Sometimes, we need to switch off. [We need information hygiene](#) despite what the attention economy dictates. There is no need to form opinions about everything immediately after a piece of news emerges. What is more needed is often just spending more quality time offline, outside, in nature, with friends and family.

So next time when we tend to get upset or angry about a particular piece of content online, we need to understand, that our brains have their ways how to deal with the information overload. Our minds are not perfect, and they deploy mechanisms to protect us. There are 183 so-called "[cognitive biases](#)". Some of them, such as the "confirmation bias" explains why we tend to trust only information, that corresponds with our opinions and views.

## **Fact-checking and verification as a public service**

Even if we managed to successfully implement media literacy into the formal and informal education system, and also if we as individuals managed to master the media literacy skills, it will not resolve the ever-growing need for thorough analysis, investigations and fact-checking. It is just simply not in our capacity to verify and crosscheck all the pieces of information we routinely consume. We need a professional service to do this for us. Moreover, we need to trust such a service. Here are some of the initiatives, besides traditional professional newsrooms, that try to fulfil such role:

### **Fact-checking**

In [this YouTube lecture](#), Bill Adair, the founder of the Pulitzer Prize-winning website PolitiFact shares his thoughts on the role of political fact-checking in current times.

### **OSINT – Open source investigations**

Although [not new](#), investigations using openly available pieces of information often help to resolve some of the biggest mysteries and crimes. Usually done by large numbers of people, digital investigators use a variety of tools and techniques to piece together a shred of evidence from a variety of openly available sources, such as public databases or social media profiles. One of these initiatives, Bellingcat, gained respect for its active investigations into top world news. Following incidents like the shooting down of an MH 17 to the chemical attacks in Syria, Bellingcat demonstrated the incredible power of citizen investigations by crowdsourcing expertise and open sources. [Christiaan Triebert from Bellingcat shares three case studies](#) that capture the daily work and tools of a citizen investigator.

Moreover, everybody can join the ranks of digital Sherlocks. To start, enrol to an online course by the FirstDraft News: see [Verification Curriculum](#) and [Resources](#).

**Jaroslav Valuch** is an experienced practitioner in the field of media literacy, social media activism, hate violence, hate speech, and communication with crisis-affected populations. He has worked with dozens of organizations and civic initiatives in Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia.

He is a project manager at Transitions, a Prague-based media development organization, where he runs the organization's media literacy and disinformation initiatives, including Factczech.cz, which provides support to Czech journalists and students in the field of verification and fact-checking, and a program focused on senior citizens. At Transitions, he is also project leader of [Press Start](#), a global crowdfunding platform assisting journalists in countries where the press cannot work freely.

Since 2005 Jaroslav has been working closely with the One World in Schools Program of the People in Need organization on the implementation of media literacy into the educational curriculum.

Jaroslav is also a co-founder of the Institute for Social Inclusion where he oversees hate violence and extremism related programs. He contributes to the [Budapest Centre for Mass Atrocities Prevention](#) as a senior researcher and recently led a nationwide communication campaign focused on monitoring, awareness raising, and mapping of hate-motivated violence and hate speech organized by The Office of the Czech Government.

In 2009 Jaroslav worked in Burma as a humanitarian and capacity-building projects coordinator before joining the Ushahidi Haiti earthquake [deployment](#) and later becoming the field representative in Port-au-Prince.

In 2010 Jaroslav was a [Fulbright Fellow](#) at the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland.