the Disinformation Handbook

A GUIDE FOR **MOLDOVAN JOURNALISTS, COMMUNICATORS**, AND **CAMPAIGNERS**

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The Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) empowers local voices to drive change in countries in conflict, crisis, and transition. Where hate speech and propaganda proliferate, and journalists and civic activists are under attack, IWPR promotes reliable information and public debate that makes a difference. The information provided in this handbook does not, and is not intended to, constitute legal advice; instead, it is intended for general informational purposes only.

It is important you learn the relevant media law and the risks of reporting on conflict disinformation in your region.

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IWPR MOLDOVA DISINFORMATION HANDBOOK

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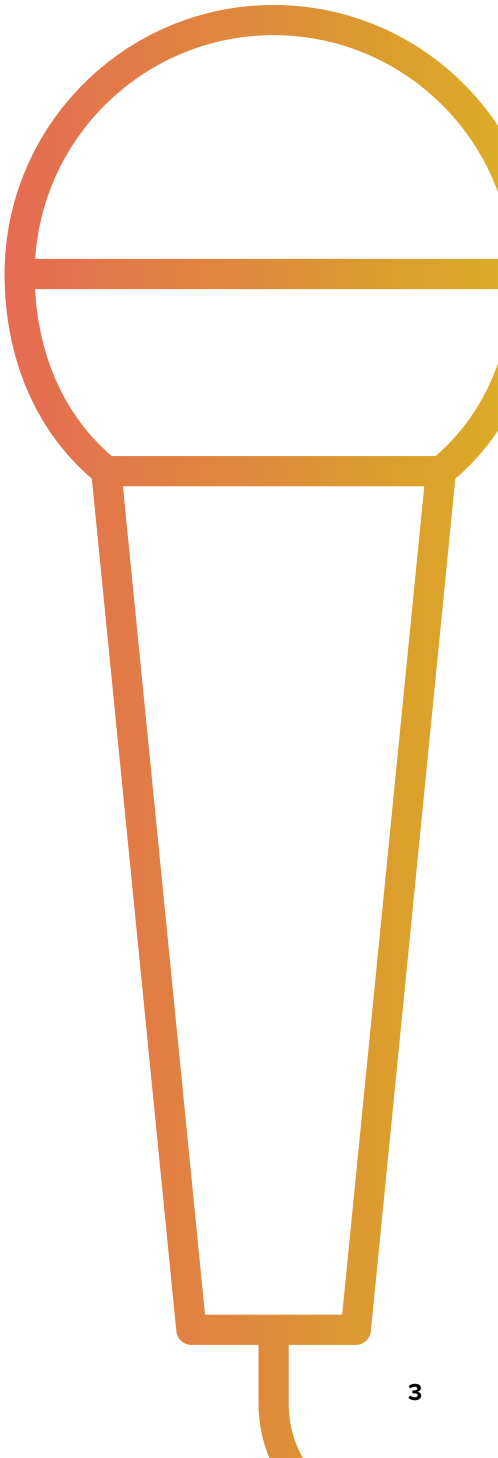


DISINFORMATION IS EVERYWHERE. DO NOT BE DISHEARTENED.

HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook is aimed at journalists, communicators, and campaigners as well as educators. It has not been designed as a comprehensive guide to disinformation, which is a huge subject. Rather it is an introduction, designed to help you develop a 'factchecking mindset'. Whilst the focus is on Russian disinformation in the context of the war in Ukraine and threats to Moldova, the range of examples to illustrate the key learning points is as global as the sources of disinformation.

It is broadly divided into three sections:
Part 1 – understanding the challenge
Part 2 – journalism essentials in an age of disinformation
Part 3 – countering disinformation in practice

TERMINOLOGY

Rather than including a glossary at the end of this handbook, useful terms and expressions will be explained throughout. Unless otherwise stated, these are the author's own. Bear in mind news language varies from one country to another, and even within a particular country, organisations often use different terms.

In fact, one of the purposes of conflict disinformation is to make you feel helpless. To stop you believing that anything is true. To make you feel cynical and distrustful, particularly of other people who are different from you.

Disinformation, fake news, and propaganda cause mistrust and doubt.

Some of this false information is designed to get people angry and arguing with each other.

False information promotes the idea that everybody is as bad as each other. That there is chaos and disorder.

They want you to believe that it doesn't matter who's in charge. So, you don't vote, or you vote for a strongman figure who will simplify the problems of the world for you.

It's time to fight back.

We believe that the disinformation wars can be won with accuracy, fact-checking skills, and empathy. Kindness, even.

Because we know that good people sometimes share false information (p12): fact-checking hasn't always been taught well in schools. Until recently, digital verification techniques were not on any school curriculum.

But disinformation, misinformation, and downright lies have been with us for so long that some falsehoods which are centuries old are still believed. (p6)

Remember, not everyone changes their minds when presented with the facts: it took hundreds of years for people to accept that the earth is (roughly) spherical. A few still hold out against this idea.

To be well equipped in this battle, you'll need some psychology as well as media skills: an understanding of how people change their minds. Clue: telling people they are wrong does not always work (p48). There are complex reasons why people believe what they do.

The stakes are high; you'll meet people who want to tell lies about others in order to kill them and steal their land. It will be confusing and complicated at times, and you'll need to stay safe. There are specific risks for women online (p40)

But anger won't help you. Evaluating sources and accessing a range of information will help, as will building up the skillsets editors use to make almost-instant verification decisions (p34).

As well as being impartial, accurate, and fair, you'll need compassion for those whose lack of analytical skills may be frustrating.

The ability to take a step back, and to not let disinformation achieve its intended effect of making you angry, is vital. You'll need good humour for this fight.

EDITOR'S NOTE:
Staying safe while reporting is vital and covering conflict can be dangerous. Reporters and campaigners have been killed, threatened, imprisoned, and tortured. Some face online abuse. Also, you need to take precautions to protect your sources. See page 44 for more on journalists' safety.

Vadim Russo | Unsplash

DISINFORMATION TIMELINE

EDITOR'S NOTE:
False information has been around for thousands of years.

Some of this early 'fake news' was innocent enough, and based on a genuine lack of understanding, since corrected: for example, most people now believe the earth is roughly spherical.

In other cases the disinformation campaigns were so successful that decades and even centuries later, people still repeat and 'amplify' false information.

Certain states, religious groups, and corporations have a long history of spreading false information: and getting other people to do this on their behalf. This timeline is to show how some of the trends in disinformation are historic.

c. 330 BC

Aristotle provides strong empirical evidence for a spherical Earth. The historical myth that medieval Europeans thought the earth was flat was created later, by 17th century Protestants who wanted to make Catholics sound superstitious. There was a revival in flat earth beliefs in Europe from the mid 19th century onwards, and some people on the internet continue to advocate in favour of the 'flat earth theory'.

44BC

Roman politician Mark Antony is believed by many historians to have been brought down by Octavian due to a sophisticated disinformation campaign which included forged documents and slogans written on coins – a bit like early tweets.

129-201AD

Medical theory of humorism developed by Greek physician Galen, based on the four elements (earth, fire, water, and air) which were believed to make up the universe. It was the dominant explanation for illness in Western medicine for more than 2, 000 years, until people discovered germs in the nineteenth century. Although, incredibly, germ theory denialism is a real thing.

1898

The New York Times warns readers about the Spanish Prisoner scam, an 'old swindle revived' which features an (allegedly) incarcerated wealthy person who needs help accessing their vast fortune. It has been revived again more recently in the form of 'Nigerian Prince' emails and other similar 'advance-fee scams'.

1903

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion is published in St Petersburg; picking up on medieval 'blood libel' stories, it is presented as the record of secret meetings of Jewish leaders, and their alleged conspiracy to dominate the world. In fact, it was a fraud, cobbled together by various earlier antisemitic writers, not Jewish leaders. The forgery is widely republished internationally, including by the US industrialist Henry Ford.

1915

The 'German Corpse Factory' was classic wartime fake news: an entirely false accusation that Germans harvested the body fat of fallen soldiers was encouraged by British propaganda teams. All sides of the conflict encouraged fake stories about the enemy.

2001

Helicopter shark! This shocking viral image was declared National Geographic's photo of the year...according to the accompanying email. In fact, it was a hoax.

2016

Pizzagate was a thoroughly debunked and particularly fanciful conspiracy theory about Hillary Clinton operating a criminal gang from a pizza restaurant. The 2016 US presidential elections was a boom time for fake stories, with many sensationalist, utterly fake Facebook stories originating in Russian and Macedonian 'fake news factories'.

2017

Moldovan parliament votes in a bill aiming to ban Russian propaganda. Enacted in 2018, it is not seen to have been successful. 'Fake news' also becomes Collins Dictionary's word of the year.

DEFINITION

'Illusory truth effect'
Repeated information is more likely to be believed than something completely new. Which explains why advertisers spend millions of pounds on repeating the same information during peak times, and why authoritarian regimes in particular, tend to repeat false information until it sounds normal.

C. 985

Norse explorer Erik the Red allegedly names Greenland thus, in order to attract visitors who might be put off by a place called 'land of snow and ice'..!

1144

The Jewish community in the English city of Norwich is falsely accused of the ritual murder of a child. Superstitious and unfounded accusations that Jews ritually sacrifice Christian children at Passover were a feature of Medieval life. Despite the lack of evidence these false 'blood libel' accusations led to the persecution of Jews. Many were killed, and others forced to wear a yellow star.

1782

US founding father Benjamin Franklin creates a fake issue of a Boston newspaper to build sympathy for the American Revolution. The paper claims that British colonial troops hired Native Americans to scalp pro-independence soldiers and civilians.

1835

The 'Great Moon Hoax' featured the supposed discovery of life and even civilisation on the moon; it boosted the circulation of the New York Sun but was dismissed at the time as fake news.

1917

The Cottingley Fairies, crude fake photographs of supernatural beings, are made in England. They fool Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes detective stories.

1938

CBS Radio Network broadcasts 'War of the Worlds' radio play: some listeners believe that a Martian invasion is really taking place.

1952

The word 'disinformation' appears in the Soviet Union's official encyclopaedia. It originated as the name of a Soviet propaganda department, founded by Stalin in 1923. Stalin-era disinformation campaigns included placing fake stories in Western media outlets, as well as propagandising to domestic audiences.

1983

False claims that AIDS was created in a lab by US scientists in order to reduce the population of poorer countries appear in a fake letter to Patriot, a low circulation pro-Soviet Indian newspaper. The false claim, which was repeated in many news outlets, was cooked up by Operation Infektion, a Soviet disinformation campaign intended to discredit the US.

2020

COVID-19 'infodemic' disinformation boom. False messages include the virus having been deliberately manufactured in a lab, or by Bill Gates, and spread by 5G mobile phone networks. The United Nations declares an 'infodemic', with an estimated 45 % of tweets about the virus containing false information coming from 'low credibility sources'.

2022

Ukraine takes down 100, 000 bots used for disinformation about the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which is described as a 'special military operation' by Russia. Russian disinformation includes false claims that victims of its shelling were actors.

2023

Facebook advertising used in Moldova to try and destabilise the government: the pro-Russian messaging was paid for by Vietnamese front accounts in order to circumnavigate sanctions on Illan Shor's political advertising. Paid protesters also turned up at Chișinău events.

Photos: Farragutful, Bogomil Mihaylov, Alex Steyn, Brett Jordan, Markus Winkler, Nick Raistrick

WHAT TYPES OF MEDIA COMMUNICATORS ARE THERE? WHICH KIND ARE YOU?

In the past only a handful of people attempted journalism, usually working for a state news agency or a private media house. In the digital era, it has become easier to create and share content online.

Research shows that many people in Moldova access news via social media, often bypassing 'traditional' journalism entirely. So, many people get information from news sources that are biased; many stories are generated and amplified by propaganda 'factories' backed by states; and many people share news without checking if these stories are true.

Types of communicator

Victoria Ciobanu:

I'm a public service reporter. I try to be guided by certain long-established and international news values. I try to achieve accuracy, balance over time, and impartiality. I will cover any story if I think it is in the public interest.

I have colleagues working all over the world, in different media and in the both the private and public sectors. I follow the Moldovan journalists' code of ***ethics***, and I have spent several years training. Despite this, it is a struggle to make a living, and I know many people who have ended up working in PR, or for sensationalist media outlets. I supplement my income with freelance work for international media houses.

Typical outlets: TeleRadio-Moldova, Jurnal TV, TVR Moldova.

MORE DETAILS:
Note that in this context, public service refers to behaviour, not ownership model. Some public service reporters cover a specific 'beat' such as business, crime or the environment. Others will cover news and current affairs more generally. Whilst some of the big international media houses still mainly employ Western journalists who travel, many are increasingly employing 'local' reporters with expert regional knowledge who can report accurately and insightfully.

Anastasia Turcanu

I am a campaigning journalist, and my job is to expose injustice. I report exclusively on human rights issues and file copy for a wide range of news outlets. I am less interested in balance and impartiality and more interested in exposing the wrongdoings.

Typical outlets: my stories appear in a wide range of media.

MORE DETAILS:
Campaigning journalists often believe strongly in a particular cause or field of endeavour, such as the environment, or human rights; others tend to focus on advocacy for specific groups.

Sergey Kuznetsov

I am a pro-Kremlin journalist. I work to promote my country. I've worked across a range of state broadcasters and channels. My stories appear frequently in Moldovan news outlets.

Typical outlets: Primul în Moldova, RTR Moldova, NTV Moldova (their Russian parent stations are Perviy Kanal, RTR and NTV)

MORE DETAILS:
Partisan, pro-government, and pro-opposition media encompasses a range of reporters: from those directly working on behalf of state authorities or political parties to journalists who work for a privately-owned media outlet with a strong allegiance to a particular group.

Andrei Bordeianu

I'm an influencer, and I'm motivated by boosting my 'personal brand'. I specialise in computer games but my content covers a range of topics including beauty, health and sport. I don't have any training as a journalist but I use my profile to cover important issues that the mainstream media are too scared to cover. So I will report on the fake pandemic, and cover the conflict from a non-NATO point of view. I believe in free speech, and nobody can censor me!

MORE DETAILS:
There is debate over how to regulate influencers on social media. Serious topics which used to be the preserve of journalists can now be covered by anybody. Sometimes influencers with huge audiences can spread false information, and some have been paid to cover conflict. A recent investigation by ***Vice News*** showed that some YouTubers and Tiktokers were being paid up to 20,000 roubles each by Russia to cover the invasion of Ukraine favourably.

Alexandru Chiriac

I'm an investigative journalist. I carry out in-depth and complex research to break stories that the rest of the news media eventually cover. I have specialist research skills.

MORE DETAILS:
Traditionally investigative journalists have been seen as 'lone wolves', often working as freelancers. Their work can be time-consuming and speculative, and therefore expensive, so investigative partnerships are becoming increasingly common, particularly on big data stories.

Angela Petrea

I'm a public relations manager. I promote content to big audiences on behalf of a range of clients. It's not my job to do any factchecking, just to make sure that people see content. I sometimes get my content into mainstream media outlets, by building links with journalists, or getting celebrities involved.

Typical outlets: It is hard to think of a media outlet that has not produced a story which originated with a PR team; the most successful 'place' stories without audiences realising. They sponsor research, brief journalists off the record, and pay influencers.

And whilst a lot of PR activity is based around getting you consume particular products, PR teams will also produce spin on behalf of armies, governments, and mercenary groups. Journalists should develop the skill of spotting PR spin.

Nicolae Ceaușescu, Former President of Romania gives his final address at a TV station

Public service journalists strive for balance. In order to be accurate and credible, it is seen as good practice to speak to 'both sides'. This applies to all kinds of reporting.

Source: IWPR ***Reporting For Change*** handbook

DEFINITIONS

Contacts book
This is an expression for the network of people whose contact details you have, even though the details tend to be stored digitally these days. It's an important concept: good reporters should have a 'bulging contacts book', meaning a range of people who you can call on at short notice to get a quote, background information, or an interview. Your contacts book should include people from a wide section of society and include ordinary people as well as business executives and politicians. National reporters should cover all of Moldova, including Russian-speaking areas.

'Beat'
An area of expertise covered by a journalist. Crime, sports, entertainment are all different 'beats', although the term's origins are geographical. Whilst many journalists in Moldova are all-rounderschur who don't have a particular specialism, it can be useful to learn a topic well and gain a reputation in a particular area so that you can pitch freelance stories to international media outlets.

Valery Tenevoy | Unsplash

MISINFORMATION, DISINFORMATION, AND MALINFORMATION

HOW TO LABEL DISINFORMATION: EXAMPLES

- **This claim is disputed**
- **There is no evidence for this claim**
- **This is manipulated media**
- **This is an altered video which purports to show...**
- **The missing context behind this meme is...**
- **Factcheck: 'This claim is true/false/ partly true'**

EDITOR'S NOTE:
Rather than the potentially vague 'fake news', many data journalists, academics, and others distinguish between misinformation (false, but shared 'innocently'), disinformation (false and deliberately created to cause someone harm) and malinformation (based on reality, but taken out of context).

The term 'fake news', in use since the nineteenth century, can be confusing: it has been used to describe completely fabricated stories, bad and inaccurate reporting, misinterpreted satire, genuine errors, and biased or one-sided stories.

More recently 'fake news' has been used (and abused) as a term to describe any journalist whose reporting a political leader or public figure doesn't like. Most famously Donald Trump used this term in 2016 to insult a CNN journalist whose question he did not want to answer. CNN is considered a generally reliable news source with good factchecking in place. Some governments have even used the term 'anti-fake news legislation' to restrict the freedom of the media.

Many audiences won't understand the differences between disinformation, misinformation, and fake news, and these terms don't translate well into Romanian or Russian. So it's your job to help explain it to them in clear language.

There are a lot of ways to clearly label false information, and the techniques you use will depend on your audience. For example, some European newspapers use quotation marks for false claims. But not everyone might understand this 'subtle' idea. Another challenge is that some people believe that if some content isn't labelled as false, it must be true: this is called 'the implied truth effect'.

Kayla Velasquez | Unsplash

DEFINITION

The Dunning-Kruger effect
Put simply, people with a low knowledge of a subject think they understand it well because they don't realise how complex the subject is. Experts with a good knowledge of a subject appear less confident: they know what they don't know.

> ***We limit amplification of misleading content or remove it from Twitter if offline consequences could be immediate and severe.***

Source: Twitter guidelines
https://help.twitter.com/en/resources/addressing-misleading-info

A Russian teenager creates a fake story that Maia Sandu plans to host 30,000 Syrians = **disinformation** = deliberately false information

A retired factory worker in Bălți shares the false story about Maia Sandu on Facebook = **misinformation** = unwittingly shared

Images of actors with fake blood go viral along with the false claims the war is a hoax = **false labelling** = the images are of a film shot years before the invasion

Maia Sandu's security costs are leaked = **malinformation** = true but taken out of context to make her look bad: all leaders need to pay for security services

Deepfakes, also known as fabricated content, include computer-generated audio and video designed to impersonate a real person. Clearly there is a bad intention, as with deliberately mislabelled content. This is particularly common for images and videos. Watch out for mislabelled or misunderstood satire and parody too.

GOOD PEOPLE SOMETIMES SHARE BAD THINGS

DEFINITIONS

'Truth bias'

The human tendency to believe others. The term has its origin in psychology: various experiments have shown that humans are much more gullible than we perceive ourselves to be. It has also been theorised that this is not a bad thing, given that complex societies rely on trust, cooperation, problem solving, and trade. Many people assume others are honest because they don't think of deception as a possibility during communication. Psychologists have observed that when falsehoods are repeated enough, most people have a tendency to accept them as fact.

See also **'truth default theory'**. Additional info: ***https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg24532700-300-why-the-human-race-may-be-less-gullible-than-you-think/***

Churnalism

'Churnalism' is closely related to plagiarism and fake news and involves desk-based journalists who are too busy (or lazy) to do their own newsgathering. They copy and paste or rewrite internet-based research, other people's original journalism, memes, or material from a press release. To some degree, this has always gone on in journalism, but as newsroom budgets are squeezed, the phenomenon appears to be on the rise. At its best, journalism involves original research, interviews, and factchecking across multiple sources.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

One of the consequences of disinformation is that it gets people arguing. And people can be abusive online towards those who they believe are wrong. Even if the people you are virtually shouting at are not good at factchecking, being rude doesn't change people's minds. For journalists and professional communicators, you need to dig deeper to connect with your audience, and understand why they believe falsehoods. More on page 28.

North Macedonia > USA > UK > Russia > Moldova

In 2016 an unemployed graduate called Tamara who works at a 'click farm' writes a story about Muslims in Britain attacking women. It gets widely shared on Facebook and generates a media storm.

USA > Nigeria > Somalia

Joseph Mercola, an anti-vaccine entrepreneur who makes his money from dietary supplements, creates a pseudoscientific antivax meme. A Pentecostalist pastor in California likes the anti-science message, and shares the post, which is picked up both by a pastor at a Lagos megachurch and al Shabaab, an armed Islamist terror group who translate it into Somali. Variants of the message also appear in the UK and Moldova.

Sources: ***https://www.channelnewsasia.com/cna-insider/paid-troll-army-hire-philippines-social-media-elections-influencers-2917556***

New Russian propaganda entertains, confuses and overwhelms the audience... It is also rapid, continuous, and repetitive, and it lacks commitment to consistency.

Source: ***https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html*** (accessed 2016)

Syria > Russia > UK > Moldova
RT and Sputnik falsely accuse volunteers in occupied Syria of being terrorists. The story is picked up by conspiracy theorists and alternative news sources, and US alt-right commentators. Several years later, these stories are still retweeted.

Russia > China > Europe
China's foreign ministry repeats false Russian claims about the presence of US biological weapons in Ukraine via social media. Unwittingly, it gets picked up by conspiracy theorists both on the far right and the far left.

Philippines > USA >Europe
A 'spam factory' in the Philippines manages to get a 'Plandemic' conspiracy video shared millions of times on Facebook, despite owners of the videos being banned. Some pro-Putin content also shared via these networks.

Hate speech

Whilst there is no universal, specific definition of hate speech in international law, the Oxford English Dictionary describes it as 'abusive or threatening speech or writing that expresses prejudice against a particular group, especially on the basis of race, religion, or sexual orientation.'

Laws to combat hate speech exist in most countries. There is a long history of hate speech linked to disinformation as a precursor to genocide and other large scale human rights abuse. As well as dehumanising language, fabricated stories play on genuine fears: e.g. falsely accusing targeted groups of abuse of children.

INTERNET RESEARCH AGENCY

DEFINITIONS

Troll
In Norse folklore, a troll is an ugly, malevolent giant with magical powers. In English, the word has become slang for an online bully; someone who makes off-message, provocative, negative, or hateful comments in discussion forums, or on comment threads and social media.

Troll farm (also **troll factory**)
Organised institutions that produce and share fake news, hate speech, and divisive content for political ends. They use fake identities (often stealing online identities) and automated messages (bots) to spread targeted disinformation. Not to be confused with a 'click farm', where people are paid for positive reviews and 'likes'. Significant troll farms with an international reach have also been reported in the Philippines, China and North Macedonia.

Probably the world's most famous troll farm, the St Petersburg disinformation centre was founded around 2013, and at one point employed at least 1,000 people. As well as creating Russian language disinformation over the invasions of Ukraine, it spread polarising messages on a range of topics including vaccines, the 2016 US presidential election, and Brexit. A number of real-life rallies, organised by fake 'grassroots' organisations created by the agency (with names like Citizens Before Refugees, Florida Goes Trump and Trump Is Not My President) took place in America.

In February 2023, Yevgeny Prigozhin, founder of the Wagner mercenary group admitted inventing and running the group.

Source: ***https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/02/14/battles-in-vuhledar-bakhmut-signal-imminent-russian-offensive-analysts-say-a80222***

'Coordinated inauthentic behaviour'
The term used by Facebook to describe 'coordinated efforts to manipulate public debate for a strategic goal where fake accounts are central to the operation'.

Source: ***https://www.snopes.com/articles/366947/coordinated-inauthentic-behavior/***

Objective journalism
Reporting that focuses on the facts rather than the opinions or biases of the journalist or organisation they work for. This is widely seen as an ambition of best practice international journalism, although it is generally understood that biases will always creep in: for example, story selection is based on editorial decisions which are made by humans.

Hyperpartisan journalism
News outlets which are extremely biased towards a particular ideology, politician or movement. Examples include pro-Trump, pro-Kremlin, or pro-market news outlets. The tendency towards hyperpartisan journalism is often associated with online media, but this form of journalism has a long history.

Mainstream media (also MSM)
Traditional news brands. The term is sometimes used pejoratively by people on both the far right and the far left of the political spectrum (as well as conspiracy theorists of all kinds), who believe that mainstream news outlets collude to keep some stories quiet, and promote others. The term is somewhat vague, given the range of media which exist in democracies around the world. People on the left tend to believe that big corporations ensure that the media bias is very right wing and pro-market; those on the right tend to believe that liberal media elites control the media and that the media has a left-wing bias. Both groups often work hard to ensure that their stories end up in the mainstream media, which can include both large conglomerates like News Corp, and public broadcasters like the BBC.

Editorial interference
This can include direct censorship from governments on media houses, harassment of journalists and editors, owner interference to block stories or encourage negative reporting of business rivals, and the closing down of titles that do not adhere to the 'party line'.

Self-censorship
Over time editorial interference often leads to self-censorship where reporters and others come to understand that they can only cover certain 'approved' subjects, and in a particular biased way.

Editorial independence
A situation when journalists are free to investigate and report on the issues they decide are important to audiences without any form of editorial interference. Rarely achieved.

SOURCE

The practice of Macedonian 'troll farms' has been widely covered in international media. 140 fake US news sites were said to be operating out of Veles.
https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190528-i-was-a-macedonian-fake-news-writer

https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo#.hcRNEk6Ox

Not to be confused with a 'click farm' (where people are paid for positive reviews and 'likes')

THE MAIN EFFORT OF RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA LANGUAGE IS TO GIVE THE IMPRESSION THAT THERE IS STILL NO WAR.

Source: Aleksandra Arkhipova, in Global Voices: ***https://globalvoices.org/2023/02/05/the-main-effort-of-russian-propaganda-language-is-to-give-the-impression-that-there-is-still-no-war/***

Sean Foster | Unsplash

LOADED LANGUAGE

DEFINITIONS

'Newspeak'

A form of euphemistic 'double language' used by politicians and others to disguise their true intentions. By dishonestly inserting phrases that contradict the real meanings of actions, some communicators have the power to gain consent for their actions. For example, people might support 'the pacification of a country' whereas they might not agree with 'the invasion of a country'.

EDITOR'S NOTE:
Newspeak was a fictional double language used by English writer George Orwell in his novel 1984. However, this was based on observations of how language was used by those in power. Many people believe that newspeak is still with us. Orwell's essay '***Politics and the English Language***' covers the deliberate misuse of language well.

Style guide

Should you capitalise Prime Minister? Do you write EU or European Union? Is the word 'xxxxx' offensive, or is it right for your audience? Most media outlets have a style guide to answers this kind of question. As well as ensuring consistency of language, a good style guide helps you communicate your news values and to explain big editorial decisions. Some titles, like the Economist and the New York Times, publish their style guides.

Editorial values (sometimes news values)

What kind of stories should you cover? And how? These questions are guided by your organisation's editorial values. Accuracy, impartiality, and fairness are relatively common, but others are more specific subject or geographical areas. A Comrat news outlet, for instance, will obviously cover Gagauzian affairs more closely.

Language can be a battleground; there is a long history of corrupt or authoritarian governments switching the meanings of words around in order to justify or cover up their actions. Your job as a conflict sensitive communicator is to use accurate and precise language in order to be as neutral as possible. So you'll need to be able to spot euphemistic language.

Euphemistic language exists in all walks of life; advertisers use them so much that we don't even notice that our sofa is not made of vinyl, but 'faux leather'; that our shampoo ingredients list 'aqua' instead of water' or that a second-hand car is a 'retro preloved vehicle'.

It's not just PR people who use this kind of spin. In one 2005 study doctors were found to be telling patients: "There's fluid in your lungs because your heart isn't pumping well," rather than the more alarming "you have heart failure."

In each case there is a subtle, deliberate attempt to mislead. Whilst these examples may raise a smile, military disinformation can lead to people being killed and impunity for those responsible.

It is very important that media houses develop a style guide which reflects their editorial values. By ensuring that the language you use is clear and precise you can avoid the 'framing' of a conflict by those involved.

A famous recent example is the invasion of Ukraine by Russia. It led to two armies becoming engaged in a series of land, sea, and air battles: tanks, rockets, and bombs. Hundreds of thousands of troops have been killed or injured.

Yet it is described as a 'special military operation'. Russian journalists who use accurate terms like 'invasion' are charged with 'discrediting the Russian army' and can be jailed for up to 15 years.

EDITOR'S NOTE:
A lot of famous quotes are misattributed. In some cases, we may never know who said things first. The reasons are varied: a lack of primary sources mean that we will never know who said what. We can safely assume, for instance, that some wise quotes falsely attributed to Stalin were the work of terrified underlings.

Nick Raistrick

> ***Defenceless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called pacification.***
>
> Source: George Orwell, Politics and the English Language

LOADED LANGUAGE	MORE ACCURATE TERM	BACKGROUND
'Collateral damage'	Accidental killing of civilians by soldiers and airmen	Term originated during Vietnam war, used by US military
Surgical strikes, precision bombing	Missile strike or bombing	Terms used by the US coalition forces during the invasion of Iraq. In fact, some 'surgical strikes' did not hit their target and killed children
Enhanced interrogation	Torture, abuse	11 American soldiers were found guilty of charges including aggravated assault over Abu Ghraib torture and prisoner abuse in 2003/4
Line of contact	Battle front	Russian military language has focused on pretending there is no war in Ukraine, hence this inaccurate euphemism.
Liberated	Invaded, captured	This phrase has a very long history of misuse. The specific meaning of liberation only applies where people were not free
Special military operation	Invasion of Ukraine	It has been said that many Russian soldiers genuinely believed that they would be welcomed by Ukrainians, such was the power of propaganda leading up to the invasion
Liberation mission	War	Be accurate. An invasion of a sovereign state is not a liberation mission, but an act of war

SCENARIO EXERCISE

How should true public service journalists describe Ukrainian troops fighting against Russian soldiers?

OPTION 1
Brave soldiers because they are defending Ukraine from fascism

OPTION 2
Cowardly soldiers because they are attacking innocent Ukrainians

OPTION 3
Journalists shouldn't describe soldiers at all, just describe the facts

OPTION 4
Describing the soldiers can help our understanding of the conflict

FEEDBACK

Public service and 'conflict sensitive' journalists should think of their audience first and foremost, and aim to report on their behalf. Not taking sides is an important part of this, so words like 'cowardly' and 'brave' should not be used in news bulletins, for example.

Whilst this may not be right for a news bulletin, many ethical reporters and editors would think that is okay to describe the soldiers. There is a long history of war correspondents giving colour in their reports and 'humanising' combatants. It is both factually accurate and an important part of reporting the story that many of the troops on the 'Russian' side are mercenaries from Chechnya and Syria, for example, and that others are Russian prisoners who had been found guilty of violent crimes such as murder and rape. It's also true that many soldiers on both the Ukrainian and Russian sides were, until recently, not employed as professional soldiers and worked in 'regular' jobs.

DEFINITION

Staged incidents and crisis actors

According to conspiracy theorists, certain events portrayed in the news are 'staged incidents' played by 'crisis actors'. This fanciful and false idea has a long history, but has boomed in the internet age. The 2012 Sandy Hook mass shootings (in the US) were claimed to have been staged by actors, on behalf of the anti-gun lobby. The idea that real events could be portrayed as fake appears to have appealed to Russian authorities who, in 2018, falsely claimed that Britain staged chemical attacks in Syria, and in 2022 falsely claimed that Ukrainians had staged an invasion.

THE BIGGEST VICTIM OF RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION IS THE RUSSIAN PEOPLE

DEFINITIONS

Hybrid aggression (sometimes 'hybrid warfare')
A mix of conventional, 'physical' warfare with other elements such as 'fake news', terrorism, targeted diplomacy, dark PR, foreign electoral intervention, and cyberwarfare.

'Thinkpiece'
Any article offering opinions, analysis, or discussion of an issue as opposed to bare facts. Closely associated with newspapers, but blogs often play a similar role. Internationally, most editorial guidelines state that comment and news should be clearly separated.

SCENARIO EXERCISE

You are a newspaper editor based in Chișinău. A junior colleague has written a thinkpiece called 'Truth is the first casualty of war'. What feedback would you give?

OPTION 1
This is correct, governments start to make false claims when a conflict starts. It's a good theme

OPTION 2
Maybe you could update them with some more recent examples of pre-conflict propaganda

OPTION 3
As it's an opinion piece, you shouldn't make any changes

OPTION 4
Tell them to stick to the facts

FEEDBACK

Firstly, there is a long tradition of opinion pieces in newspapers around the world. It's very important to distinguish between news and opinion, and label clearly. Terms like 'opinion', 'my view' and 'editorial' are useful markers.

The challenge here is that this old phrase doesn't reflect the fact that disinformation campaigns begin long before the shooting starts. The idea of some false conflict information is to create the conditions where an armed conflict, or the invasion of another country seems like a normal course of action.

For example, many commentators have observed that the Russian disinformation over its invasions of Ukraine started many years before the tanks rolled in. With Russian media having painted Ukraine as a country led by corrupt neo-Nazis, some Russians are genuinely confused that there is objection to its invasion.

The Russian model for propaganda features [a] high numbers of channels and messages and a shameless willingness to disseminate partial truths or outright fictions. In the words of one observer, New Russian propaganda entertains, confuses and overwhelms the audience.

Contemporary Russian propaganda ...[is] also rapid, continuous, and repetitive, and it lacks commitment to consistency.

Source: Rand Corporation report, 2016 ***https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html***

CONFLICT DISINFORMATION BEHAVIOURS

HIGH LEVEL

Direct censorship, fabricated incidents and hate speech, false flag operations, dehumanising the enemy, censorship, completely false stories, harassment of journalists, sockpuppet accounts to influence debate, deep fakes, imposter content (e.g. websites copying another website), denial of atrocities for which there is evidence.

MEDIUM LEVEL

Ultrapartisan reporting, politicians openly criticising journalists, (which can lead to self-censorship and harassment), politicians refusing to speak to journalists, excluding certain voices from news reports, paid trolling.

LOW LEVEL

Spin doctors 'massaging messages', jokes about 'the enemy', politicians refusing to speak to journalists, criticism of experts, sponsored content and 'advertorials' not clearly labelled, comment presented as fact.

EDITOR'S NOTE:
This is very much a personal list. Do you agree? What's missing? Remember that people involved in large-scale disinformation campaigns use a wide range of techniques. Also that the sheer volume of posts can be quite huge; just like spammers who try and scam users out of their money, disinformation campaigners can produce a mind boggling volume of fake messages. Also, some disinformation behaviour is indirect: ultrapartisan reporting leads to disinformation over time.

Mads Schmidt Rasmussen | Unsplash

CONFLICT LANGUAGE: US/THEM - GULF WAR

George Bush Presidential Library and Museum

During times of violent conflict, language changes. Even without direct censorship, a kind of 'us/them' language often creeps in. Dehumanising the enemy through language is common in conflict.

Often, you can only notice it when you step outside your own conflict: it can be hard to spot your own biases. So spend time looking at how other conflicts are covered and avoid the pitfalls of biased reporting.

If you are guilty of churnalism, you are likely to be copying somebody else's bias. Be particularly careful over language: if you call the invasion of a sovereign state, a *'special military operation'* you are being factually incorrect. This can damage your credibility and reputation for independence.

Instead use plain, accurate language, and avoid euphemisms (more on p16).

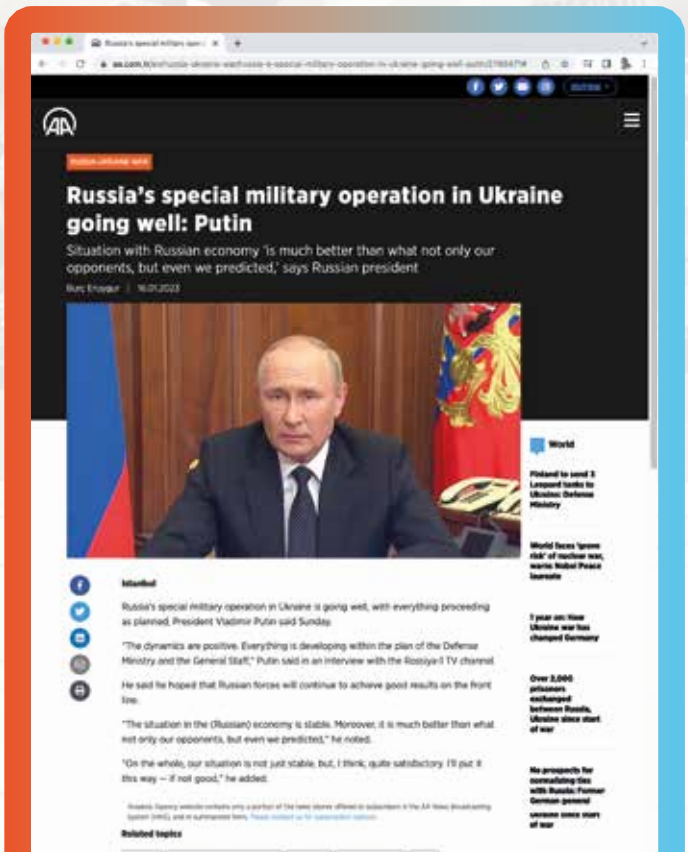
CASE STUDY

An analysis of British media coverage of the second Gulf War by the Guardian newspaper showed that while British soldiers were often or usually defined in much of the press as, *'lion-hearted boys'* and *'resolute lads'*, the Iraqi troops were *'brainwashed troops'* and *'fanatical hordes'*.

British forces were reported as launching, *'pre-emptive first strikes'*, but the *'bastards of Baghdad'* apparently launched 'sneak missile attacks without provocation'. The Western (US, UK and other) army, navy and air forces would *'precision bomb'*, sometimes causing *'collateral damage'*, while the *'Iraqi war machine'* would *'fire wildly at anything in the skies'*, causing *'civilian casualties'*.

The *'brave'* American troops were *'loyal to George Bush'*, who was *'resolute, statesmanlike'*, and 'at peace with [themselves]', while the *'ruthless Iraqi mad dogs'* were *'blindly obedient to Saddam Hussein'*, the *'demented crackpot monster'* and *'evil tyrant'*.

Ironically, the *'confident, yet cautious'* allies were reported to have *'reporting guidelines'* and *'press briefings'*, while the *'desperate'* and *'cornered'* Iraqis were said to have *'censorship'* and *'propaganda'*.



A LIE CAN TRAVEL AROUND THE WORLD AND BACK AGAIN WHILE THE TRUTH IS LACING UP ITS BOOTS

Source: Mark Twain.
Factcheck: It probably wasn't Mark Twain who said this.
More on famous misquotations here:
https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/26/books/famous-misquotations.html

We need to train people to identify fake news. To identify and raise questions, and to find better inform.

We have been highly impacted by Russian propaganda. We've been raised with it, and it's under our skin. It's hard to take it off, it will take a long time to educate our society to understand what's true and what isn't.

Luminița, Journalism Student, Chișinău

David McLeod

INTERVIEW WITH VALERIU PASHA

DEFINITION

Primary source
An original object, document, diary, recording, or any other source of information. For journalists: your own original interview is a primary source, a quote grabbed from another media outlet isn't. This concept is also important for historians.

I'm the chairperson of the WatchDog.MD community. Our main work is countering disinformation and other malign influences. We address Kremlin-sponsored disinformation in Moldova. We do research, factchecking, and mapping.

We try to make countering fake news interesting, and we try to explain how the creators of fake news are fooling the public.

But we try to do it in an accessible way, through different media and humour.

As well as different organisers and influencers based in Russia there are also local media influencers sponsored by local kleptocrat groups. Channels include social media, TikTok, Telegram, Facebook, Instagram as well as Russian channels like Odnoklassniki and Vkontakte.

There's also disinformation via traditional media, like broadcasting from Russia. It's sometimes also spread via YouTube and other online platforms like [Russian language portal] mail.ru, [search engine] Yandex, and Russian language video sharing sites.

Russian disinformation and propaganda comes from Moscow. There are a few people directly in the President's administration responsible for media policy who are designing, redesigning and adapting different narratives. As well as many more who are amplifying these in different formats – news, opinion, post, tweets, debates, op-eds. Inside and outside Russia, in all possible languages. But the chief propagandist is Putin himself.

In the 2021 elections we built resilience over fake news. Most people blamed and shamed those who were responsible.

Not everything is perfect, but I'm optimistic.

Both in Moldova and internationally, we are dealing with this better. We are more conscious about the disinformation phenomenon. But there is a lot to be done. Disinformation actors are adapting quickly.

We are responsive, but with time we may be able to be more preventative.

IN THE 2021 ELECTIONS WE BUILT RESILIENCE OVER FAKE NEWS. MOST PEOPLE BLAMED AND SHAMED THOSE WHO WERE RESPONSIBLE.

KNOWING YOUR AUDIENCE

Across the world, media organisations spend huge amounts of time, effort, and money on research to find out as much as possible about their audience's habits.

When do they log on? What content do they like? What makes them switch to a competitor? What kind of stories do they respond to?

Social media algorithms do something similar. Even if you aren't in a position to commission your own research, knowing your audience is at the heart of successful communication. Being tuned in to audience needs, expectations, and habits is vital.

Of course, it's important to be editorially independent. And you should avoid clickbait journalism, if you want to develop a reputation as a trustworthy supplier of news and current affairs.

But your news output should reflect your audience and what they are most likely to be interested in. Moldovan farming communities are more likely to be interested in the weather forecast than share prices, say. Whether the news you produce is of interest to your audience is certainly a newsroom conversation you should be having...

SCENARIO EXERCISE

You work at a media house that produces newspapers, websites, and podcasts.

You want to cover a story doing the rounds on social media that Romania is 'stealing' rain from Moldova by sending in aircraft that spray clouds. How best should you cover it?

OPTION 1
This is a big story. It's front-page news

OPTION 2
Put it in your weekly round up of fake news, but make sure you speak to a meteorological expert

OPTION 3
Do a peak time discussion programme so that you get all views on the subject

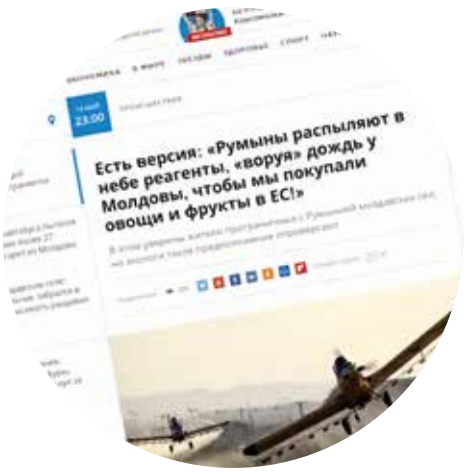
OPTION 4
A straight factcheck will do the job

FEEDBACK

Incredibly, just over five per cent of Moldovan people believed this entirely false story, according to a Watchdog.md poll; another variation is that Moldova is stealing rain from Transnistria. How you would go about debunking this in the most effective way depends on your audience.

We know that some audiences just don't respond well to 'being factchecked' once they believe something. And giving this fairly old fake story a front-page slot is likely to give it even more prominence: you risk amplifying the story. The problem with giving everybody the chance to discuss this provably false story is that you risk 'false balance' [see p52], and giving the fake story more credibility. You need to make an editorial judgement, and let your audience know this rumour is false.

In this case, a meteorologist might be a useful expert voice to explain the impossibility of 'stealing' rain. They are politically neutral and credible: but make sure they can explain things in plain language. This is where your contacts book comes in (see p9).



SCENARIO EXERCISE

You are a hard-working freelance investigative reporter, and for the last few weeks you've been on the road covering a story on conflict disinformation. You are proud of your in-depth investigation, which is due to be broadcast on Ziarul de Garda next week. You think it'll be good enough to get picked up by international media outlets. What should you do next?

OPTION 1
Move on to the next story

OPTION 2
Send a promotional Tweet when you finish work that evening

OPTION 3
Think about where else you can place the story, perhaps an international media outlet

FEEDBACK

For many investigative reporters the instinct to move onto the next story is strong: it's what keeps them going. If you have another paid project lined up, that's great. But you might want to think about promoting your story a bit more.

There was a time when journalists used to be able to leave a lot of decisions to marketing teams and commercial departments; now they normally have to do some promotion themselves. Even high-profile reporters at the biggest international news outlets might find themselves appearing as guests on other programmes to promote a high-profile investigation, for example.

Incidentally, using Twitter might be a useful tool. But research suggests tweeting during the working day is usually most successful: tweeting at night is not seen as a good strategy, even if its convenient. Also, target who you tweet, and ask people to retweet. Maybe your audience isn't using Twitter? How will you reach them?

You need to check the nature of your contract and speak to your editor: but seeking to place the story in other places can be a good idea, both for the people who hired you and your career. Think: how many new viewers might your show get if your story has received international exposure?

EDITOR'S NOTE:
It can take hundreds of hours to do a journalism investigation, so you need to make sure your story gets maximum exposure when it goes live. In the olden days, newspapers would try and scoop each other and be secretive about forthcoming stories: the front page 'splash' would sell papers on the news stand. Given the 24 hour news cycle, that's largely a thing of the past, and big stories tend to be trailed on social media in advance of publication or broadcast.

SOURCE
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-JCd-IdUEj8 the story is factchecked here: ***https://www.veridica.ro/en/fake-news/fake-news-the-republic-of-moldova-steals-transnistrias-gas-and-sells-it-to-ukraine***

John Cameron | Unsplash

UNDERSTANDING THE CULTURE WARS

IN SUMMARY

- **Disinformation actors often exploit existing cultural divisions, and sometimes introduce them**
- **This can be low-level and restricted to online behaviour**
- **However, culture is often used to spread false information about certain groups, as a precursor to direct violence**

DEFINITION

Hate speech
Any words, expressions, or descriptions which show contempt for a specific group or ethnicity, or which calls for their death or destruction. It can be broadcast, printed, or published online or via mobile devices. Although common in conflict reporting, it is often illegal and can potentially be a crime against humanity.

Culture wars
The term is often associated with US politics and divisive issues which are known to cause arguments. These are particularly exploited online during election periods. They include abortion, gun politics, separation of church and state, privacy, homosexuality, and censorship.

Russian state actors will often amplify culture wars disagreements. Getting people angry about immigration, Black Lives Matter, or trans issues is an important technique: when people are angry, they are less prone to factchecking.

Globally, culture wars can take on many forms, from African tribal politics to Indian Hindu nationalism. Homophobic and misogynistic rhetoric is common around the world, often dressed up as appeals to 'traditional family values'.

Hate humour is a specific branch of hate speech that involves telling jokes about outsider groups. This has always been around in some way, as part of the process of dehumanising your enemies. The study of Nazi humour is an emerging academic field, for example. It illustrates how much ordinary Germans knew about atrocities.

Modern online humour is common amongst far right groups. The idea is that when challenged, those who speak out can be accused of being humourless. It can be fairly sinister: a comedy programme about a group of people staging chemical attacks was made for Syrian TV. The chemical attacks were real, but by playing to the false information that the White Helmets staged these atrocities the regime managed to cast doubt on events. It can be seen as an example of cultural violence.

Cultural violence is any aspect of culture which legitimises other kinds of violence. This can include songs, jokes, and works of fiction as well as journalism and propaganda. The term is often associated with Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung, who observed the link between cultural violence (e.g. anti African racism), direct violence (e.g. slavery) and structural violence (e.g. apartheid in South Africa).

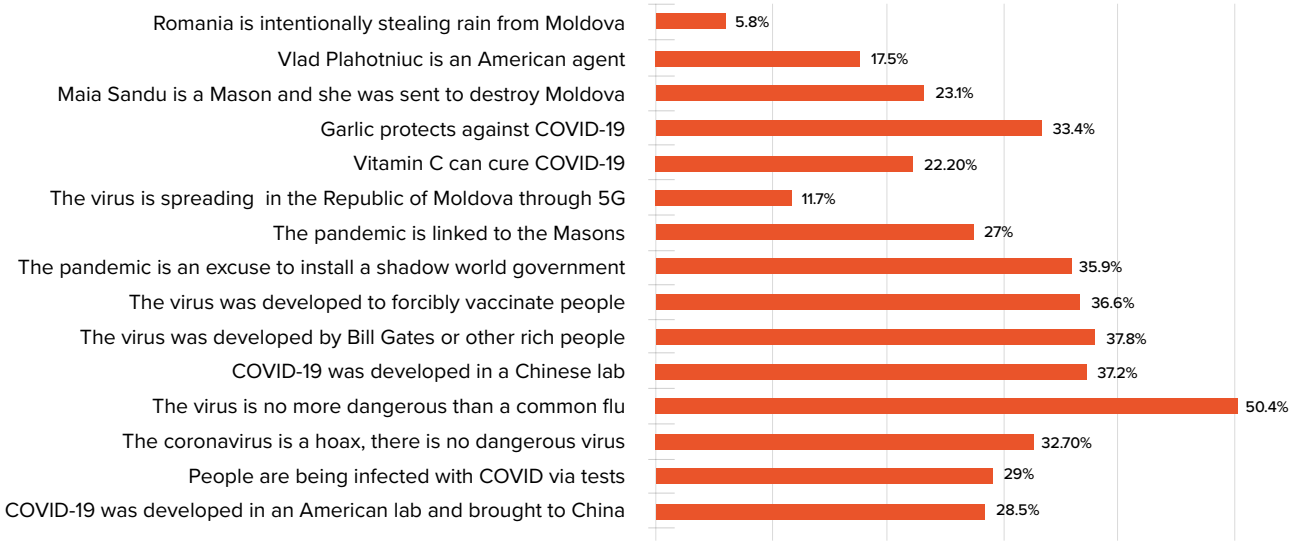
Conflict sensitive communication is based on the idea that people can resolve their conflict through dialogue. It has roots in the conflict resolution theories of people like Johan Galtung, a Norwegian sociologist who believes that we should look beyond our positions on a particular issue, and look to shared interests, as opposed to focusing on the perceived faults of 'the other side'.

Jason Leung | Unsplash

"The radio kept broadcasting messages like 'search for cockroaches – make sure you find them."

Source: During the ***1994 Rwandan Genocide***, radio broadcasts encouraged citizens to take part in the massacre Tutsis. More than a million people died. Some broadcasters were imprisoned for incitement to commit genocide.

COVID-19 disinformation, fake news and other conspiracies in Moldova – sociological data



"One of the most disseminated fake news [items] of that campaign was that Maia Sandu promised Europeans that she would accept 30,000 Syrian immigrants in Moldova. Kremlin propaganda [...] tried to create an apocalyptic image of a genuine barbarian invasion in the face of which Europe was collapsing."

Source: ***https://www.veridica.ro/en/fake-news/fake-news-under-the-leadership-of-maia-sandu-moldovans-are-leaving-and-syrians-are-coming***

Adam Niescioruk | Unsplash

EMOTIONS AND CONFLICT

FORUMS

If you host a forum of any kind, set guidelines:
- **Keep people on-topic**
- **If someone is abusive, warn them**
- **Exclude as a last resort**
- **Watch out for trolls**

Learn how to spot a 'sock puppet' account here: ***https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuciu/2022/03/10/russian-sock-puppets-spreading-misinformation-on-social-media-about-ukraine/***

People share things when they are angry, upset, or feel a great sense of injustice. Or sometimes when they find something funny, often about people on the other side of an ideological divide.

People who spread disinformation know this. They will use emotive issues as a kind of 'Trojan Horse' in order to get people to share false information.

One commonly used technique is for accounts operated on behalf of disinformation actors to lurk on social media, sometimes for years, posting seemingly innocent and agreeable comments and reposting about a particular topic (for example sport) before lurching into another (NATO is evil and Ukraine doesn't exist). Those years spent gathering 'likes' give a false cloak of credibility that a brand new account would fail to muster.

At other times, specific user groups are targeted by disinformation actors based on their interest in clusters of topics. People who have expressed an interest in anti-vaccination campaigns through likes and clicks on Facebook have found themselves targeted by Russian-backed campaigns which include anti-democracy, anti-EU, or anti-NATO messaging.

Some state-backed troll-like behaviour is less focused; it seems the strategic purpose is simply to get people arguing...

EDITOR'S NOTE:
In modern times, much of our interaction and learning comes from a screen. We behave differently online. Social cues are missing, and our behaviour changes. You wouldn't dream of going into a café and shouting at people you disagree with, but the equivalent behaviour frequently happens online. It's not just the big issues, like politics, conflict, and religion where people get angry and abusive. On just about any forum, you will find people getting angry at those with different views: I've even seen a bird-watching online forum get nasty. As professional communicators we need to set standards for good online behaviour, and abide by them.

It can be surprising what can make people angry on the Internet. Some people got upset about the [fictional] 'Fat Controller' from the childrens' TV series ***Thomas the Tank Engine***, after reports that he had been renamed as a result of 'political correctness gone mad'. In fact, the story is fake. As all true Thomas fans know, 'the Fat Controller' is a nickname for Sir Topham Hatt, and both terms are used in the stories.

DEFINITIONS

Impartiality
Impartiality means speaking to all sides, whilst avoiding false balance.

Amplification
In the context of editorial decision-making, amplification means giving a voice and 'amplifying' concepts which may be harmful. For example, if you report on copycat suicides, terrorists or certain kinds of murder you may amplify their cause.

Democracy requires the ability of a population to pay attention long enough to identify real problems, distinguish them from fantasies, come up with solutions, and hold their leaders accountable if they fail to deliver them."

Source: Johann Hari, Stolen Focus

DEFINITIONS

Sock puppet account
A false user identity created to mislead other social media users. There has been a spike in sock puppet accounts created by Russia over the Ukraine conflict, although the practice of book reviews by fictitious critics predates the Internet.

User-generated content, or UGC
Anything created by internet users and shared online, including images, Facebook posts, reviews, and even books: the novel *50 Shades of Grey* started out as fan fiction and went on to sell 150 million copies worldwide and has been translated into 52 languages.

Bots
...short for robots. These are software applications that take over certain simple computer-based tasks. Text bots can hold basic 'conversations' with real users. Some are benign – helping customers with online transactions or IT support, say. However, bots are often used by those carrying out large-scale disinformation campaigns. Like 'Spambots', which harvest user details, or 'troll bots', which falsify traffic and disrupt forums.

Most journalistic codes agree that accuracy, impartiality and fairness are the foundation stones of good journalism.

Source: IWPR handbook

AVOIDING FAKE NEWS

DO

- Use very clear language to label false information
- Say things like: 'There is no evidence for this false claim that has been repeated on social media'
- Make confident editorial decisions...
  ...but acknowledge where there are gaps in data ('according to unconfirmed reports')

DON'T

- Ignore the issue
- Be guilty of 'false balance': you don't need to balance a fact with a false theory (see p52)
- Copy inaccurate euphemistic language – an invasion is not a liberation, and 'denazification' would require a Nazi regime

EDITOR'S NOTE:
Most media outlets in Moldova are privately owned, and relatively small. Self-censorship is relatively common, whereas direct government censorship is rare.

Across the world, situations where pure editorial independence exists are uncommon. In some cases, editorial boards guide decisions; the New York Times has a 14-person editorial board whilst the BBC famously has a board of cross-party governors whose job it is to uphold impartiality and investigate complaints (even though people on both sides of the political spectrum complain that the BBC is biased against them).

Some successful media houses are open about their editorial processes and publish guidelines, actively engaging audiences to challenge them when they fall short of standards. Others simply publish and broadcast what they think will sell newspapers, drive clicks, or are paid to say by their sponsors.

Ehimetalor Akhere Unuabona | Unsplash

SCENARIO EXERCISE

Security services in Moldova's breakaway Transnistria region claim they have thwarted a plot by Ukraine against the entity's leadership. You can't corroborate this.

OPTION 1
This sounds like fake news– possibly a false flag operation to scare people. Ignore it, don't amplify

OPTION 2
This is clearly an aggressive act by Ukraine; you should speak to the highest-level Tiraspol official you can get hold of

OPTION 3
Give some background while you investigate further

OPTION 4
Get someone from the EU to denounce Putin

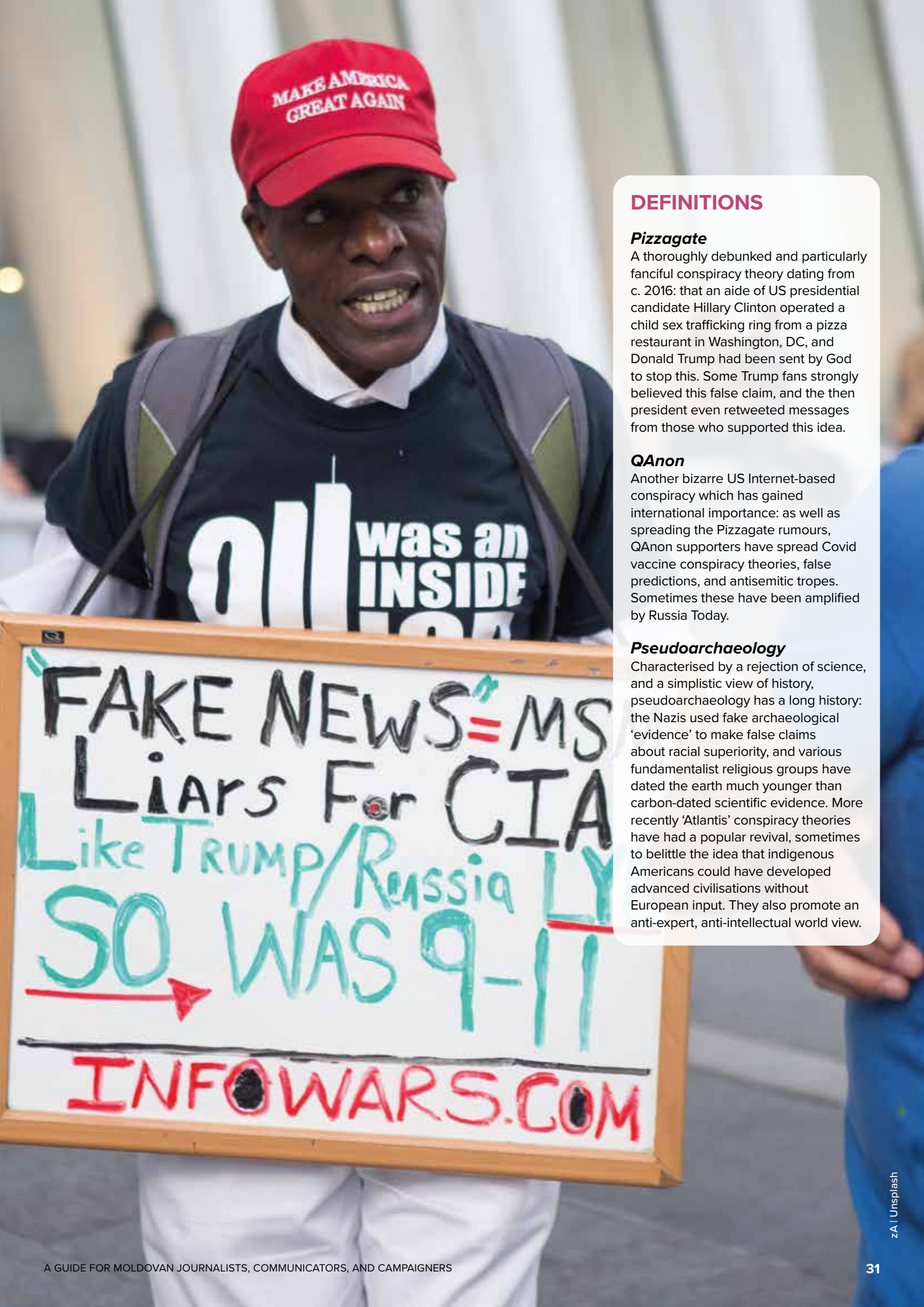
FEEDBACK

Amplifying fake news is, of course, a challenge. Having said that, the emerging consensus among people who aim to combat disinformation is that ignoring false rumours has allowed them to thrive. This is because there are so many spaces where false information can thrive.

And, of course factchecking websites should investigate false claims before dismissing them! Or indeed assuming that it is a genuine attack. Giving some background whilst you investigate further would be useful for your audience. Are the sources making these claims reliable? Have they made similar false statements in the past? Have there been similar plots for which there is evidence in the past? What actual evidence (beyond a statement or 'confession') have been provided?

Getting someone from the EU to denounce Putin would, of course, be false balance. Your job is to stick to the facts. assuming that it is a genuine attack.

This exercise is something of trick question: ultimately, what you should do in this situation very much depends on your audience and editorial values.



zA | Unsplash

DEFINITIONS

Pizzagate
A thoroughly debunked and particularly fanciful conspiracy theory dating from c. 2016: that an aide of US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton operated a child sex trafficking ring from a pizza restaurant in Washington, DC, and Donald Trump had been sent by God to stop this. Some Trump fans strongly believed this false claim, and the then president even retweeted messages from those who supported this idea.

QAnon
Another bizarre US Internet-based conspiracy which has gained international importance: as well as spreading the Pizzagate rumours, QAnon supporters have spread Covid vaccine conspiracy theories, false predictions, and antisemitic tropes. Sometimes these have been amplified by Russia Today.

Pseudoarchaeology
Characterised by a rejection of science, and a simplistic view of history, pseudoarchaeology has a long history: the Nazis used fake archaeological 'evidence' to make false claims about racial superiority, and various fundamentalist religious groups have dated the earth much younger than carbon-dated scientific evidence. More recently 'Atlantis' conspiracy theories have had a popular revival, sometimes to belittle the idea that indigenous Americans could have developed advanced civilisations without European input. They also promote an anti-expert, anti-intellectual world view.

CONFLICT SENSITIVE REPORTING VERSUS WAR REPORTING

DEFINITION

Conflict resolution
How and why do conflicts end? There are various conflict resolution theories, as well as analysis around successful resolution processes around the world. Whilst conflicts, and their resolution vary around the world there is some consensus that diplomacy, communication, negotiation, mediation and an understanding of the positions, interests, and common ground all help.

Zero sum *(view of a conflict)*
This can be expressed as 'for me to win you have to lose', with nothing in-between possible. Although widespread in culture (particularly myths and movies), this is widely seen as a false view of conflict resolution. Conflict resolution does not end with 'the other side' vanquished, this simply represses a conflict.

Picture a war correspondent. Perhaps he is hard-drinking, risk taking, and cynical. He works alone, dashing from one conflict to another, always close to the action. He understands battlefield tactics and he knows which side is going to win the war. And obviously, he is a 'he'. Right?

As with all Hollywood stereotypes there perhaps was once some truth in this myth of a war reporter, mixed with exaggeration, and some downright falsehoods. There have always been attempts to exclude women from the frontline, for example. But pioneering female journalists like Ida B. Wells and Margaret Fuller have been covering conflict since the 19th century.

Today, the best editors expect more than dashing prose from a handful of globetrotting star reporters. They want an in-depth understanding of the conflict, seen from all sides. They want local expertise. And the best editors will want an understanding of the peace processes as well as what's happening on the battlefield.

The conflict sensitive reporter understands their role in the conflict and is aware that impartial reporting is important: they will spot spin and avoid repeating the loaded, inaccurate language sometimes used by conflict actors.

But they will tell a story with compassion, and not pretend that atrocities are okay. They will avoid stereotyping and look beyond the simplistic narratives that can sometimes frame a conflict; they will examine their own prejudices, and try to speak those on all sides of a conflict, including the full range of people – including civilians - affected by it.

Finally, it has been said that to report on war without an understanding of how conflicts end is like reporting on a football match without understanding the laws of the game.

The best conflict sensitive reporters will think outside of their own conflict and draw upon learning from how past conflicts have been effectively resolved, as opposed to simply repressed when one side 'wins' on the battlefield.

Conflict sensitive reporters know that a military victory is not the same as the end of the conflict. Even a negotiated ceasefire can lead to a further violence, as with the end of the First World War. And some conflicts seem to rumble on in uneasy stalemate. It can take decades for conflicts to end, and the process usually involves multi-track diplomacy, working with combatants, and dialogue.

IWM

A WELL WRITTEN PIECE OF NEWS ISN'T DESIGNED TO MAKE YOU FEEL ANGRY.

Source: original interview with Maia Metaxa
Director, Moldova School of Journalism

Fedorenko | Unsplash

NEWSROOM DECISIONS AND THINKING LIKE AN EDITOR

DEFINITION

To 'spike' a story

To reject a story for editorial reasons: best at the earliest stage possible, before you spend time on it. Actual spikes (and actual paper) are no longer a big feature of most newsrooms. Typical reasons for spiking a story include lack of evidence, the fact that the story has already been covered, or a lack of public interest.

Editorial team meetings

Traditionally face-to-face meetings held in the newsroom, these set the tone for the day. Scared reporters pitching ideas to a terrifying editor can now happen via Zoom, although meetings may also be more collaborative.

Active measures

With origins in 1920s Soviet operations overseas, this term has historically encompassed political assassinations, support of guerrilla groups, and of course, disinformation. These continue: politically divisive ads reached 126 million US Facebook users, according to 2017 Senate Testimony, whilst tweets by the Kremlin-backed Internet Research Agency reached approximately 288 million American users.

Amin Moshrefi | Unsplash

How to spot fake news in ten seconds

Editorial team meetings are usually very short. People are busy. It takes an experienced editor just a few seconds to spike a story or decide to allocate reporter time to it. Even if you never set foot in a newsroom, these almost instant 'deverification' skills can be learnt and are useful whatever kind of role you work in.

1. What's the story? And is it too good to be true?

For example, if it were possible to gargle away coronavirus with warm water, there'd be no need for lockdowns and vaccines. This was amongst the fake rumours put out during the pandemic.

2. Or too bad to be true?

If Maia Sandu really was a mason sent to destroy Moldova, it really would be terrible. The worst possible thing. Almost too bad to be true: but like the Pizzagate scandal, or centuries-old false stories about religious groups people wanting to murder your children in order to drink their blood, these terrible tales are untrue. Think about 'confirmation bias': people believe bad things about their ideological enemies.

3. What's the source?

No, the actual source... Where did this information come from? Not the sharer, your friend or colleague, who is a trustworthy, reliable, person. But the original source whom you don't know at this stage. This is where your OSINT skills might come in, although in most cases you don't need to do this. Instead:

4. Use a fact-checker

Using a reputable fact-checking site like ***https://stopfals.md***, or Poynter Institute's ***Politifact*** will save time, as most fake news has already been fact-checked by someone, somewhere. Some global news outlets are considered reputable and apply factchecking techniques, like the newswires - Reuters and AP (see previous page).

5. Watch out for false experts

People with a PhD in engineering, for example, aren't best qualified to talk about ballistics. It won't stop them, and in fact people with an academic background in a different subject can be quite effective at convincing non-academics that their theories are correct. In one famous case a prominent international anti vaxxer with UN credentials and a 'Dr' prefix to their name turned out to be a veterinarian.

6. Discard the truth wrapper in any new information you receive

People who spread fake news and generate conspiracy theories often mix fact and fiction. So yes, there are 5G phone networks in Romania and many other countries, but it doesn't have anything to do with Covid-19.

7. Why is this being shared?

Often it can be quite easy to spot the motive of the person posting the information. Are they selling a product, or an ideology? Or are they motivated by making the EU, the Russian Federation, or the US look bad?

8. Where has this appeared?

If you hear something on the BBC, or a TeleRadio-Moldova, you can be sure that it's been fact-checked by an actual journalist as part of a thorough editorial process. Mistakes are made, but generally corrected quickly. In contrast, an article on a blogging platform like Medium, or a YouTube video, Facebook post, or a piece in a news outlet you haven't heard of, might have had little editorial filter. Outlets that are effectively self-published are often less accurate than those that have been rigorously edited.

9. Watch out for WhatsApp (and Telegram)

One of the reasons people like instant messaging services like WhatsApp, Signal, and Telegram is because they are encrypted: so anonymous and secure. But this also makes the original source of a message very hard to trace. Many conflict stories which have been flagged as false information on Twitter, reappear on messaging services like Signal.

10. 'Shhh, the mainstream media are too scared/biased/dumb to cover this' reads the headline to an advertisement.

Or 'the medical industry don't want you to know this simple cure for xxx.' The cure it describes has already been covered extensively already and debunked. This is clickbait. The 'mainstream media' are in competition for stories that appeal to audiences, and do not work together to shut down items that might attract an audience. In fact anyone who uses the phrase 'mainstream media' as if they are a single entity should set your alarm bells ringing.

Nick Raistrick

11. 'Look, they are so scared of this story, they finally had to cover it'
(Is the Part Two of 10). The problem is sometimes that the buzz about a fake news item or conspiracy theory means the mainstream media is 'forced to deny' something. Or, to put it another way, to disprove. Frustratingly, this can amplify the story: this way millions of people learn about fringe conspiracy theories through mainstream news outlets.

12. Check the labelling
Video content is often shared with the wrong label, in order to mislead audiences. One famous example involves footage of a 2013 film shoot for a British science fiction movie: pro-Russian social media accounts said that it was proof that the invasion of Ukraine was staged and that these were 'crisis actors'.

13. Here's the science bit...
Is there some science or technology you don't understand? Run it by someone else, who specialises in the topic. For example, the fake news story about the Romanians stealing Moldovan rain is not possible. If you have a meteorologist in your contacts book, they'll explain why...

OSINT IS NOT HACKING...

DEFINITIONS

OSINT
Short for 'open-source intelligence investigative techniques'. It means using publicly available material and online tools in order to verify (or falsify) information. A vital skill for investigative journalists today.

Digital footprint
Sometimes known as a 'digital shadow', this is the traceable evidence of a person's Internet activity and is important for OSINT investigations. Often divided into the active (things like Facebook posts and likes which the user opts into) and the passive (which a user may not be aware of, such as a search history).

Geolocation
Software and techniques used to find the location of a person or a thing. Journalists can locate a person by an IP address on a computer or mobile they are using. Geolocation has been used by reporters to find buildings, 'hidden' graves and the sources of missile launchers.

IP address
This is a unique identifier which is used by devices that connect to the internet. IP is short for Internet Protocol, the set of rules which define how data is sent from one 'computer' (whether iPhone, laptop, smartwatch) to another, and an IP address looks something like this: 109.181.203.169.

Bellingcat
An investigative, OSINT, and fact-checking group, based in Holland, launched in 2014 by British citizen journalist and blogger Eliot Higgins. He developed fact-checking techniques using publicly available data: for example, comparing satellite imagery to 'official' footage from the Syrian war to prove that cluster bombs and chemical weapons were being used. Bellingcat has factchecked several false claims relating to the Ukrainian conflict. It's worth following as they explain their research methods clearly and in detail.

It's the use of information which is available online in order to investigate an issue. For reporters it involves using online tools to verify parts of a story: although the term has its roots in military intelligence.

Whereas hacking is associated with unauthorised access to computer systems, OSINT involves accessing information which is already in the public domain. It's a vital tool for today's investigative journalist, and some of the biggest scoops of recent years have involved OSINT.

Although it is often citizen journalists and campaigners who are getting involved with OSINT, the online tools used in an OSINT investigation are usually freely available. Anybody can look at a video on YouTube and observe the serial numbers on missiles or compare historical weather data to disprove claims made about specific conflict incidents.

The war in Ukraine is being factchecked in real-time, with an online army of investigators checking claims made by both sides. Some tools are very simple – like learning to analyse Twitter data, for example. Most of the commonly-used tools require downloading some fairly basic new software. Many tools are free and very easy to use, and there are YouTube tutorials for a lot of these.

But you can go in pretty deep: there are more than a dozen geolocation tools, for example, but most journalists will only ever use a handful. Building OSINT skills involves a lot of self-teaching, and Googling into what software and techniques work best: see the resources section for some good start points.

SCENARIO EXERCISE

You receive an image anonymously. It features an image of several dead bodies in a street who have been killed by Ukrainian soldiers in Dnipro, according to the caption. To find out whether it is fake or not, what should you do first?

OPTION 1
You should devote all your energy on finding out who sent it. Are they a trusted source?

OPTION 2
You should start with a detailed reverse image search: use TinEye or Google to find out where and when the photograph was taken

OPTION 3
Tap some of the text into a factchecking site

FEEDBACK

Finding out who sent the image is a good instinct. Where are they based? When was it taken? On what device? OSINT tools can, in many cases, answer these questions. But it can be time consuming to trace a source who wishes to remain anonymous, and it is possible for people to cover their tracks.

So, this wouldn't necessarily be the first thing you'd do. A reverse image search is a bit quicker, and there are various types of free software out there to help you do this. Learning how to use Google Images is something you can teach yourself online. But it can still be fairly time consuming.

You need to upload the image, then filter through all the places it has appeared. Therefore, whilst these are both useful techniques, when you think you have a story, the first step would be type in a few key words of the accompanying text and the word 'factcheck'. Most of the time, you'll find that a reputable factchecker, like Associated Press, or AFP will have investigated the story in detail already.

If they haven't, then it's time to use your OSINT skills.

IN WAR, TRUTH IS THE FIRST CASUALTY.

Source: Sometimes attributed to Greek writer/poet Aeschylus (525BC - 456BC)

FURTHER RESOURCES

The ***Columbia University School of Journalism (US)*** and ***Centre for Investigative Journalism (UK)*** both have good comprehensive guides to OSINT for journalists, and ***Bellingcat*** produces topical guides to specific techniques.

Masood Aslami | Unsplash

THE FACTCHECKING MINDSET

DEFINITIONS

Confirmation bias
The tendency for people to filter and process information in such a way as to support their existing beliefs and opinions. We all have experience this to some degree, and it has been observed many forms such as 'belief perseverance' (people continue to believe a falsehood despite evidence) and 'irrational primacy effect' (a loyalty to the first piece of information they hear about a topic).

Echo Chamber
Metaphor to describe an environment where people only come across beliefs similar to their own. Made worse by the Internet, where it's possible to find vast amounts of content to back up your belief, even if they are potentially harmful or based on inaccurate assumptions: racists, terrorists, conspiracy theorists, and climate change deniers tend to find each other online.

Filter bubble
A specific kind of echo chamber, created by algorithms and social media. You are served 'more of the same' content based on your likes, clicks, and follows.

Radical polarisation
The political situation created by people living in echo chambers and filter bubbles. People distrust each other and fail to find common ground, particularly over certain 'hot' political and cultural topics. See also 'the splinternet' and 'cyber-balkanisation'.

EDITOR'S NOTE:
Some factchecking specialists like ***Bellingcat*** and ***Full Fact*** also share their methodology. Note that new factcheckers are appearing all the time, and some fold. Wikipedia's list of factchecking websites can be a useful resource.

The BBC publishes its ***editorial guidelines***, as do many other news organisations. It's a useful resource, albeit suited to a much larger news organisation than exists in Moldova.

Who factchecks the factchecker?
Sometimes this question is asked sarcastically in an online forum to belittle a person who quotes a factchecking website; at other times it's an honest question.

It can be genuinely confusing to know what to trust. It is a particular challenge that some disinformation sites and even political parties copy the look and feel of a fact-checking website. So what should you look for? And who can you trust?

Firstly, a good factchecker is transparent about its sources, the way it is funded and its affiliations; it looks at a wide range of claims and all sides of the story. It will examines discrete claims and reaches conclusions and be clear about its methodology.

Good factchecking sites are also transparent about sources and methods. They will quote from credible and reputable sources – like respected peer-reviewed journals as opposed to unsourced opinion pieces.

They will refer to media outlets which have a reputation for accuracy, balance, and fact checking.

These include certain news agencies, which are collectively known as the 'newswires' or simply the 'wires' in English. The term originates from the Victorian era of 19th-century telegraph wires, when agencies like Reuters (UK), and Associated Press (USA) and Agence France-Presse, (or AFP, based in France) would transmit 'objective' information to newspaper offices around the world.

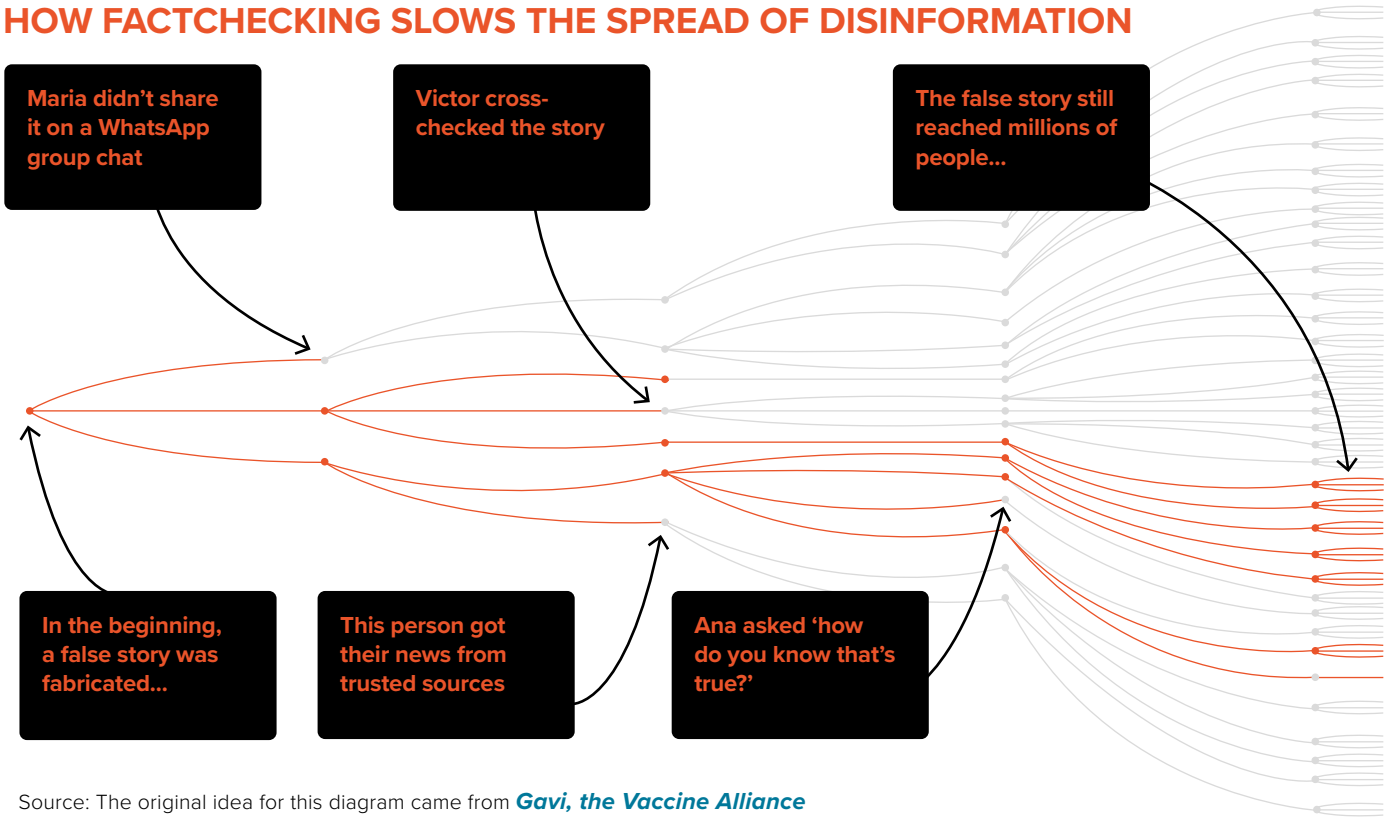
They still exist, albeit digitally, and are usually considered trustworthy sources of news because of their reputation and methodology. State-owned news agencies are not considered as credible, and are often tools of government propaganda.

When quoting news sources, they should be aware of outlets whose extreme political bias is such that they can no longer be considered accurate: Fox News in the US is a good example of a TV station with a big team of reporters and a huge audience, but little credibility due to a lack of balance and accuracy.

Reputable factcheckers include:
- ***https://stopfals.md***
- **Associated Press** ***https://apnews.com/hub/ap-fact-check*** (global, news)
- **Snopes** (US, cultural, myths)
- ***factcheck.org*** (US)
- ***Fullfact.org***
- **BBC** ***https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/reality_check*** (UK)
- ***https://www.factual.ro***
- ***https://www.veridica.ro*** (Romanian focus)

If you feel really strongly about something you read on the Internet, this is a warning sign

HOW FACTCHECKING SLOWS THE SPREAD OF DISINFORMATION



Source: The original idea for this diagram came from ***Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance***

SCENARIO EXERCISE

You are the news editor for a national TV station. There is a rumour that a Russian missile has struck Tiraspol, having flown over Moldovan airspace. Meanwhile Moldovan troops have been spotted on training manoeuvres. You aren't sure whether you should include it in your news bulletin.

OPTION 1
Wait until you get a senior official to comment before mentioning anything. You don't want to cause undue panic

OPTION 2
See what Russian-speaking Telegram is saying

OPTION 3
Once you have two sources, you can go with the story. That's BBC methodology

OPTION 4
Try and speak to an eyewitness

OPTION 5
Ignore the story, and risk losing credibility

FEEDBACK

Firstly, senior figures often refuse to speak to the media. Sometimes this is in the knowledge that some reporters are less likely to cover a story without a quote from them. You don't need a senior figure, although clearly you should try.

Russian-speaking Telegram can be a useful resource for this kind of scenario: but it is not inherently reliable or unreliable, it's just a way of connecting you to sources, some of which are not reliable. A lot of fake news has travelled via Telegram, as well as the occasional 'scoop'.

It's true that the BBC traditionally went with two sources to verify a story: although this was never a golden rule. If your first source is reliable enough, and the story is important enough, you can run with it.
It is, of course, a good idea to speak to an eyewitness. But be aware that they are not always reliable: perhaps they'll describe a gas explosion as a mortar impact, get the numbers of a riot wrong, or assume that people who are lying down wounded are actually 'dead'.

It's certainly true that if the breaking story is getting a lot of attention, ignoring it will make your news outlet look bad. So, alongside your attempts to verify the story, you should consider reporting the rumour but making it clear that you cannot fully verify it. Use phrases like 'according to unconfirmed reports on the internet by xxx' or 'It has been widely reported by some media outlets... but we have not been able to verify.'

Hopefully you spotted the 'red herring' of Moldovan troops being on training manoeuvres. Troops are always on training manoeuvres: it is not usually news. It only becomes newsworthy if they invade another country, say, or there is evidence they are preparing to.

GENDERED DISINFORMATION: FAKE NEWS MEETS PATRIARCHY

GENDERED DISINFORMATION - IN SUMMARY

- Uses false information or manipulation of real information to mislead, confuse and discredit women
- Weaponises gender stereotypes and uses misogynistic narratives
- Labelling women who differ from patriarchal norms as aggressive and dangerous
- Employs a variety of tactics, like posting fake sexualised information, images and videos, or doctoring visuals and memes to discredit and ridicule. Automation further amplifies the attacks
- Aims at polarising public debates to undermine social cohesion and spread fear, ultimately to retain power. It seeks to reshape the terms of political and social discourse in a way that harms women
- Aims to discourage women from participating in public life and to silence them

Kaitlyn Baker | Unsplash

Gender-based disinformation mixes the anonymity and reach of social media with patriarchal and sexist ideas. It aims to undermine women's reputations and force them out of public life.

Social media is fertile soil: algorithms incentivise and amplify inflammatory content and deeply-rooted gender stereotypes to keep women political leaders – and critical journalists – at bay.

At its root, it consists of coordinated and denigratory campaigns to delegitimise women's participation in all sectors of life – effectively undermining democracy and human rights. Its malign intent is often part of a broader political strategy to consolidate power. It can also intersect with other forms of identity-based disinformation, such as that based on sexual orientation, disability, race, ethnicity, or religion.

It mainly targets individuals, particularly high-profile women – politicians, journalists, women's rights activists – in an effort to discredit, intimidate and silence them. It distorts the public understanding of female politicians' track records and discourages women from seeking political careers. US Vice President Kamala Harris encountered a programme of disinformation and harassment throughout the 2020 election cycle that included attacks on her criminal justice record, as well as misogynistic allusions and allegations.

Gendered disinformation is not just false information. It uses highly emotive and value-laden content to undermine the individuals its targets.

CASE STUDY – GEORGIA, THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION

Disseminating secretly filmed videos from prominent figures' sex lives was a disturbing weapon in Georgia's political scene in the late 2010s.

In 2016, in the run-up to the highly contested parliamentary election in Georgia, fake sex videos were circulated, allegedly showing several women politicians and one male politician. Dubbed 'Georgia's sex Wikileaks', similar videos surfaced in 2019; in all cases they were removed.

One of the videos alleged that a male politician was gay. In a socially conservative country, where extramarital sex is not tolerated for women, and where homophobia runs deep, these allegations were designed to discredit and intimidate.

Campaigns can also focus on issues such as women's rights, domestic violence, sexual orientation and gender identity.

Take the Istanbul Convention, the Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence. It aims to increase protection for victims and end impunity for perpetrators but has been seen as a proxy fight between 'traditionalists' and 'progressives' in Europe.

Moldova signed the Convention in 2017 but only ratified it in October 2021, after five years of bitter political debate. Conservative parties criticised it for supposedly eroding so-called traditional family values.
Ahead of the parliamentary vote, the Moldovan Orthodox Church also lobbied against it, with the Diocese of Făleşti and Bălți threatening to excommunicate the lawmakers who endorsed it. Critics claimed that the convention destroyed Christian traditions, legalised same-sex marriage and promoted abortion and LGBT education. They also pointed to how the treaty defines gender as a 'socially constructed' category.

The polarisation around the treaty is not unique to Moldova. In Hungary, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Turkey, conservative governments have labelled the convention a threat to family values and their national systems. Women's rights advocates warn of a worrying rise in distorting the nature of the treaty.

Gendered disinformation is designed to make women seem inherently untrustworthy, unintelligent, or too emotional or libidinous to hold office or participate in democratic politics.

CASE STUDY - BRAZIL

In Brazil, Folha de S.Paulo's journalist Patrícia Campos Mello exposed how the country's gendered fake news machinery, fuelled by former President Jair Bolsonaro, had spilled into the streets. Her reporting on a disinformation campaign spread by a group of bloggers close to Bolsonaro, aptly called Office of Hate, turned her into a target. Photos of her face were pasted onto pornographic images with slurs, fake allegations and violent messages, including calls for her to be raped.

In 2020, Bolsonaro's son Eduardo claimed that Campos Mello had attempted to use sex to gain damning information about his father and that she tried to interfere with the 2018 presidential election. She sued him and won in January 2021.

The Climate Reality Project | Unsplash

GENDERED DISINFORMATION: WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

DEFINITIONS

Media literacy

Studies which encourage a critical assessment of media and its messages. This can include the study of media ownership, advertising, disinformation, propaganda, copycat behaviour, body image, gender identity...and more. It has been argued that media literacy is vital in a democracy and that autocratic regimes don't include critical thinking on the curriculum. But democracies don't always teach media literacy either.

Sex

Refers to the different biological and physiological characteristics of males and females, such as reproductive organs, chromosomes and hormones.

Gender

Refers to the "the socially constructed characteristics of women and men, such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It changes over time, and it varies from society to society. While people are born either male or female, they are taught appropriate norms and behaviours, including how they should interact with others of the same or opposite sex within households, communities and work places.

Source: World Health Organisation

Malign and Creative Tactics

The internet, in particular social media – and, increasingly, manipulation by artificial intelligence (AI) – has allowed gender-based disinformation to balloon but the offline and online worlds should not be considered separate spaces. Rather, they form a continuum where misogyny, patriarchal norms and gender-based violence continue to hold sway. Malign tactics are various and creative. They include:

- Posts of fake sexualised information, images and videos, which violate what is considered socially acceptable behaviour for women and men
- Posts of doctored or AI-created images, videos, memes to discredit and ridicule
- Dissemination of false claims to protect traditional "family values", combining narratives about religion, race or immigration
- Using algorithms and automation, for example on social media, to further amplify attacks and reach
- Manipulation of traditional stereotypes about men and women, for example portraying women as breaking from traditional gender norms as violent aggressors
- Myths and lies about gender equality, for example ultra conservative forces using narratives of "the corrupt west" to develop and mobilise individuals around an "anti-gender" discourse, arguing that gender equality is an anti-family, anti-life, pro-gay ideology
- Fabrication of information and statistics on contentious gender issues, making false links between issues and manipulate true statistics by removing context. For example, during the 2018 referendum on abortion in Ireland, groups of anti-abortion campaigners created a false link between abortion, depression and cancer

Domestic and Transnational Campaigns

Gendered disinformation can be divided into two types. Campaigns can be domestic and foresee state actors attempting to silence internal critics or opponents. It is a trend in regimes run by strongmen such as Russia's Vladimir Putin, the Philippines' Rodrigo Duterte or Hungary's Viktor Orban who weaponised gender not only to attack female critics but to attack feminism itself.

Countering gendered disinformation should form part of a broader response to general disinformation.

Solutions in policy and practice must recognise that disinformation takes many forms. It varies in what it looks like and where it originates, according to context.

Centralised automated solutions to gendered disinformation are likely to censor legitimate speech and overlook gendered disinformation. Input and oversight from local experts who understand the language, culture and society in which disinformation occurs is vital. Solutions should centre and learn from the experiences of women who are already working to challenge disinformation: the problem is a systemic one and the targets of gendered disinformation should not be expected to fix it as individuals.

CASE STUDY - UKRAINE

In 2017, Ukrainian MP Svitlana Zalishchuk talked at the United Nations about her country's war with Russia in the eastern Donbas region and the impact it had on women. She stated that, because of the armed conflict, Ukrainian women had shifted their focus from 'equality to survival.'

Zalishchuk was targeted by pro-Russian trolls. A screenshot of her speech started circulating, and a tweet claimed that she had promised to run naked in the streets of Kyiv if the Ukrainian army lost a key battle to the Russian proxies. The message was accompanied by a doctored image purporting to show her totally naked. The doctored material circulated for months, undermining and devaluing her as a politician.

Kate Bezubetts | Unsplash

Journalists and the media can take two specific steps to combat gendered disinformation.

1. **Adopt gender-sensitive reporting techniques**
   Given prevalent gender stereotypes, reporters cannot simply claim to be gender-neutral. Media reporting either reinforces gender stereotypes or challenges them. One way in which the media can challenge gendered disinformation is by challenging the stereotypes on which it feeds through gender-sensitive reporting.

Gender-sensitive reporting can be achieved by:

- Selecting sources and stories in order to achieve a balanced presence of women and men, reflecting the composition of society and human experiences
- Avoiding stories with stereotypes and avoid making assumptions based on such stereotypes
- Using gender-sensitive language
- Promoting gender equality within media organisations

2. **Make gendered disinformation the story.**
   The media can highlight gendered disinformation by investigating and reporting on specific campaigns in a critical manner, interviewing experts in disinformation and gender to provide analysis.

On 19 January 2022, the day after Emilia Sercan published an investigation revealing how Romania's Prime Minister had plagiarised his doctoral thesis, she experienced a deluge of threats and the dissemination of intimate photos on social media.

Images she had taken two decades ago were uploaded onto adult-only sites and the screenshot she had provided to the police upon filing a criminal complaint was published on a site registered in Moldova. The pictures were posted on a number of sites in Romania, accompanied by denigratory articles.

Evidence Șercan had gathered indicated that the campaign against her was carried out with the complicity of state officials; she accused the authorities of having "orchestrated a *kompromat* operation"[1] against her. The criminal case prosecutors opened has made no progress.[2]

Her experience shows how a state actor can weaponise gendered narratives to defame women, with significant implications for women's equal participation in society.

Female journalists, politicians and human rights activists are particularly at risk. No country is immune: in India, trolling against women is routine; in Russia, feminist activists are regularly targeted by online threats and slurs, in Brazil attacks on women in public life increased under former president Jair Bolsonaro.[3]

Even in liberal Finland, Prime Minister Sanna Marin, the world's youngest, was taken to task by the far right and political opponents over a video of her dancing at a private event and forced to take a drugs test "for her own legal protection".

STAYING SAFE WHILE COVERING CONFLICT

DEFINITIONS

Cyberattack
Malicious digital assault, via data access to computer systems or individual devices. Carried out by individuals, hacker groups, or nation-states: Russian cyber attacks have included the Killnet attack on Romania, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, as well as a large-scale attack on Estonia in 2007 following a diplomatic row over a Soviet war memorial.

Zero-click attack
A kind of cyberattack that doesn't involve the target clicking on anything: phones are often targeted this way with spyware.

Spyware
Malicious software (AKA malware) that accesses personal data and tracks user behaviour. Israeli Pegasus smartphone spyware is a famous international example, whilst Russian malware includes Gamaredon (also known as Primitive Bear and Actinium).

SpyBuster app
A Ukrainian app which has been designed to detect Russian Spyware.

There are plenty of checklists out there for reporters operating in hostile environments or covering high-risk topics. IWPR has some excellent guidelines, and organisations like Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists produce useful and potentially life-saving information too.

It's certainly useful to triangulate from these sources, and learn some of the tips, tricks, and techniques that have kept people safe from harm while covering stories.

You may want to create your own checklist before covering a story, as the risks you face will be unique to your assignment: covering Transnistria, for example, requires specific preparation and knowledge. It may be that other journalists have not published material on how to travel safely in this region.

Remember: staying safe is a mindset. You will need to be flexible, gather intelligence from trustworthy sources, and be aware of the risks on the horizon.

Staying safe online

Risks are changing all the time, so you will need to keep both your knowledge and your software up to date. Online services and risks vary from one region to another, and reporting some beats will require more security measures than others.

The more 'investigative' your journalism is, the higher level of security you need, for example. And if you write about certain topics – like Ukraine, gender issues, or Middle East conflict, say – you are exposing yourself to higher levels of online abuse.

However, even journalists who cover uncontroversial topics have experienced (and been threatened with) cyberattacks, hacking, online blackmail, and trolling. Sometimes personal details and information are maliciously shared online. And sometimes journalists experience physical violence.

Of course, it is currently unsafe for journalists to report in Russia and journalists who cover Russian affairs have found themselves particular targets of state-sponsored online harassment as well as direct physical harm. Many reporters will have a range of identities, switching between an ultra-secure temporary email service for investigations and an anonymous identity on a chat room, for example, alongside a regular, publicly available email address and a private number for friends and family only.

Just about any task you do online has the potential to provide a security risk, but there are always measures you can take to mitigate this.

Many of these are good IT security practice: you should keep your anti-virus software up to date, for example, and manage your passwords effectively.

Just about every piece of software you use has a 'more secure' version. For example, there are encrypted and even 'single use' email services for highly sensitive communications; ultra-secure file sharing services; and many people have chosen to use Signal instead of WhatsApp over privacy concerns.

You will need to do your own research on which services are currently best for your circumstances, within your budget, and available in Moldova.

Needless to say: you should always protect the identity of your sources, unless they have agreed to go on the record. And you should balance the need for security with ease of use: your ultra-secure, single use email address is all very well, but if you forget the password, you've lost an audit trail of important emails...

Engin Akyurt | Unsplash

Mikhail Volkov | Unsplash

Please note this is an introduction to the subject. Recommendations soon go out of date, and may not be appropriate for your particular location and level of risk. Speak to a trusted colleague or friend with good IT skills if you need up-to-date advice.

You should take the security recommendations of your organisation before going on assignment to a hostile environment.

Staying safe

1. **Plan, prepare, and take precautions.** Have you researched the risks with the same diligence that you would investigate a story? Have you made an adequate risk assessment? Have you made (discreet) enquiries with colleagues and others as to the potential dangers of your reporting?

2. **Double check your travel plans.** When journalists are killed or kidnapped it tends to happen in a war zone, or other specific hostile environment. Have you found out where these places are? Also, more than a million people a year are killed in traffic accidents. Steps like checking your vehicle is safe, wearing a seatbelt, and making sure your driver isn't drunk, can be life-saving. Get recent local knowledge on whether it's safe to travel on a particular road, especially at night-time.

3. **Be digitally secure.** Have you made sure that nothing you carry can incriminate you or your sources? (see previous page) Some people carry a disposable 'burner' phone, and remove data from their drives and devices when on assignment, in case they are detained.

4. **Dress appropriately.** It sounds strange, but wearing the right footwear at a demonstration is important advice for young journalists. Have you chosen clothes which are practical, help you blend in, and are appropriate for the assignment?

5. **Assess the situation.** Demonstrations are newsworthy events, and reporters will want to cover them; but remember that both protesters and authorities see you as a target. Have you assessed where stampedes may occur and identified your escape route? Have you made sure an accident site is safe?

6. **Carry accreditation (usually).** In most circumstances it's important to identify yourself as a reporter. Have you brought ID to show people at a crime scene, for example? Undercover reporting requires exceptional editorial reasons, and carries risks if you are caught.

7. **Stay healthy.** Are you fit enough to travel? Do you have water, food, and medication? Do you need a first aid kit for your trip? Have you considered mental health impacts?

8. **Consider a buddy system.** Filming can mean you lose peripheral focus and put yourself at risk. If you don't have the luxury of working as part of a crew, can you work with other journalists to support each other?

9. **Tell people where you are.** Have you made sure that somebody knows when you are due back? So that if you are kidnapped or illegally detained, someone will be looking for you?

10. **No story is worth your life...**
...and sometimes you have to walk away from a situation to stay safe.

COUNTERING DISINFORMATION IN PRACTICE

DEFINITION

Information deficit model
Sometimes called the 'deficit model'. This is the idea that as soon as people are exposed to a piece of information they will change their understanding and behaviour. For many people this is not the case: some people continue to believe the earth is flat, despite the overwhelming amount of evidence to the contrary.

'Truth sandwich'
This is a recent technique used in journalism to counter false claims made by politicians. The idea is that rather than quoting a false claim made by a politician as the main part of a news item, you provide context. So instead of saying 'the earth is flat, claimed a leading politician this morning' you might say 'false claims that the earth is flat are being circulated by a politician, despite overwhelming evidence that the earth is spherical.

Truth Sandwich:
1. Start with the truth. The first frame gets the advantage.
2. Indicate the lie. Avoid amplifying the specific language if possible.
3. Return to the truth. Always repeat truths more than lies.

Source: Poynter.org ***https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2020/how-to-serve-up-a-tasty-truth-sandwich/***

So... you understand the problem of disinformation and propaganda. You understand that a democracy can only function with facts. You understand how journalism works, and you can evaluate sources, report accurately and with impartiality.

How can you put this together and do factchecking of conflict disinformation in such a way as to connect with your audiences?

The answer is complex. And unfortunately, there isn't a quick fix. In some ways, we know what more about what doesn't work.

Simply giving people the facts, for example, sounds perfectly logical. But many people experience 'truth bias', believing the first information they hear about a particular topic.

We also know that most people are particularly likely to take on board repeated, information, from sources they are familiar with. So once told that there is no war in Ukraine, for example, and having had that message repeated, they will not change their minds, even when they see pictures of the tanks and body bags.

In fact, as we know from watching arguments on platforms like Twitter and Facebook, telling people they are wrong can have the opposite effect. Many people get more entrenched in their positions when contradicted.

So as a communicator you need to work harder if you are serious about factchecking. Knowing your audience is vital. You'll need to learn about behaviour change. And you might need to learn some new storytelling techniques.

VIDEO SHOWS MILITARY PARADE PREPARATIONS, NOT WAR ACTIVITY IN ROMANIA

CLAIM
A video of air defence systems and other military equipment slowly turning at an intersection in Romania shows them being transported toward the Moldovan border as tensions rise in the region.

AP'S ASSESSMENT
False. The video shows a military parade in Alba Iulia, Romania, hundreds of miles from the Moldovan border. The clip dates to November 2022 and is not related to Russia's war against Ukraine, according to ***Romania's Ministry of National Defence***.

THE FACTS
A video of military parade preparations before a Romanian national holiday in 2022 is being misrepresented online with claims it shows a real military advance toward the Moldova border.

Source: AP Factcheck
https://apnews.com/article/fact-check-romanian-military-moldova-143412918752

EDITOR'S NOTE:
The 'classic' factcheck format shown here is certainly useful and clear, but may not resonate with all audiences. What else might work?

ONE OF THE KEY PROBLEMS INHERITED FROM THE SOVIET PERIOD IS AN EDUCATION SYSTEM THAT DOES NOT PRIORITISE THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL AND INDEPENDENT THINKING.

Source: infoMD '*Analysis And Strategy For Increasing Resilience To Disinformation In The Republic Of Moldova*'

Ian Betley | Unsplash

HOW DO PEOPLE CHANGE THEIR MINDS?

DEFINITION

Free speech absolutists
Somewhat vague term, often used in the context of American political debate, to describe those who believe in the First Amendment right that citizens should be able to say what they want. In reality, all countries have laws to effectively limit free speech to some extent, including libel, hate speech, and national security laws. Even celebrity 'free speech absolutist' Elon Musk suspended Kanye West from Twitter for posting Nazi imagery and used lawsuits to silence employees.

Do you smoke? Wear a seatbelt? Or favour a particular brand of fizzy drinks?

You might feel like these are very personal decisions. But it's likely that you have been influenced in all of these decisions by a behaviour change campaign; and if you are serious about challenging disinformation, there are some useful skills to learn.

FIVE STEPS TO BEHAVIOUR CHANGE:

In one commonly used model of communication there are five steps to behaviour change:

1. Knowledge
2. Approval
3. Intention
4. Practice
5. Advocacy

Knowledge

Means that the individual or group (the target audience) is aware that change is possible and that there are individuals who have changed in this way. Change is unlikely without this knowledge, which can be provided in the form of straight information, ideas and/or examples of individuals who behave in the way you want to achieve.

Approval

This refers to the idea that the target audience thinks that the idea of the suggested change is generally a positive one, but also feel that at that moment it is a step too far for them personally, or that it is suitable for other people but not for them.

Intention

Intention is the moment at which the target audience, or some of them, form the intention of changing their attitude or behaviour.

SCENARIO

A prolific poster on your newspaper's messageboards and Facebook group is circulating a story about the build-up of troops in Romania. It has the caption 'troop build-up earlier this week shows NATO aggression' and 'Romania set to invade'. But you've done some OSINT research and know the footage dates from an exercise in 2020. As a reporter, what would be the best way to counter this?

OPTION 1
A simple factcheck piece for the daily edition and to put on the website

OPTION 2
A deep dive 12-part podcast

OPTION 3
Get on your newspaper's Facebook group and start telling the user they are wrong

OPTION 4
A feature in the weekend edition profiling a priest who used to believe Russian propaganda until they hosted a refugee family

OPTION 5
Block the user and ignore the issue

FEEDBACK

A simple factcheck has the advantage of being relatively quick and easy; if you go down this route, you should explain your research methods. It can certainly help build your editorial credibility. See p38 on what makes for a good factcheck.

On the other hand, we know that some people don't respond well to simple factchecks. A deep dive podcast might work for the much bigger subject of disinformation generally, but it will take weeks to prepare so you might be too late to correct this false story: if you already have a podcast, it could be a good bonus episode, or episode for your weekly programme (and yes, newspapers do have podcasts! They can be a good way to reach new audiences).

Arguing with people on Facebook is, of course, rarely dignified. So avoid this. Much more conflict sensitive would be the feature showing how people come to change their mind about disinformation.

Finally, free speech absolutists may disagree, but most media organisations think it's okay to block trolls, spammers, and serial disinformers on your platforms if they break your site rules. But ignoring the issue is probably not best for your audience who may see these messages and you should be guided by your own specific audience on editorial questions like these.

SCENARIO

There's a lot of buzz on a few Russian and Romanian language Telegram channels that Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was hit by a Ukrainian missile: a Ukrainian soldier has even admitted to the 2014 incident.

Your editor is really keen on following up the story and has invited you, as a young journalist, to pitch ideas as to how to cover it. What do you think might work?

OPTION 1
A discussion programme would work well. You could then show balance between people who believe it was caused by the Russians, and those who believed Ukrainians downed the plane

OPTION 2
A news bulletin

OPTION 3
You should tell your editor this a terrible idea: this is old news

OPTION 4
TikTok would be best for this because young people like it and you'd capture a big audience

OPTION 5
A podcast might be a good way to tell this complex story

FEEDBACK

Firstly, the facts. Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was downed by Russian surface-to-air missile. A Dutch court found three men guilty of the murder of 298 people. They were from the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic, a pro-Russia separatist movement.

The court also heard they were controlled by Russia at the time, and OSINT data showed the launcher used to shoot the plane down was the Russian 53rd Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade based in Kursk.

There may be lots of people who believe the Russian propaganda that a Ukrainian soldier admitted to these murders. But this story is very old, from 2014, and was a fairly blatant and easy to disprove attempt by Russian authorities to deflect blame from their own state-sponsored act of terrorism.

It would therefore be bad journalism to include a false story from 2014 in a news bulletin! Also, bad journalism to discuss the issue as if it were a matter of faith, when the facts are well-established.

It's certainly an old story. But in many ways, it's very relevant to today.

The outrageous counterfactual narrative, the blaming of a country that is the victim of violence, for example. And many observers have noted the fact that Putin and his team grew in confidence as they realised they can get away with it: there is a story to be told here, albeit a long and complex one. Something like a podcast or a very long article might be the best way to do this.

Incidentally, it would be a brave journalist who would tell their editor their ideas are terrible. TikTok might be popular, but perhaps not best to tell a complex story like this, where there are claims, counterclaims, and a certain amount of historical background.

They may still think that it's too difficult for them given the environment or their own personalities, but they have decided that sometime in the future (maybe tomorrow, maybe in five years' time) they will try to change.

Practice

Practice is when those who have decided to change actually make the break with the past and change their behaviour. The behaviour change may only last a day (many smokers for instance give up, and then go back to smoking), or forever.

Advocacy

Advocacy is when those who manage to keep up the behaviour change over a sustained period go on to encourage and persuade others to change too. They become advocates of change.

Communicating with audiences
There are a number of different ways people get hold of and remember new ideas. Acting on those ideas comes later.

Source:
This was adapted from a postgraduate conflict sensitive reporting module developed by Nick Raistrick and Francis Rolt. It draws upon the transtheoretical model of behaviour change.

DEEP DIVE JOURNALISM AND THE RISE OF THE PODCAST

DEFINITION

'News desert'
Areas without independent reporters holding power to account. Includes areas where newspapers have closed (2,500 in the US since 2005, mostly regional, as advertising revenue shifted online), or where independent journalists can't operate safely.

Opinion journalism
Sometimes used as derogatory term for partisan, one-sided journalism featuring high levels of disinformation which often appears in the vacuum left by news deserts. (Also used to describe subjective journalism like columns, opinion, and editorials). Note: respectable media outlets separate fact from opinion.

Ghost newspapers
Titles which theoretically still exist, but are a shell of their former selves, with newsroom staff having been fired to cut costs, and replaced with syndicated national news, opinion journalism and churnalism.

Around the world, newsroom budgets have been slashed. We are addicted to our smartphones. Stressed by the constant drip of bad, and often fake, news. We can't concentrate any more. Young people are getting depressed about their body image, because of an addiction to Instagram.

That's certainly one narrative.

Another is that some audiences are tired of the 24-hour news cycle and are turning towards longer format media; that context is more important than ever; and that the boom in 'slow journalism' offers an alternative for storytellers.

Podcasts, for example, are going through a global boom. Almost half a billion people listen to them around the world. Why? How do you make them? And what does this mean for the Moldovan media landscape?

The rise of podcasts has been linked to the rise in smartphone technology; you can record, edit and listen to podcasts in a device that most of us already own. And you don't need a radio station's editorial team to act as a gatekeeper. For a few dollars a month you can pay for hosting, to reach audiences across the world.

And whilst podcasts are very easy to make, to get people listening you still need a strong idea and effective promotion. You need to 'think with your ears' and use sound creatively.

Certain genres suit podcasts. 'Behind the news' shows work well, as do long-form in-depth documentaries. True crime is associated with podcasts, and can be hugely popular. But the kind of shows like Serial – which 300 million people have downloaded – involved hundreds of hours of journalistic research as well as creative storytelling techniques, like 'cliff hanger' endings.

Such deep dive journalism isn't restricted to audio formats. Self-published eBooks, independently published magazines, and websites specialising in long-form journalism have all been a feature of the media landscape in recent years.

There are certainly opportunities in slow news and in-depth, long-form, fact-checking journalism, particularly if you can produce something with international appeal. But the Moldovan domestic market is relatively small; it might not be time to give up the day job just yet.

YOU ARE ENTITLED TO YOUR OPINION. BUT YOU ARE NOT ENTITLED TO YOUR OWN FACTS.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan

Jonathan Velasquez | Unsplash

THE LOST ART OF DISAGREEING

Mikhail Volkov | Unsplash

POSITIONS, INTERESTS, AND LEMONS

To understand how conflicts can be resolved, it can be useful to consider the case of the lemon. There is only one available.

The main chef, who is cooking fish, makes a good case. So does the pastry chef. The diners are hungry. Who gets the lemon?

An acknowledgement that conflict is all around us, and not necessarily a bad thing, informs conflict sensitive communication. We don't all have to agree, but we can resolve those disagreements by better communication.

Traditional conflict communications can mean repeating our perceptions and positions ('I should have the lemon'), rather than reaching out to the other side to find the shared interests of both conflicting parties.

The lemon example is often used to introduce conflict resolution. Debates can get heated, with each side justifying their own use.

With some smarter questions (or a basic applied knowledge of cooking), it is resolved quickly. To cook fish you need juice, whilst to make puddings only the zest is required. The common ground is happy customers at the restaurant.

Of course, this is a simplified metaphor to explain a point; bringing about peace in the Gaza Strip may be a little harder.

But the point about entrenched positions is valid, as is the importance of communicating, and listening to the 'other' side. It comes more naturally when we are face to face than on messageboards; when we speak the same language; when we are polite, and when we ask questions of 'the other side', rather than restating our own positions and interests.

SCENARIO EXERCISE

You are putting together a political panel programme about the conflict in Ukraine because there has been a lot of false social media activity claiming a recent atrocity was staged. What should you consider when you put together your guest list?

OPTION 1

People who disagree. Everyone loves a good argument. Then you'll get lots of angry callers too. It'll be good for audience figures

OPTION 2

Several data experts who can provide facts and detailed GPS data. It's your duty to make sure people hear the truth

OPTION 3

Go for a wide range of people, as it's important to reflect all views. Balance a pro-Kremlin guest with a pro-EU guest

OPTION 4

Use your editorial judgement and make sure that you don't give undue prominence to false claims

FEEDBACK

As a general rule, you should show balance both in your reporting and choice of guests.

But you should also not give undue prominence to false claims. There has been no credible evidence at all that any atrocities have been staged. However, there is a long and well-documented history of Russia serially accusing victims of attacks of having staged events, a technique which it has developed since at least 2013.

This is a particularly unpleasant communications technique. It involves accusing (without evidence) those who have lost loved ones and suffered injury of lying. It is a playbook that was developed during the Syria conflict, when footage of disaster movies being filmed were relabelled as 'proof' of 'staged' events. It was a cynical attempt to cover up real attacks carried out by Russia's strategic ally, the Syrian government, in which several civilians died.

Because there is no real opposition media in Russia, most communicators tend to 'toe the party line' and repeat false claims, without offering analysis.

Incidentally, you don't need a pro EU voice for this panel, either. This would provide 'false equivalence.' Instead, you would probably want an expert voice who understands how social media is used as a tool of hybrid warfare.

Clearly some hosts like to stoke up disagreements on their talk shows; others aren't in control and let things get out of hand. Neither can be considered as conflict sensitive communicators.

By stoking up conflict, audiences can be left feeling helpless and frustrated and you may end up amplifying false and damaging information. Rather than getting people to restate their familiar positions, it may be better to get people to look for shared interests. It is better practice to give very careful editorial thought about who you get on your show.

A data expert (not several!) might be a good idea, but don't overdo it, and make sure they can explain their work in clear language...

DEFINITIONS

Balance (in journalism)
An editorial value closely related to fairness and considered by many editors to be important in seeking to achieve impartiality. Some editorial guidelines are quite strict: for example, the BBC's state that all political parties should be given equal prominence, and this is closely monitored during an election period. Newsreaders are supposed to be politically neutral, in public at least. For other journalists and media houses, achieving balance is irrelevant: they choose to openly support a particular government or regime.

'False balance' AKA 'bothsidesism'
The misleading presentation of a false theory (e.g. 'the Earth is flat') to 'balance' a fact ('the Earth is roughly spherical'). To avoid this, you need to be confident in your understanding of a subject, and to be very clear with your language. Explain early to your audience if a claim is false or unsubstantiated. Evaluate sources: for example, be aware that peer-reviewed journals are more likely to be reliable than single-source news items.

Conflict sensitive communication
This is based on the idea that people can resolve their conflict through dialogue. It has roots in the conflict resolution theories of theorists like Johan Galtung. Conflict sensitive communicators seek to look beyond their own positions on a particular issue, and the perceived faults of 'the other side': instead looking to shared interests and common ground to resolve conflict.

To achieve impartiality, you do not need to include outright deniers of climate change in BBC coverage, in the same way you would not have someone denying that Manchester United won 2-0 last Saturday. The referee has spoken.

Source: BBC editorial policy briefing: following a review in which the corporation admitted its 'mistakes' in allowing climate change deniers too much exposure

Cash Macanaya | Unsplash

EVALUATING SOURCES

DEFINITION

Peer-reviewed journals
Particularly associated with science topics, where research which has been published in a journal and reviewed by scientists working in a similar field (peers).

Whilst no science claims to be definitive, the peer review process is designed to provide some transparency to research. But there are downsides. Peer review involves paying experts to be part of a time-consuming checking, review, and 'sign off' process.

As a result, some peer-reviewed research is not publicly available without a (sometimes very high) fee. Also, purveyors of junk science and pseudoscientific theories produce their own journals which look like the real thing.

Not all sources are created equal; your job as a journalist is to evaluate and decide whether sources are trustworthy. You should also explain this well to your audiences.

On the one hand, you should develop a healthy scepticism and be guided by the question: 'What's the source? Why is this person telling me this now?'

On the other hand, you should not become too cynical. One method used by disinformation actors is to make audiences doubt everything, including well-established facts. Having achieved high levels of mistrust in audiences, they can then create a false narrative.

Conspiracy theorists, for example, tend to believe in some quite fantastical explanations, because they have rejected available evidence, even credible sources.

In the case of conflict, all sides have a vested interest in a particular narrative. This doesn't mean that all sides are equally unreliable. Clearly there is a difference between getting the number of casualties in a battle wrong, say, and the outright denial of a chemical attack or an invasion for which there is substantial independent evidence.

The job of a professional journalist is to get good at evaluating sources. Also to know your limitations. If a topic is complex, you will sometimes need to find a specialist.

SE

Whistleblower

Accuracy	8
Impartiality	2
Willingness to speak	8
Relevance	8

CONFLICT REPORTING IN THE DISINFORMATION AGE

EDITOR'S NOTE:
Whistleblowers are people within an organisation with a story to tell. They reveal misconduct at great personal and professional risk. They are routinely subject to harassment, job termination, arrest, and even physical attacks for exposing wrongdoing.

SE

Politician

Accuracy	3
Impartiality	2
Willingness to speak	8
Relevance	8

CONFLICT REPORTING IN THE DISINFORMATION AGE

EDITOR'S NOTE:
Some politicians are reliable and honest, and dedicate their lives to serving their public. But many aren't, and they sometimes 'spin' events. They are also likely to be media trained and can be good at avoiding questions.

You may not be a ballistics expert, or have an in-depth knowledge of tanks, or military strategy.

This is where you may need to dig into your contacts book, and find someone can answer these questions. 'Good talkers', including knowledgeable experts who can explain complex topics in plan language, are the kinds of contacts you need to nurture.

Sometimes you might get a good story from an unreliable or even anonymous source: you need to corroborate and cross reference rather than ignore it. Plenty of Pulitzer Prize-winning journalists have started with an anonymous source, or an 'off-the-record' briefing.

Sources under attack: the UN

The UN is often the target of conspiracy theorists and despots, particularly in recent years; and even amongst its supporters, there are few who would claim it is a perfect organisation. It is arguably biased in favour of liberal democracies, and you should definitely hold it to account in your reporting. However, the idea that it frequently makes false judgements against specific targeted countries and fabricates evidence to do so is contentious. The UN Independent Experts and Special Rapporteur who evaluate human rights issues tend to be academics with a history of peer reviewed publication, drawn from a wide range of countries and backgrounds and their biographies and reports are in the public domain.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

This is a personal list, and the views it represents are very much the author's own. Politicians can be hard working and amongst the most dedicated and public-spirited people you can meet. So, it may seem unfair to accuse them all of dishonesty. What do you think?

SE

Kremlin Military Spokesman

Accuracy	0
Impartiality	2
Willingness to speak	10
Relevance	8

CONFLICT REPORTING IN THE DISINFORMATION AGE

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Remember that to you it might be blindingly obvious that this kind of source is unreliable, and that they are paid to 'toe the party line'. But to some audiences, who already trust Russian sources, this may not be the case.

SE

UN Bodies

Accuracy	9
Impartiality	9
Willingness to speak	2
Relevance	8

CONFLICT REPORTING IN THE DISINFORMATION AGE

EDITOR'S NOTE:

UN bodies aim to be transparent and put their material in the public domain, often with a high level of detail. For example, the UN Secretary-General's Mechanism for Investigation of Alleged Use of Chemical and Biological Weapons publishes its findings, including committee reports, minutes, guidelines, and procedures. The international composition of its panel ensures that it does not favour a particular nation. And its team of experts have staked their careers on providing thorough, scientific data. Of course, the UN doesn't always get it right, but it does aim to base decisions on a peer review process.

SE

Eyewitness

Accuracy	?
Impartiality	Usually high
Willingness to speak	Depends
Relevance	10

CONFLICT REPORTING IN THE DISINFORMATION AGE

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Eyewitnesses can make excellent reliable statements about events; but they can also get things wrong. They are notoriously bad at guessing crowd sizes, for example, or assume that someone lying down injured is dead.

INTERVIEWS ARE AT THE HEART OF GOOD JOURNALISM

Interviews are at the heart of journalism. Even if you are doing OSINT journalism or data stories, you still need to step away from your screen and speak to real people.

If you are covering stories where it's hard to get hold of your ideal interviewee, that's OK. You don't always have to speak to a senior official or an expert – although these are useful. You can vox pop people affected by the story, or feature an expert guest from your contacts book.

The opposite of a vox pop is an in-depth profile: a much longer detailed interview. Most interviews are something in between: an informational interview might be speaking to someone who has specific knowledge of interest to your audience. A confrontational interview might involve holding elected leaders to account, whereas an emotional interview might be about the impact of a particular issue.

The point is, not all interviews should sound the same. But you should always prepare for an interview, to be able to challenge any false claims made by the person you speak to. Desk research will help; so that you can, for example, quote sources that can contradict false claims.

You should speak to as wide a range of people as possible, including people of all ages, demographics, and opinions. Always remember: you are supposed to be asking questions on their behalf.

SCENARIO EXERCISE PART ONE – INTERVIEW STYLES

You are interviewing a whistleblower who has worked at a troll farm. They claim to have been paid to generate disinformation by a state actor. They left because they were experienced harassment after making complaints over content. How should you interview and edit them?

OPTION 1
Make sure that you ask difficult, hostile questions on behalf of your audience

OPTION 2
Present them in the best light, because they are brave and have been through a lot. Focus on emotions

OPTION 3
Try to be objective and get the key details, plus how they felt about working there and their motivations might be interesting

OPTION 4
This is a big story, so your interview should be long and detailed focusing on the history of the agency they work for

FEEDBACK

There are many different interview styles. A confrontational interview might usually be appropriate for someone like an elected official who is in a position of responsibility, who you are holding to account for something they have done; even then, you shouldn't be hostile, but firm in your questioning.

An informational interview would be best for an 'expert witness' and is usually neutral in tone. In this case, you do need to get the details and take it from there. Be guided by the classic journalistic questions: what, when, how, and hardest of all: why? In this case, the motivations might be interesting for your audience. You can get the details and history from other sources, and your interviewee might not be able to provide the answers.

Some stories are inherently emotional, and challenging. Remember in this case to be wary of retraumatising your subject, and take into account the concept of 'informed consent'. Will they suffer as a result of your interview, even if they don't realise it? Have you made them aware of this risk? There may be risks here in going 'on the record'.

Freddy Kearney | Unsplash

DEFINITIONS

Off-the-record
Be careful with this one: to some it means 'a background statement which cannot be used at all', to others, 'comments that can be quoted, but whose source must remain anonymous.' Watch out for 'off-the-record' briefings containing false information about political opponents.

Vox pops
Very short interviews, typically asking the same question to a variety of people. Can be used in many ways, for example as part of a package, as reaction to a news event, or to bring ordinary voices to a round table discussion. Particularly useful when you want to bring a data story 'alive', or to get opinions. Beware of spreading false information through vox pops! The idea is to be representative of your audience, but not to amplify false information.

Informed consent
When the person giving consent fully understands the consequences of a decision and consents freely and without any force: in the context of journalism, this might be explaining fully the repercussions of going 'on-the-record'. Interviewees may be harassed years later for speaking out.

SCENARIO PART TWO – EDITING THE INTERVIEW

How should you edit the interview?

OPTION 1
Keep everything in, details are important

OPTION 2
Keep it short and snappy, so that people don't get bored

OPTION 3
Think about how you will mix your explanations and context with their responses

FEEDBACK

How you edit will depend very much on your audience, and the type of content you are making. Short and snappy is usually good for news items.

In many cases you will make different cuts of the same interview: so short clips might be used in a news bulletin; longer clips could form the basis of a newspaper, magazine or web article; and an even longer version might form the basis of a 'deep dive' for a podcast.

There is no need to keep everything in – some people have a tendency to ramble on, for example. You decide how much to cut.

Of course, you should be careful not to misrepresent people. In written formats, tidying up grammar and taking out repetitions is normal. When editing audio interviews it's okay to take out some 'ums' and 'ers'. But don't overdo it; when people overedit gaps, it can sound unnatural and clipped.

Will Francis | Unsplash

MEDIA LITERACY (AND HOW HISTORY LESSONS START WARS)

DEFINITION

Post-truth
Oxford Dictionaries' Word of the Year in 2016, 'post-truth' is a somewhat ironic reference to the political situation exacerbated by social media which was characterised by political dishonesty over Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, and the denial of chemical attacks in Syria.

AI (artificial intelligence)
In the context of disinformation, AI can be used in many ways. It is being used by both and bad actors who spread false information and fact checkers who set out to combat it. ChatGPT is currently one of the most famous AI content tools: it's a chatbot that can give surprisingly convincing [text based] answers when asked questions, even though these answers often amplify disinformation which already exist on the Internet: much like some humans.

It's not me, it's the other guy:

59% of people think they can identify fake news. On the other hand, only 30% and 31% respectively say that the general population can identify fake news. At the same time, only 9% were able to correctly fake news in an experiment.

Source: ***https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/9/10/185***

On 21 February, 2022, a 69 year-old man gave a somewhat rambling history lesson. If the lecture had been given by a real history teacher, the parents might have complained.

Lasting just under 57 minutes, it contained a number of provably false statements, including the bizarre claim that a particular country didn't exist despite centuries of evidence to the contrary, including a capital city, a language, a football team... and millions of people prepared to fight when invaded by a foreign power.

Putin's history lesson was delivered the day before the invasion of Ukraine, in which hundreds of thousands of people have died. It teaches us some important lessons.

You could argue that the biggest lesson is just how important the role of independent educators is to combat the kind of disinformation which can lead to violent conflict and the invasion of a sovereign country.

Why did nobody object to the lecture on Ukraine's history?

One possible answer is that a better-educated, more well-informed population would have been able to spot the obvious false historical statements instantly, and his comments would have been laughed off.

But this did not take place in isolation. For decades, only certain approved versions of history had been taught in Russian schools; academics who challenged the status quo were hounded out of jobs, just like journalists before them; and a bogus, ultranationalistic version of history became the 'dominant narrative' in recent years.

Critical thinking was actively discouraged, and many people left the country. Others were locked up, or faced physical violence at the hands of security services.

There is historical precedent for this. Every country teaches a particular view of history, and sometimes a radical crackdown on classroom ideas which challenge those in power. Stalin's version of history was full of disinformation and people were too scared to factcheck him.

Attempts to rehabilitate Stalin's reputation in the Putin era naturally gloss over the huge scale human rights abuses for which he was guilty.

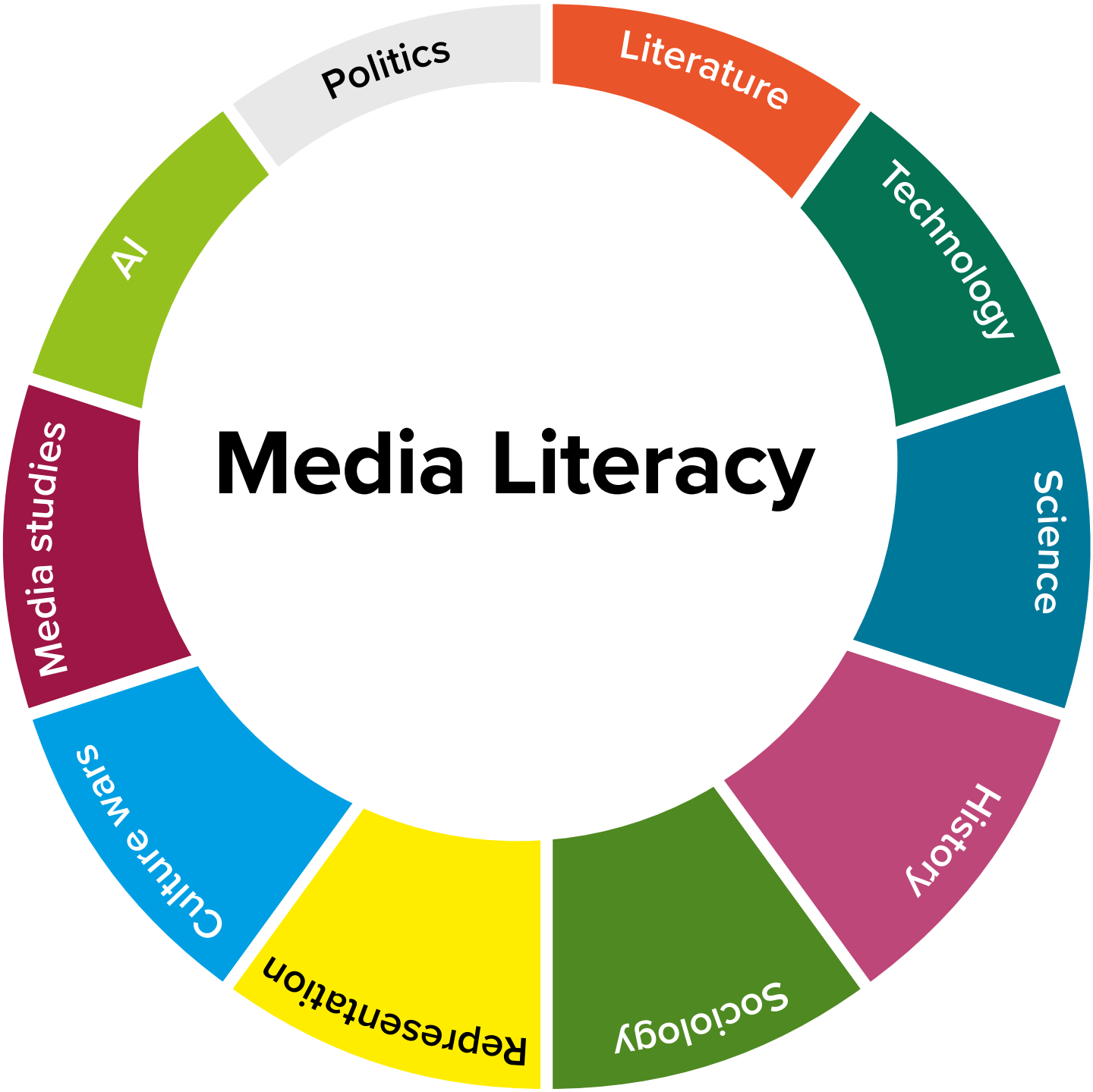
The Great Leap Forward, in China between 1958 to 1962, involved the preventable deaths of tens of millions of Chinese people from violence and famine. Students were encouraged to physically attack their 'revisionist and reactionary' teachers: only the official Marxist-Leninist version of history was taught.

Educators in Western democracies are not exempt from bias. School curricula have a strong tendency to gloss over their own state's role in the exploitation of its colonies, for example, including the way in which millions of native people were wiped out.

If history is a battleground in the disinformation wars, teachers are on the front line. But media literacy isn't just about how competing versions of the past influence today's politics. There are certainly crossover skills shared between journalists and historians, like the ability to spotting bias and evaluate how trustworthy sources are.

EDITOR'S NOTE:
Across the world, there has been an increasing realisation that media literacy is too important to be left to chance. Moldova is one of the world leaders in making sure that media literacy is taught in schools.

Countering disinformation requires a combination of subjects. Students will need to understand history and the importance of primary evidence; language skills to spot loaded language; some Russian and English will help; they'll need to understand some basic IT, and a bit about how social media works. But most of all, they'll need to learn the kind of fact-checking mindset that the best news editors take for granted (p38).



"Our educational policy must enable everyone who receives an education to develop morally, intellectually and physically and become a worker with both socialist consciousness and culture."

Mao Zedong ('Chairman Mao')

"Putin is a strikingly poor historian. [his] lengthy essays on Russia's relationship with Ukraine, meant to justify his war, are as stylistically wooden as they are historically dubious, cherry-picking evidence that seems to fit his argument, and stripping them of context and nuance. He has also encouraged a national narrative of struggle and victory focused on war,"

Source: ***Mark Galeotti***, Putin's Wars: from Chechnya to Ukraine

MEDIA IN MOLDOVA

"Whilst there is press freedom in Moldova, the media landscape is seen as polarised, with pro-Western and pro-Russian media houses offering different editorial viewpoints. Given the relatively small size of the country, independent media outlets struggle to survive, and owner-interference (and self-censorship) are relatively common. Direct violence against journalists is rare, although cyber harassment is relatively frequent; IWPR is currently producing research on Moldova's media landscape."

To visit IWPR's media research pages, go to iwpr.net/impact

"Through the media and Kremlin-affiliated opinion formers, Moldovan citizens are presented with the idea that Chisinau was the aggressor in the 1990-1992 Transnistria war, and attempts are being made to legitimise the Russian military presence on the left bank of River Dniester."

Source: ***Analysis and Strategy for Increasing Resilience to Disinformation in the Republic Of Moldova***

" 'Blatantly toxic' media outlets continue to be highly influential, undermining the Moldova's information security."

Source: ***The Independent Journalism Center's State of the Press Index 2022***

"EU media is considered trustworthy by most respondents (42%), followed by Russian (35%) and Moldovan media (24%)."

Source: *Internews*. (November 2020). ***Public Perception of Media and Media Skills in the Republic of Moldova.***

SCENARIO EXERCISE

As a junior producer, you've been asked to moderate the Facebook group for the news team you work for. Recently there's been a spike in comments about a statement associated with the Moldovan Orthodox Church which explains that Covid-19 vaccines are more harmful than the virus itself.

OPTION 1
People who believe in such rumours are stupid and beyond help. Tell your managers to close the chat room and focus on newsgathering

OPTION 2
Religions always spread false vaccine rumours. This will be a good place to factcheck them

OPTION 3
This can be useful audience information: why do they believe the rumours?

OPTION 4
Block the user who is spreading false information

OPTION 5
Stoke up the argument, It's good for audience engagement figures

FEEDBACK

Firstly, your job as a conflict sensitive communicator is to serve your audience, not judge. Finding out why people believe these rumours can lead to some interesting questions. Who started these rumours? Where did they get their information from?

Incidentally, it is false to say that religions always spread false vaccine rumours: the Pope, various Chief Rabbis, and Patriarch Kirill of Moscow are among the overwhelming majority of religious leaders and teachers who both urged their congregations to take a vaccine and told others to stop spreading false rumours.

Blocking users and closing chatrooms are certainly options you can take. But most moderation guidelines state that this will only happen if you seriously breach guidelines – advocating hate speech, making libellous allegations, or repeatedly ignoring warnings, for example.

There are other steps you can take to moderate chat rooms more effectively – like making sure that profiles are linked to real account to avoid bots and spam, or making sure that the rules of a forum are clear to users.

Flagging false information can certainly be a useful technique.

Some of these can be automated: but it can be impossible for moderators to police all comments, and for certain topics some media houses have found it easier to turn off comments.

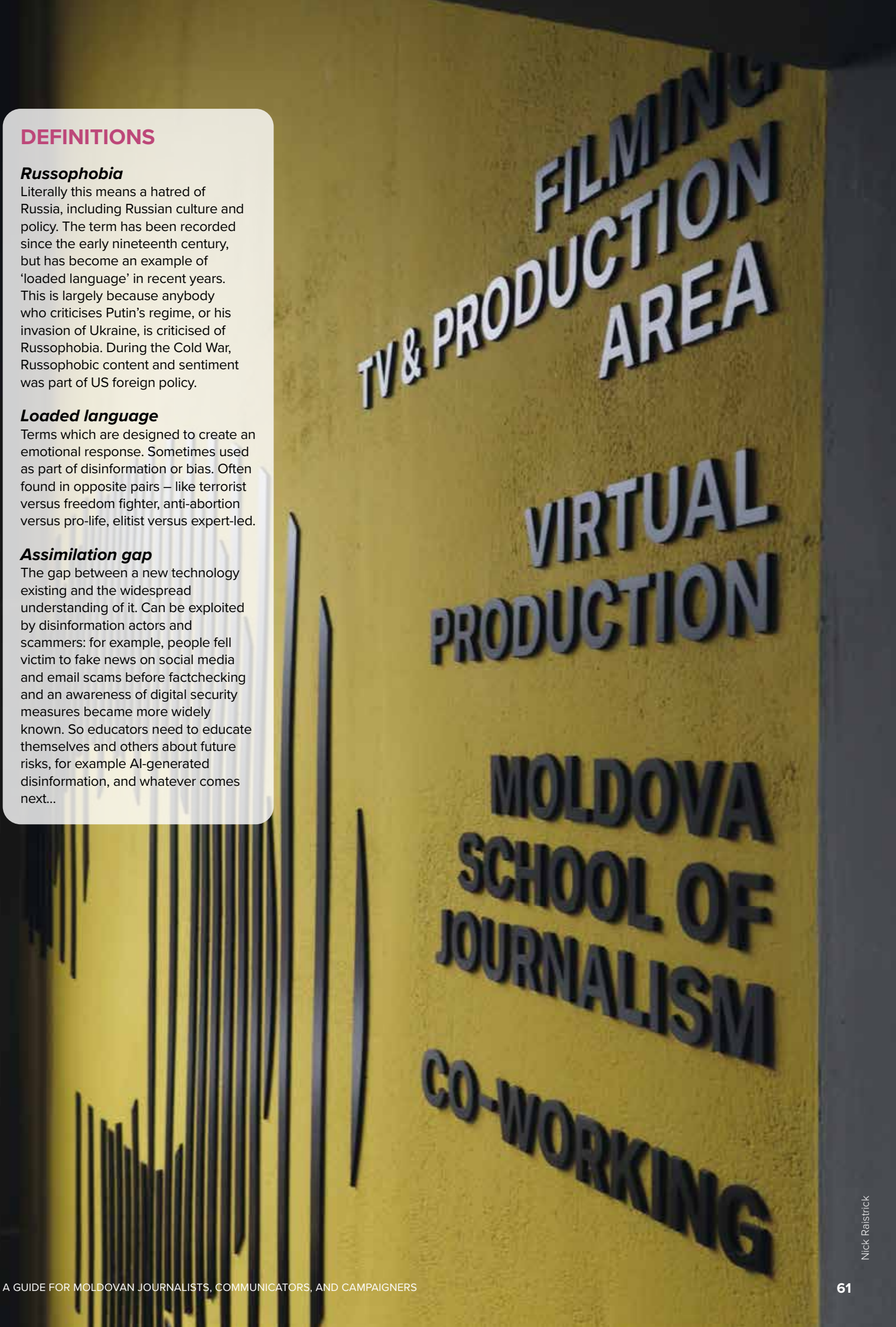
EDITOR'S NOTE:
It's really important to do as much as possible to learn about your audience, and forums, chat rooms, and social media can be useful sources for enterprising communicators. You can also find out which topics can be divisive and make people angry. These need to be handled with particular editorial sensitivity. Of course you should watch out for trolls who can dominate discussions.

DEFINITIONS

Russophobia
Literally this means a hatred of Russia, including Russian culture and policy. The term has been recorded since the early nineteenth century, but has become an example of 'loaded language' in recent years. This is largely because anybody who criticises Putin's regime, or his invasion of Ukraine, is criticised of Russophobia. During the Cold War, Russophobic content and sentiment was part of US foreign policy.

Loaded language
Terms which are designed to create an emotional response. Sometimes used as part of disinformation or bias. Often found in opposite pairs – like terrorist versus freedom fighter, anti-abortion versus pro-life, elitist versus expert-led.

Assimilation gap
The gap between a new technology existing and the widespread understanding of it. Can be exploited by disinformation actors and scammers: for example, people fell victim to fake news on social media and email scams before factchecking and an awareness of digital security measures became more widely known. So educators need to educate themselves and others about future risks, for example AI-generated disinformation, and whatever comes next...



Nick Raistrick

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PAGE 7
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'Facebook advertising used in Moldova to try and destabilise the government', widely reported, including in Fortune magazine: ***https://fortune.com/2023/02/17/facebook-ads-oligarch-moldova/***

PAGE 8
Clearly these are not real people and examples for illustration only.

PAGE 10
The use of 'fake news' as a term has been very widely documented; but this 2016 Politico article provides useful context: ***https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/12/fake-news-history-long-violent-214535/***

PAGE 12
Joseph Mercola factchecks can be found here (and elsewhere): ***https://healthfeedback.org/authors/joseph-mercola/***

For more on how US vaccine disinformation spread to Africa, listen to the IWPR podcast: ***https://iwpr.net/impact/human-rights-africa***

PAGE 17
Alex Jones told to pay $965m damages to Sandy Hook victims' families: ***https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-63237092***

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The press toe the line on the Iraq war: ***https://www.theguardian.com/media/2006/nov/13/mondaymediasection.iraq***

PAGE 21
Interview by the author, in Chișinău, 2023.

PAGE 22
Interview by the author, in Chișinău, 2023.

PAGE 26
The Harvard website is a useful resource on Galtung and cultural violence: ***https://rpl.hds.harvard.edu/what-we-do/our-approach/peace-violence***

PAGE 27
'Fake news and other conspiracies in Moldova' data comes from Watchdog.md/CBS poll: ***https://www.watchdog.md/2020/06/03/socio-political-trends-and-disinformation-impact-during-the-pandemic/***

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The '50 Shades' phemonenon has been covered extensively, including here: ***https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/27/business/media/for-fifty-shades-of-grey-more-than-100-million-sold.html***

PAGE 31
'With Netflix's Ancient Apocalypse, Graham Hancock has declared war on archaeologists': ***https://theconversation.com/with-netflixs-ancient-apocalypse-graham-hancock-has-declared-war-on-archaeologists-194881***

PAGE 34
Russian-backed content reached 126 million US Facebook users: widely reported including here: ***https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/russian-backed-election-content-reached-126-million-americans-facebook-says-n815791***

PAGE 36
You should really do your own research into Bellingcat, but this CBS News article is a good start point: ***https://www.cbsnews.com/news/bellingcat-russia-putin-ukraine-60-minutes-2022-08-21/***

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This diagram was influenced by Gavi - The Vaccine Alliance: ***https://www.gavi.org/vaccineswork/lets-flatten-infodemic-curve***

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[1] Emilia Șercan, 'State authorities have orchestrated a kompromat operation against me. Now they're trying to cover it up', PressOne, 4 April 2022: ***https://pressone.ro/emilia-sercan-state-authorities-have-orchestrated-a-kompromat-operation-against-me-now-theyre-trying-to-cover-it-up***. Accessed on 23 February 2023.

[2] 'Romania: Renewed call for action after fresh smear campaign against Emilia Șercan,' in Media Freedom Rapid Response, European Centre for Press and Media Freedom, 17 February 2023: ***https://www.ecpmf.eu/romania-renewed-call-for-action-after-fresh-smear-campaign-against-emilia-sercan/ https://pressonemilia-sercan-state-authorities-have-orchestrated-a-kompromat-operation-against-me-now-theyre-trying-to-cover-it-up***. Accessed on 22 February 2023.

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This list is adapted from the IWPR handbook on reporting health disinformation also the author: ***https://iwpr.net/global-voices/print-publications/reporting-health-disinformation-age***

PAGE 46
Kanye West's Swastika tweet forces Elon Musk to finally do some moderating: ***https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2022/12/kanye-elon-twitter-suspended***

PAGE 49
For a (very) deep dive into flight MH17, the Bellingcat investigation website is a good place to start: ***https://www.bellingcat.com/tag/mh17/***

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'Over 360 newspapers have closed since just before the start of the pandemic': ***https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/29/business/media/local-newspapers-pandemic.html*** (although this article is about US newspapers, this is a worldwide phenonenon).

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'BBC admits 'we get climate change coverage wrong too often': ***https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/sep/07/bbc-we-get-climate-change-coverage-wrong-too-often***

BBC Editorial Guidelines can be accessed here: ***https://www.bbc.com/editorialguidelines/guidelines***

FREEDOM IS THE FREEDOM TO SAY THAT TWO PLUS TWO MAKE FOUR. IF THAT IS GRANTED, ALL ELSE FOLLOWS”

Source: George Orwell (in 1984)

Sasha Pleshco | Unsplash

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