

Offline disinformation awareness module - outline

Summary of the module

The module takes the form of a role-playing game inspired on the popular game Mafia or Werewolf, and modeled after the Bad News game developed by DROG. The facilitator of the module will take on the role of moderator (or storyteller) and will guide the players through practical assignments. The goal of the game is to take the students on a journey through the inner workings of disinformation. First, they play as the bad guys, where they make the citizens of an imaginary country stop cleaning their teeth through a campaign of lying and fear mongering. As soon as their efforts succeed, the roles are reversed. Now the students have to expose the disinformation campaign to the citizens of the country. But this is not as easy as it looks. The moderator (hereinafter referred to as M) will also provide the backstory of the assignments and embed them in theory on disinformation. The module will end with a discussion on how the students perceive manipulation and polarisation through media.

Module step by step

Introduction to the module (5 minutes)

M asks the students to think about several ways in which they might be misled by the media. Do they think they ever fell for something fake? How do they assess their own capabilities to spot fake news? Have they ever spread fake news? Would they call out their friends for spreading fake news?

Start of the role playing game (5 minutes)

M introduces the group into the situation:

We are in the fictional country of Unescia, and we are a group of young, recently graduated dentists who can't get enough work because the people of Unescia take too good care of their teeth. Our ultimate goal is to make the people stop cleaning their teeth. And we have no problem with being evil in the process.

M makes sure the students empathise with the dentists and are ready, prepared and excited to cross their own ethical borders and be as evil as they can be.

Emotion (15 minutes)

M starts explaining the first exercise. How do we get the people of Unescia to stop cleaning their teeth? The most effective way to change peoples' behaviour is by invoking strong emotions. What kind of emotions work best?

M asks the group for input. The correct answer is negative emotions, especially fear and anger.

M divides the group into smaller groups of two/three students and hands out pictures. The students are asked to write a text under the picture that is as emotionally charged as possible. The message: toothbrushes and miswak contain dangerous chemicals.

The students get 5 minutes to come up with a meme, and then share the results with each other.

Then, M. starts telling the back story: after the fear campaign is launched on social media, in whatsapp groups and on instagram, news runs fast. Children are scared to clean their

teeth, young mothers are scared their children will get sick, people throw away their miswak and toothbrushes on massive scale. A riot mob heads to the manufacturer's office to demand compensations and for the CEO to resign. The fear and anger are destabilising the country. An official of the health ministry appears on the official government channel and promises there is no harm in cleaning one's teeth. The manufacturer launches a campaign on social media and promises nothing is wrong with his products. Things seem to calm down. What do we do?

Impersonation (15 minutes)

We attack them, of course. In the second exercise the students impersonate someone who will get involved in the public debate. In groups, they pick one of four options:

- ▶ A mother whose child died of chemicals in miswak
- ▶ An investigative journalist who exposes the corruption of the manufacturer
- ▶ A scientist who has proof that the chemicals in toothbrushes are harmful
- ▶ The health inspector's childhood friend who opens up about his shady past

M. hands out papers with social media profiles; students can fill in the blanks to create their persona and write a social media post. M emphasizes that the best lie is close to the truth, that people tend to believe things that fit in their worldview and ideological preconceptions, that they tend to believe information that comes from someone they can empathize with.

The students get ten minutes to come up with a message on behalf of their persona, and then discuss the results with each other.

Then the moderator continues with their story: the messages work; more and more people believe in the stories of the fake personas. After a fake scandal was exposed, the government official is forced to resign. No one buys toothbrushes and miswak anymore, and the factory goes bankrupt. More and more people quit cleaning their teeth. The dentists have reached their goal; their business is successful!

Investigation (30 minutes)

Then, M explains the situation from a different perspective: the campaign has caused enormous problems in the country, while only a small group benefits. M explains that two investigative journalists - Huda and Suhair - are looking to expose the dentists and tell the truth.

M makes sure that the students start to question their previous opinion about the dentists, and that they switch over and empathize with the journalists.

After continuing with the story, M asks the group how the reporters can share their story. What makes for reliable journalism? Correct answers are: citing your sources, conducting proper research, reporting in a factual manner, letting people make up their minds for themselves by not playing into emotions.

M then steers the conversation towards television news broadcasts: maybe Huda and Suhair can share their story here?

M starts the next exercise:

- ▶ The students rehearse a short news cast (1-2 minutes) in groups of two/three students in which they present Huda and Suhair's story as TV news casters. The groups have 10 minutes to complete this task.
- ▶ After the rehearsal, the news is ready to go live! The students present their broadcasts as newscasters, and compare their approaches.

Exposing the dentists (30 minutes)

M continues the story. After the news is broadcast on national television in Unescia, the dentists launch an elaborate counter attack to discredit Huda and Suhair's work.

M asks the group to think of how they did this when they were the bad guys. The correct answer is: spreading false rumours through fake social media profiles. Then M starts telling back the story. The false rumours are getting out of control, and the reporters are getting scared. It is as though nobody in Unescia wants to believe them...

M then discusses with the group how Huda and Suhair can strike back. How do the students think the fake profiles can be exposed best? There are several ways to trace a fake profile:

- ▶ Tracing the names through a search engine. If you can't find anything related to the name that is shown on the profile, it is most likely fake.
- ▶ Using Google reverse image search, you can trace the profile pictures used for the profile. If this picture is used on other profiles under different names, or if it is used on other websites, it is very likely that the person on the profile picture is not the same person as the profile.

M asks the group if there is someone else Huda and Suhair can use in their exposé of the dentists. Omar's influencer sister of course! The reporters can show the connection between the influencer and the dentists to prove their theory.

Final Discussion (10 minutes)

M continues the story. Slowly the people of Unescia come to their senses. However, they still don't know who or what to believe, and they are still afraid to clean their teeth. A small step towards resolving the national health crisis has been made, but the people of Unescia still have a long way to go in recovering from the disinformation attack by the dentists.

M compliments the group on their work, and asks if the students enjoyed it.

- ▶ What was the general impression?
- ▶ What did it feel like to play the devil for a while? Did it feel good?
- ▶ What was easier? Playing the bad guys or the good guys?

M explains the purpose of the exercise and points out lessons learned: what you have just done is called a "vaccine" against disinformation. This thought exercise has hopefully helped build mental antibodies against the real thing.

The exercise has also shown how difficult it can be to effectively intervene after disinformation has run its course. By playing this module, you can hopefully better identify prospective disinformation before you believe it.

Learning goals

- ▶ Disinformation can spread like wildfire through social media
- ▶ Negative emotions spread most easily
- ▶ People's opinion can be swayed by memes
- ▶ Fake identities can have a lot of influence online
- ▶ Nuance and checking of news source make for credible journalism
- ▶ Understanding what strategies can be used in determining what is real and what is fake for themselves
- ▶ Being able to evaluate why journalistic "truth" can be very nuanced