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***#IMMUNE Train-The-Trainers
Narrative and Toolkit Introduction***

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The #IMMUNE Narrative

It has already been elaborated in the #IMMUNE White Paper: for some years now, interest in the phenomenon of media disinformation and fake news has increased considerably. It has been recognised that widespread disinformation is a danger, especially for democratic societies with a free and independent press. They undermine social cohesion by increasing social tensions, poisoning social communication, inciting social groups and playing them off against each other. In response, governmental and civil society organisations have taken up this issue and launched various initiatives and projects to counter this phenomenon.

The main focus is on the subject of misinformation. Its structure, dissemination channels and objectives are discussed. Methods and teaching content are also developed that show how misinformation and its different variants can be uncovered (debunking) and facts can be checked (fact checking). This is often combined with the basics of journalistic work. Recipients are trained to recognise qualitative journalistic work and to do it themselves. In some examples, further methodological knowledge is imparted, such as elements of critical thinking as a basic attitude towards media reporting and as a basic attitude in a free democratic society.

Somewhat less attention is paid to the question of the origin of the disinformation wave and in particular why it is having such a destructive effect on society today. After all, disinformation and propaganda are not entirely new phenomena that emerged with digitalisation. They have always been elements of governance in authoritarian societies and are also prevalent in liberal democracies.

In general, it is often argued (see e.g. DORIAN project) that in the media landscape of the digital age, important control functions regarding the quality of published material have been lost. In the pre-digital era, the production of text-based and audiovisual material and especially the distribution of this material involved a great deal of effort and high costs. Publishers, newspapers and broadcasters had a certain gatekeeping position with their established distribution network, i.e. they had the power to publish only what met their quality standards. The end result was that media content had a certain quality and the reporting met at least some basic journalistic standards. Even if certain media houses leaned towards a certain political direction, facts had to and still have to be thoroughly researched before they can be published. Likewise, opinions must be clearly separated from factual reports for the consumer. Established media houses were and are formally obliged to do this, for example by the German State Media Treaty.

The general assumption now is that newspapers, publishers and broadcasters have largely lost this gatekeeping power in the digital age. Media content can be produced without great difficulty and published

via various social media and internet platforms. These have hardly any rules for the published content. It is true that the big online platforms try to ensure that no criminal material is published on their pages. However, their measures have nothing to do with journalistic standards.

Accordingly, it is obvious to place debunking, factchecking and journalistic standards at the centre of the aforementioned initiatives. Since people generally can no longer rely on the fact that information and news circulating in the public domain have already been qualitatively checked, it is the task of each individual media consumer to critically reflect on the news that they are presented. For this, they need a certain set of tools.

Without a doubt, this line of argument is not wrong. The oversupply of information and news is enormous, given the new ways of producing and disseminating disinformation. A good understanding of what constitutes quality reporting is therefore important. Nevertheless, this argument does not go far enough because the new media distribution channels via social media and other internet platforms are fundamentally changing the way we consume information and how it is presented to us.

Digital media content is generally easier to absorb, is shorter, simpler and more visual. Media content also tends to speak negative emotions to trigger states of arousal. The former is due to our reduced attention span, the latter is the consequence of our human trait to be more attentive to such information. If reporting is emotional, provocative, confrontational, easy to consume, and visually appealing, it is more likely to be perceived and absorbed by the average media consumer. This circumstance alone plays into the hands of widespread disinformation, because there tends to be less room for a deliberative and differentiated presentation of news in the average news coverage.

More serious, however, is the fact that social media and internet platforms - even the online versions of established media houses - do not present information and news to their users randomly. Rather, they make sure that the user is shown content that is likely to be of interest to the user. The criterion that is used is not the quality of the information, but the ability of the information to increase their engagement - i.e. the likelihood of further interaction with the platform. Since this calculation is made individually for each case, the perspective of each individual user changes - each user receives his or her own, tailor-made picture of the news situation.

This personalisation is the decisive element of the advertising-financed business model of the dominant technology companies such as *Alphabet* or *Meta*. Their enormous economic success has shaped the entire online advertising industry and is the standard today.

Personalisation means that social media, other internet platform operators and advertisers create detailed activity and personality profiles of internet users and feed them constantly with data that they obtain from widespread monitoring of internet users. This allows them to make precise estimates of the interests and preferences of individual users and supply them with individually tailored content and advertisement.

For example, if I regularly watch NBA basketball games online this is recorded by tracking cookies of social media sites or other advertisers. They recognize my affinity to NBA Basketball. This interest is making me a potential target for sports brands that produce Basketball gear as it stands to reason that I also like to play Basketball or at least like to wear Basketball sportswear. The advertiser or the platform operator sells this information to companies that produce Basketball gear – for example to NIKE that is just about to put out the latest Air Jordan collection. Hence, I am a high potential target for NIKE because I am probably highly interested in new Air Jordan Basketball shoes. Accordingly, I am provided with advertisement for the latest Air Jordan collection if I use the platform operator's services or interact with websites that are linked to the advertiser. In addition to the advertisements, I also receive other information about basketball - e.g. links to live broadcasts of basketball games, reports about the latest Basketball gossip as well as links to US-American "rap music" - because, as the evaluations of the platform operators show, people with an affinity for basketball also have an affinity for "US-American rap music". As indicated, all this does not happen by chance, but with the intention of keeping me on the respective platform for as long as possible and showing me advertising repeatedly and as often as possible. Companies profit from this because they can advertise their products, the platforms profit through their fees.

Personalisation thus allows platform operators to always provide us with the information we most likely to want to see and hear. This may be convenient for shopping or amusement - why should I watch advertisements of football boots if I don't play football at all? From a democratic perspective, however, this kind of personalisation is problematic. A democracy is built upon the recognition that opposing positions have their legitimate place in a pluralistic society and the conviction that political decisions in must take into account and include the various social currents in a society. Accordingly, whether I like it or not, each and every citizen needs to be aware of these other societal currents, has to deal with those at least to some extent and must recognize their legitimacy.¹

The dominant business model of the big platform operators does not promote this democratic mindset - to the contrary - it effectively prevents any discussion and debate. If the selection algorithm of a media platform filters out all content that contradicts my interests, preferences and opinions, my engagement

¹ The only limit is attitudes, opinions, and interests that deny others their dignity as human beings, their human and civil rights and, in general, their legitimate right to be part of our society.

with these social realities is prevented. Since such algorithms always present the content that corresponds to my opinions and attitudes, I run the risk of increasingly losing myself in an isolated thought construct in which I run the risk to become more and more extreme and radical about it.

This personalisation is hard to escape as it permeates the most platforms of daily use. It dominates my search bar on Google and YouTube, my news feed on Facebook and Instagram, as well as my electronic assistants in my mobile phone and my email inbox. On all these channels, therefore, I always get the same (political) messages. Considering the extent of internet use and the large role that social media play in the dissemination of news and political opinions, it is fair to say that the dominant business model of the online advertising industry is damaging democracy. False news and disinformation reinforce the negative effect. But in the end, they are just using the same manipulation tool that the online advertising industry is built on.

In summary, we find that to counter the negative impact of disinformation on society, we must not only be concerned with the subject matter of the false news. We must also address the fact that the selection of information - the content we have in front of us - does not appear there by chance. We are confronted with the *content* out of strategic considerations and calculations - we are to be manipulated and influenced out of economic considerations. This online advertising industry is ideal for disinformation and propaganda, because it transports its messages precisely to the people with whom they have the greatest influence. But even without disinformation, this personalised dissemination system has a negative impact on our democratic society.

If we manage to free ourselves from the manipulations of the personalised advertising system, disinformation and fake news will also lose their negative impact. Nevertheless, we must also realise that in view of the one-sidedness of reporting, we have an increased responsibility to create a social discourse, to actively broaden our horizons and - even if it sometimes hurts - to deal with counter-positions to our own. Online media in particular offer almost unlimited opportunities for this. We just must not stop actively seeking our information and rely exclusively on the suggestions of platform algorithms. We must be aware of the fact that these are geared towards the economic profit of the platform operators and never towards the functioning of a democratic society or the expansion of our individual horizons.

Accordingly, the #IMMUNE Train-The-Trainer Format is not limited on fake news and disinformation. It is broadening the perspective to the social media business model with personalization as its core methodology. The Train-The-Trainer documents and the entire #IMMUNE Toolkit is investing a large share of its efforts to introducing trainers in civic education to this somewhat technical subject and raising their awareness for the necessity to thematize youngsters' social media consumption habits

beyond the aspect of fake news and disinformation. Additionally, it is making suggestions how this subject can be put on the agenda of trainers in their average teaching environment.

This focus on the social media business model is complemented by explanations and exercises that are tackling our news consumption more specifically. They deal with questions like critical thinking, the recognition of fake news and disinformation and the dynamics of journalism and media ethics. Specific exercises are designed to introduce youngsters to these somewhat abstract subjects. All exercises are picked and designed in order to make trainers and youngsters alike aware of their own media consumption and to develop a critical distance to the news coverage – expecting that this makes them #IMMUNE To Opinion Manipulation.

The #IMMUNE Toolbox

This #IMMUNE Toolbox is covering the subject described above in five modules. They will be briefly described below. Each module is containing an introduction to its specific topic. It is preparing trainers substantially and is providing references to literature and other multi-media resources for self-learning.

Additionally, the modules are providing exercises that trainers can carry out with their youngsters. They are described in an own introductory text which is complemented by all the necessary documents needed for the implementation of the exercises like presentations and worksheets. Again, videos and other multi-media resources help the trainers to familiarize with the respective topic that they are about to present.

Module 1: The resource for the social media business model: Data

The major commodity that personalised advertisement is built upon is data. The first module is going to give a brief overview of how data is collected and processed before it can be used for advertising purposes. The module is first, presenting shortly the technical preconditions that allows large scale data collection. Second, it is looking into types and methodologies of data collection. It is, in particular showing how much data all users are voluntarily giving up, how Cookies work and which other data collection and identification methodologies exist. Third, it is describing briefly why the data is valuable for advertisers and how they are processed after being collected. Fourth, the module is presenting ways how to secure personal data and limit the data-collection possibilities. The main focus here is the “General Data Protection Regulation” (GDPR) as well as individual measures each user can apply.

Module 2: The method of the social media business model: Personalisation and Engagement Rate

The reason why social media and other internet platform operators make such an effort to collect all these data is to provide their users with highly personalised advertisement with a high probability to triggering a purchasing decision. Therefore, the platform operators are keen to maximise the engagement rate of the users with the platform. This means that they take measures to motivate the users to like, share, comment or produce content on the platform. On the one hand this leads to a prolonged and intensified user experience giving the operator plenty of opportunities to place personalised advertisement. On the other hand a high engagement rate improves the data-base of the platform operator enabling it to further complete the user's data profile and enabling the platform operator to provide the user with even more accurate personalised advertisement. The more the user engages with the platform the more information it is giving up, the more accurate is the characterisation of its interests, and the more appropriate are the suggested ads. Accordingly, all the content that is presented on a social media profile is personalised – not only the advertisement. The user is presented exclusively content that it is supposedly increasing its engagement with the platform.

Module 2 is describing personalisation in greater detail and is explaining why it works. In particular, it is outlining human psychological traits that are exploited by social media platform operators that make the engagement rate increase. It is also giving a short insight in how the social media platform operators earn their money.

Module 3: The Impact of the Social Media Business Model on society

The social media business model has proved to be a gigantic success – financially. Social Media platform operators make astronomic profits and their parent companies have risen to become the most valuable and profitable companies the world has ever seen. However, their financial success comes with considerable harmful societal side effects. They concern the users individually – the way we communicate with each other on a personal and societal level – and have a devastating impact on our political systems, free and liberal democracies in particular. More specifically, they profoundly disturb the way we deal with societal and political conflicts and our ability to settle them.

This module names these side-effects and explains how they come about. Thereby, the module resorts importantly to scientific psychological insights in order to understand which human traits are intentionally exploited by social media platform operators for making profit.

Module 4: Surfing on a wave of personalisation: fake news and disinformation

Opinion manipulation and propaganda are not new phenomena, they have existed long before the rise of social media and before the term ‘fake news’ made its way into everyday language. In fact, propaganda has existed through all centuries and has involved all kinds of communication channels, from billboards, newspapers and radio to television and the internet. This module, therefore, begins with an overview about propaganda – what it is and its effects on individuals and societies – and outlines propaganda techniques and strategies that were already used before the event of the digital age. The second part of this module then delves into new methods propagandists use in the digital age, such as social bots and trolls.

Module 5: Media Ethics

The final module takes a step back and asks for the new role of media in the digital age. It increases trainers’ and youngsters’ understanding of the high importance of media when it comes to informing the public, shaping and structuring the public discussion about pressing societal challenges. It also discusses the concept of ethics as an inner superintendent of decent moralities, ideals and opinions that impact on how people analyse or interpret a situation and to adjust their behaviour accordingly. Trainers and youngsters are sensitized for the fact that every piece of information has a manipulative element and that there are ways how to free oneself from it. After dealing with questions of media ethics trainers’ and youngsters’ minds will be sharpened and prepared to see more clearly through the jungle of information in the digital space.