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*Report based on surveys & focus groups interviews (educators & students)
regarding students and educators thoughts about the concepts of fake news and
political manipulation.*

The German case study

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Document description

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1. INTRODUCTION

This document represents the substantial starting point of the “#IMMUNE to Opinion Manipulation” project. The central aim of the project is to establish a platform for sharing and exchanging information and educational material about the topic of disinformation and disinformation campaigns in Germany, Italy, Greece, and eventually all over Europe.

The platform addresses educators who should be motivated and enabled to sensitise their pupils for misinformation, disinformation campaigns and propaganda in media coverages, in particular in online media outlets and social media.

This German Country Study is one of three reference points that lay the foundation for the development of the platform. It has three elements:

1. First, it is giving a short glimpse of the actual debate about the topic of misinformation and disinformation campaigns in Germany: how the issue is perceived and which subjects are highlighted. This contains also some actual examples of disinformation that is currently observed.
2. Second, it is listing actual initiatives, projects, and organisations that are dealing with the subject of fake news and disinformation or with media literacy more generally.
3. Third, it presents the results of a survey among educators and youngsters that were interviewed about their perception of disinformation in their everyday life. The survey was conducted during the months of March-May 2021. It is a particularly important element of the platform development process and its co-creative approach. Therein, the target groups – educators and youngsters – are involved in the conceptualisation and design of the platform. They give the developers important input about its content, functionalities and usability.

This work aims to give the developers of the "IMMUNE to Opinion Manipulation" platform important clues for its content and design. It is therefore to be understood as a starting and reference point for future developments.

2. CURRENT TRENDS IN FAKE NEWS AND POLITICAL MANIPULATION IN GERMANY

The actual debate

The public debate about fake news and disinformation in Germany has gained traction. The problems and threats that arise from this continuously growing phenomenon have been realized and are being observed and researched. First public and societal reactions are discussed and initial countermeasures are implemented. However, just like other societal developments that are taking place in the context of the wave of digitalisation, disinformation and fake news that are used in online communication strategies are a relatively recent phenomenon. Accordingly, the state of knowledge is rather thin as are the possible remedies and societal defense strategies.

Commentators are, however, rather unanimous in their assessment that targeted fake news and disinformation that are distributed through online channels are increasingly threatening the democratic will formation in Western democracies and needs to be counteracted in a systematic way (Wissenschaftliche Arbeitsgruppe Nationaler Cyber-Sicherheitsrat, 2019). According to the Cyber-Security Council ("Cyber-Sicherheitsrat") of the German Ministry of Education and Research the principle aim of disinformation is to undermine trust in institutions or persons and advance the fragmentation of our society. This is achieved through impacting the public debate about controversial issues in a negative way: agitating against those involved in the debate, sowing uncertainty and confusion (EUvsDisInfo, 2021). Therefore, pieces of fake news and disinformation do not even have to be of good quality to have their effects. They just need to tap a certain feeling that is already present in the debate.

It is also uncontroversial that the mechanisms that apply in the context of fake news and disinformation are not new. They are well known from the world of propaganda and traditional media manipulation attempts. But, they have become much more problematic and dangerous since they can be applied to digital communication. They are easily produced, easily spread and generally ideal for deceiving and divisive manipulation strategies (Jarusch, J. 2019). Furthermore, information technology offers plenty of highly powerful methodologies to forge information e.g. through specially produced videos or "deep fakes" (Wissenschaftliche Arbeitsgruppe Nationaler Cyber-Sicherheitsrat, 2019). Nevertheless, the phenomenon of widespread disinformation that is boosted by the possibilities of internet technologies is still new and highly dynamic. Accordingly, the knowledge about it is still preliminary and many questions are still under investigation. However, Steinbach et al. (2020) from the DORIAN Project describe the current situation of fake news and disinformation in Germany as follows:¹

¹ The following assessments are taken from Steinbach, M. et al. (2020): Desinformation aufdecken und bekämpfen. Interdisziplinäre Ansätze gegen Desinformationskampagnen und für Meinungspluralität. Baden-Baden: Nomos

Fake News and disinformation in German-speaking Europe are mainly produced by and for a right-wing populist audience. 88,3 % of the cases in the DORIAN Project can be categorized accordingly. 3,5 % of the researched cases can be classified as left or left-leaning; 8,2 cannot be classified in right or left leaning. By the year 2020 they have left their niche and are increasingly reaching mainstream media. However, they are not as wide-ranging as populist outlets in the United States as for example Fox News that actively produce and promote right-wing populist content. In Germany and German speaking Europe established media usually do not take up such content and do not participate in its distribution.

Also in contrast to the United States, there are no media outlets that produce and spread news that are exclusively fake. The relevant webpages or newspapers use to mingle true and false facts and mix in political or societal opinions. Thereby, the false factual claim is mostly found in the header or in the teaser already. The rest of the publication is then either totally meaningless or is recycling known facts from other news. These tactics are done in order to optimise the content for search engines and increase the number of "clicks". In general, fake news and pieces of disinformation use to imitate journalistic presentation patterns of established media outlets in order to build trust among the readers.

Producers of fake news and disinformation are generally found to exhibit a highly problematic handling of facts. The majority of the objects of investigation make statements without providing any evidence or proof. This clearly contradicts journalistic standards. This is also true for the professionalism of these publications: Facts and statements are rarely consistent, the language is rather imprecise, the lead text and the header is often of low quality.

Thematically, the focus of fake news and disinformation in Germany is on migration and on internal security policy. Thereby, a majority of the fake news give the impression that migrants are a threat to our societies and harm the direct environment of the reader or spectator. Important is the fact that the fake news and pieces of disinformation keep suggesting that criminal migrants are a direct threat to the health and the well-being of everyone. This should fuel fear among the readers against migrants and foreigners. Another pattern that can be found in fake news about migration and internal security is that the subject is presented in a merely uncontroversial way. The presented circumstances are exhibited as fixed facts that are not brought forward to a discussion.

Another pattern in the German fake news landscape is its relation to populism.² 75,1% of the researched examples of fake news apply populist communication strategies. 63% of

² Thereby, the following characteristics of populism are applied: First, populists assume ethnically and culturally homogeneous nations in which all the common people are pursuing the same good societal objectives. Second, the common people are assumed to be in opposition to a corrupt elite that third, oppose their cultural heritage in favour of ethnic, religious, or sexual minorities that are not assumed to be part of the homogenous people.

the fake news even apply “thick populism” - communication that is actively marginalising and attacking everyone outside the assumed homogeneous people. A particularity of the German fake news landscape is that opposition to the elite like political institutions and individual persons representing the state is even stronger than the opposition against migrants and other societal groups. This hints to the fact that fake news and disinformation in Germany is highly politicised. Steinbach et al. (2020) write: “Producers of fake news in the German speaking realm cannot be called classical media actors. Moreover, they are rather politically motivated media actors that have their own political and economic agenda and are associated with populist parties and politicians” (Steinbach et al. (2020): p. 55 - own translation).

The fact that fake news and disinformation is particularly frequent in populist communication strategies implies that they are frequently based on lies or false facts. This can be interpreted in two ways: First, populist arguments can be used to legitimize statements that are not based on facts. Thereby, they point to an abstract common sense that reveals itself to the homogeneous people but would not withstand a rational verification. This line of argumentation insulates false statements from critique because those that criticise populist arguments – mostly journalists or scientists as members of the elites – are not part of the homogeneous people and have no access to their “common sense” anyway. Second, such a populist line of argumentation discredits classical, objective ways to establish truth. Classical journalistic and scientific methodologies in which research follows specific rules are rejected. “Thus, populist communication strategies can either be understood as an attempt to conceal false statements or as the cause for why false statements occur” (Steinbach M. et al. (2020) – own translation).

Actual initiatives to combat fake news

Slowly but steadily public institutions on all levels as well as private organisations have started to tackle this problem and to formulate counter-measures. German authorities for example are searching for the best response to disinformation and fake news. The “Netzwerkdurchleitungsgesetz” for example is a legislative attempt to hold social media providers accountable for the content that is posted on their platform. Unfortunately, up to date that attempt is considered little effective for combating disinformation because the policy is not able to precisely differentiate between what is actually illegal and what is still covered by the freedom of the speech (Jarusch, 2019). An initiative by the European Commission and its proposal for a “Digital Services Act” is going to incorporate the same approach but will have to come up with more effective instruments.

Another attempt by German authorities to address the phenomenon of disinformation is the revision of the so called “Medienstaatsvertrag” (Interstate Media Treaty) of the 16 German states. It is regulating the German media landscape and is defining the rights and duties of media providers that are active in Germany. The latest revision from October 2020 is explicitly equating internet media and traditional tele media, radio and print media. This means that they are equally responsible for their content and need to adhere to the

rules of the treaty. This treaty is also allowing internet media outlets to be investigated by public authorities in case of breaching these rules. However, it remains to be seen how well German authorities are prepared to fulfil their monitoring and supervising duties and whether they are able to identify, investigate and sanction internet media in the future. In particular, the resource endowment of the acting bodies in the public authorities appears to be questionable (Laufer, 2020).

Next to legislative activities, public authorities in Germany are also supporting research in the area of disinformation in order to better understand its mechanisms. Two prominent recent examples are

- The DORIAN Project under the leadership of the German Fraunhofer Society,
- The PANDORA Project involving several German universities.

These are multi-disciplinary projects consisting of social scientists and political scientists, media scientists, information scientists, psychologists and several others that investigate questions like the structure and strategies of fake news and disinformation, their distribution channels and dynamics, their impact on the society and media reporting/journalism, the political system and individual persons.

But also the civil society is increasingly active in countering disinformation in online and traditional media. Yet, the landscape of countermeasures seems to be just as dynamic, confused and unstructured. Many organisations and public authorities publish their methodologies and resources. Those demanding these services are confronted with the task to select the most appropriate ones from a confusingly complex context. In the following this document presents a list of organisations, projects and recourses that offer materials and tools to deal with the topic of fake news and disinformation. This list, however, is necessarily preliminary and will be further developed.

- **Reporterfabrik (<https://reporterfabrik.org>)**

This website is offering educational material and seminars for the broad public in journalism and journalistic standards. It understands itself as a school of journalism in the internet (<https://reporterfabrik.org/news/lehrangebot/1100-tutorials-120-podcasts/>). This website is run by personalities from established media outlets and newspapers like „Der Spiegel“, „Zeit“ and the fact-checking organisation „CORRECTIV“.

- **Salon 5 (<https://salon5.org/was-ist-salon5/>)**

This website is a platform for youngsters who want to work journalistically. By contributing to the platform they learn about journalistic standards and how to differentiate quality journalism from fake news and disinformation. Solon5 is operated by the fact-checking organisation CORRECTIV.

- **Klicksafe (<https://www.klicksafe.de/>)**

This EU initiative aims at promoting people' media literacy. "Klicksafe" is bundling and developing relevant information and offerings for a safe and self-sufficient usage of the internet and to help users to critically assess the media coverage.

- **Amadeo Antonio Foundation**

This private foundation is dedicated to the fight against racism and and nationalism in any form.

- In this capacity, the foundation released guidelines how to deal with conspiracy theories and the related disinformation (<https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/publikationen/2x6-punkte-gegen-verschwuerungsdnken/>).
- A second publication is dealing with the question how this subject can be tackled in education in general and in school, in particular ([#https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Broschuere_VI_Schule_2021.pdf](https://www.amadeu-antonio-stiftung.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Broschuere_VI_Schule_2021.pdf))#

- **Medien in der Schule (<https://www.medien-in-die-schule.de/>)**

This website and offers educational material, toolboxes and practical applications for teachers and pedagogical experts in the context of how to treat media literacy in school or other educational contexts. The website emerged from a cooperation between the "Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle Multimedia-Dienstanbieter (FSM)" and "Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle Fernsehen (FSF) as well as google. FSM and FSF are voluntary networks of media providers that aim at youth protection.

- **Lie Detectors (<https://lie-detectors.org/>)**

"Lie Detectors is an independent, award-winning and journalist-led news literacy organisation that works to empower schoolchildren and their teachers in Europe to act as powerful lie detectors and critical thinkers in a world increasingly populated by propaganda and distorted facts online" (<https://lie-detectors.org/> viewed on June 30, 2021).

- **CORRECTIV (<https://correctiv.org/>)**

CORRECTIV is an independent journalistic research network and one of the most prominent fact-checking organisations in Germany. In its fact-checking division CORRECTIV debunks false information and disinformation. Its media coverage is regularly appearing in established media outlets.

- **Demokratielabore (<https://demokratielabore.de/>)**

Demokratielabore (democracy labs) is a project by the "Open Knowledge Foundation", the "Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung" and the Federal Ministry for

Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth. Between June 2017 and April 2019 this project developed materials and resources in the context of media literacy and implemented 94 workshops all over Germany. The resources of this project are still available and free for usage.

- **MEKiS – Medienkompetenz in der Sozialen Arbeit** (<https://www.mekis.ch/instrumente.html>)

This is a platform run by the University of Applied Sciences North Western Switzerland on which it is publishing educational material in the context of media literacy.

- **Zukunft Digitale Bildung (ZDB)**

ZDB is a non-profit organisation that is working on challenges and solutions for the educational system in the digital era. In their section “Behind the Fake News” they offer educational modules for educators and teachers that sensitise them for fake news and they can be countered.

- **Project of the “Berliner Journalistenschule” about Fake-News** (<https://www.berliner-journalisten-schule.de/bjs-projekte/fake-news-oder-real-news-ein-workshop/>)

In this project youngsters learn how to check information that they find on the internet.

- **Open Your Eyes Project** (<https://www.openyoureyes.info/en>)

This is an ERASMUS+ project that is providing resources for teachers and educators about the subject of fake news and disinformation. The project provides also a list of useful tools and initiatives to learn about online disinformation.

- **WeVerify Project** (<https://weverify.eu/about/>)

WeVerify is a H2020 project aiming for a collaborative, decentralised content verification, tracking, and debunking platform. The project is about to end in November 2021. If and how the developments of the project will be made available is not known at the time of writing.

- **Co-Inform Project** (<https://coinform.eu/>)

Co-Inform is a H2020 supported project for fostering critical thinking and digital literacy. Citizens, journalists and policymakers should be provided with tools to spot ‘fake news’ online, understand how they spread, and obtain access to verified information.

- **SWR Fakefinder – for kids, youngsters, for you!** (<https://www.swr.de/unternehmen/medienkompetenz/fakefinder-100.html>)

The SWR fake finder is a composition of methodologies, tools and resources that can be used by youngsters to research their individual news feed.

- **Training Club EU (trainigclub.eu)**

This is a web source for training material. In its fake news section (<https://trainingclub.eu/fake-news/>) it provides access to online courses about the subject.

- **Fake it to make it (<https://fakeittomakeit.de/>)**

“Fake it to make it” is a game that deals with the societal effects of fake news. The game can be played online. Working material are also available.

- **Get Bad News (<https://www.getbadnews.de/#intro>)**

“Get Bad News” is an online game in which the players are asked to produce bad news in order to generate “clicks” on a hypothetical media outlet. This game was developed by researchers at Cambridge University and DROG, a Netherlands-based platform against disinformation. It is adapted to the German context by the the non-profit organisation “Wissenschaft-im-Dialog gGmbH”.

- **So geht Medien – Medienkompetenz für den Unterricht (<https://www.br.de/sogehmedien/index.html>)**

This website offered by the “Bayrischer Rundfunk” offers material for teaching about fake news as well as online resources like web-videos.

- **Fake Off Project (<https://www.fake-off.eu/de/>)**

“Fake Off” is a ERASMUS+ project for “fostering adolescents’ knowledge and empowerment in outsmarting fake facts.” It offers resources for educational purposes.

- **No Alternative Facts Project (<https://www.noalternativefacts.net/>)**

“No Alternative Facts” is an ERASMUS+ project “tackling intentional misinformation in digital technologies through the development of Critical Thinking Skill and Media Literacy.”

Actual examples of fake news

There are plenty examples of fake news and disinformation circulating in the relevant “alternative” media as fake news outlets like to call themselves. At the time of writing this document the main subject is, of course the Coronavirus pandemic and all the related subjects. Some examples are:

- *QPress* is “reporting” about the Coronavirus as a bio-weapon that was produced in China with financial support of the U.S.A. (<https://qpress.de/2021/06/22/chinas-militaer-planspiele-zu-corona-als-biowaffe/> viewed on June 29th, 2021)
- *Oliver Janich* “presents evidence” that 99.1% of the Covid-19 infections in Portugal are fake (<https://www.oliverjanich.de/court-ruling-in-portugal-991-percent-of-the-covid-deaths-are-fake> viewed on June 29th, 2021)
- *Anonymousnews.ru* also “presents evidence” that the Moderna vaccine against Covid-19 was already fully developed before the Coronavirus appeared (<https://www.anonymousnews.ru/2021/06/27/dokumente-geleakt-moderna-impfstoff-war-entwickelt-bevor-covid-19-auftrat/> viewed on June 29th, 2021).

However, other subjects are prevalent as well. In particular, the German general elections taking place in September of 2021 are already thematised. Examples are:

- *Anonymousnews.ru* is agitating against the candidate for the chancellorship from the Green Party by claiming that she was involved in criminal activities like the misappropriation of party finances, prostitution, and pimping (<https://www.anonymousnews.ru/2021/06/28/die-akte-baerbock-untreue-prostitution-zuhaelterei/> viewed on June 29th, 2021).
- *Oliver Janich* claims to have found evidence for massive election fraud in the state elections of Saxony-Anhalt (<https://www.oliverjanich.de/massiver-wahlbetrug-in-sachsen-anhalt-vorbild-usa> video viewed on June 29th, 2021.)
- *QPress* claims that the Bavarian government is planning to lead us in our way to dictatorship (<https://www.oliverjanich.de/massiver-wahlbetrug-in-sachsen-anhalt-vorbild-usa> viewed on June 29th, 2021).

Apart from these actual subjects the viewed “alternative media” outlets continue to agitate against migrants and Germany’s migration policy. Incidents like the deadly attack of a Somalian migrant in the city of Würzburg on Friday June 25th 2021 is a recurring and frequent topic in the “alternative media” that is viewed for this study.

The quantity of fake news and disinformation is so large that it is not possible to touch upon all of them. Instead, this study refers to frequent internet sources of fake news and disinformation. But here as well, it is hardly possible to produce an exhaustive list of fake news providers in Germany because of two reasons. First, many fora for fake news and disinformation are hidden in chat groups of messenger providers like “Telegram”. They can be entered and viewed if one is able and ready to join these networks. This study refrains from this. Second, the field of fake news and disinformation is dynamic and fluid. Certain providers are banned from all major search engines and are difficult to be found. Others

are in conflict with public authorities and run the risk to be banned from the internet completely. One prominent example is “flinkfeed.com” which is already banned or “kenfm.de” that is also on the brink of being banned. Accordingly, it is very hard to get an exact overview of the fake news and disinformation landscape in Germany.

However, the following list contains enough material for being used for research purposes and to obtain examples for the media literacy platform which is the major objective of the #IMMUNE project.

- **<https://quotenqueen.wordpress.com>**

This website presents short articles and offers extensive possibilities to comment.

- **<https://www.nachdenkseiten.de/>**

It is not easy to categorise this outlet as fake news or a provider of disinformation. Real facts seem to be extensively interpreted and twisted until they represent the opinion of the author. The outlet appears anti-elitist and populist.

- **<https://qpress.de>**

This site seems to come quite close to the definition of a portal exclusively for fake news and disinformation.

- **KenFm / kenfm.de (<https://kenfm.de/>)**

This site is a classical “alternative media outlet” which is mixing true with false facts and is mixing in own opinions. It is currently being investigated by the “Medienanstalt Berlin-Brandenburg”.

- **Tichys Einblick (<https://www.tichyseinblick.de/>)**

It is unclear to what extent this site produces and distributes fake news and disinformation. It is, however, extremely populist and nationalistic.

- **RT today (<https://de.rt.com/>)**

This media outlet is directly financed by the government of the Russian Federation and conducts targeted communication in order to support the Russian interests in Germany. In doing so, RT today does not shy away from interfering in the German public debate by distributing propaganda, fake news and disinformation (EUvsDisinfo, 2021). RT today appears as a highly professional media outlet both in the design and the content. If journalistic standards are breached one can assume that this is done on purpose.

- **Epoch Times (<https://www.epochtimes.de/>)**

At first sight, this website is providing correct news. Most of the headings are the same as in other traditional media outlets. At second sight, however, certain reports

appear to follow the known populist communication patterns. Furthermore, a number of reports seem to be based on shaky facts.

- **PI-News (<http://www.pi-news.net/>)**

This media outlet appears to have a clear populist character. It is focusing on the subject of migration and asylum and is clearly anti elitist. To which extent the facts that it provides are fake and whether the site engages in distributing disinformation is not that clear.

- **Oliver Janich (<https://www.oliverjanich.de/>)**

Oliver Janich is an individual who is actively promoting and distributing conspiracy theories and populist thoughts. It is clearly anti-elitist and one does not have the impression that journalistic standards are respected. Oliver Janich openly refers to the QAnon narratives on his website.

- **QAnon (<http://www.q-anon.de/>)**

This website can easily be called a purely fake news and conspiracy theory distributor.

- **AUF1.tv (<https://auf1.tv/>)**

This is a web-tv outlet that – after a first sight – promotes “alternative news”. Notable is the fact that opinions are sold as objective facts.

- **PATRIA Talk (TV show on youtube)**

This youtube channel looks and feels like an outlet of the political part AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) which is the only right-wing populist party in the German parliament. The news that are distributed here are not necessarily fake. But, they seem to be twisted to make them fit to the worldview of this right-wing party.

- **Anonymousnews.ru (<https://www.anonymousnews.ru/>)**

This website is distributing fake news, disinformation as well as correct information which. In general, the website does not seem to care a lot about journalistic standards. This outlet seems to be tied to Russia.

- **Journalistenwatch.com (<https://www.journalistenwatch.com/>)**

This website has a clear populist appearance. Journalistic standards are not visible. One important topic seems to be the agitation against the candidate for the chancellorship of the Green Party Annalena Baerbock.

- **Exomagazin.tv (<https://www.exomagazin.tv/>)**

This website is categorised as an “alternative media outlet” which is dealing with actual discussions but is bringing forward highly debatable views and perspectives. However, whether or not these perspectives are based on fake news or disinformation is not entirely clear. The site has a populist appearance but seems to be less inflammatory in its speech.

3. THE #IMMUNE SURVEYS

The #IMMUNE project follows a co-creative approach. Accordingly, each partner organisation conducted two online surveys addressed to the project's target groups: youngsters and educators. The aim of the surveys is to explore their' thoughts and experiences in relation to fake news and disinformation. Furthermore, the surveys are intended to provide an empirical backup of the research results that were presented before. This co-creative approach will be continued throughout the project's lifetime with additional dissemination activities with members of the target groups whose input will be used to improve and adapt the project's results. A second co-creative element were focus groups that each partner was called upon to hold. The results of the surveys and the focus groups in Germany are reported in the following.

Survey for educators

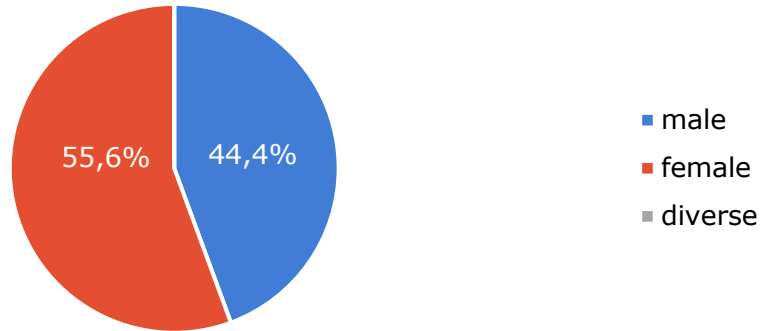
Due to the lockdown restrictions in response to the Coronavirus pandemic all surveys with educators took place online via the google-forms survey tool. The online survey was designed by the University of Peloponnes with the assistance of EuroSoc-DIGITAL. The technical implementation was done by the third partner ALISEO.

The German survey participants were recruited through EuroSoc-DIGITAL's network of schools and other educational institutions that are active in the area of civic education. EuroSoc-DIGITAL managed to motivate 9 educators to participate in the survey. Although a higher number was anticipated, EuroSoc#DIGITAL is satisfied with this number due to the fact that the survey had to take place during the second and third wave of the Coronavirus pandemic in Germany between February and May 2021. During this time schools and other educational institutions were closed and educators had to re-organise their teaching with distant learning becoming the new standard. This situation was highly demanding for each educator and exerted very high pressure on them. Subsequently, the recruitment of survey partners in these circumstances was challenging. Many of our contacts expressed their principal interest in the project but were unable to mobilise any additional resources to deal with an activity like the #IMMUNE project and its survey.

Those educators who responded positively to our invitation to participate had the following characteristics:

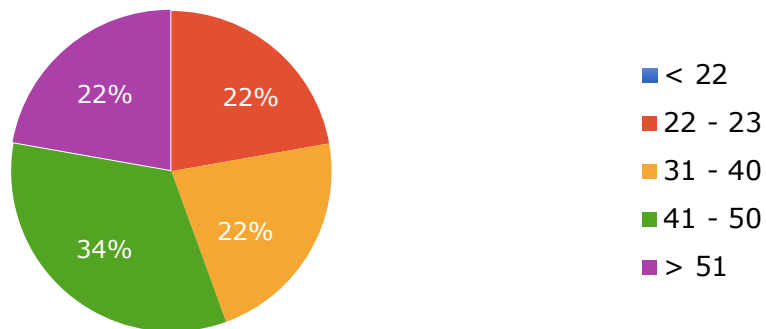
- Number of survey participants: 9
- The survey is balanced in terms of gender.

Figure 1: Gender Distribution Educators



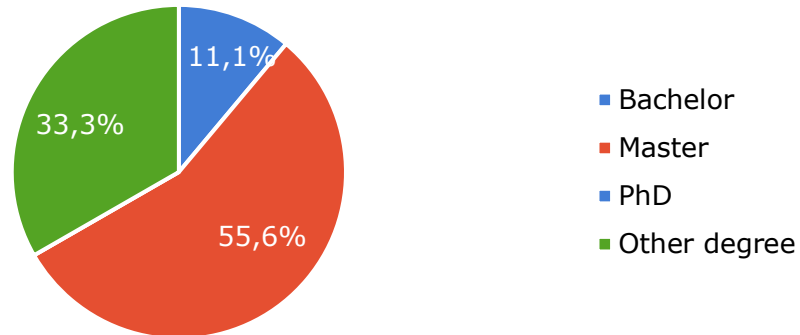
- The age distribution is as follows:

Figure 2: Age Distribution Educators



- The academic degree of the participants:

Figure 3: Academic Background Educators



- The distribution of the educational institutions represented are as follows:
 - 1 teacher in a "Realschule"
 - 2 teachers in a "Gymnasium"
 - 1 teachers in a "Gesamtschule"
 - 2 educators in Europe Direct centres
 - 1 teacher in a "Freie Waldorfschule"
 - 1 freelance educator in civic education
 - 1 educator at a university

The age distribution of the youngsters that are reached by the participating educators lies between 10-30 years of age.

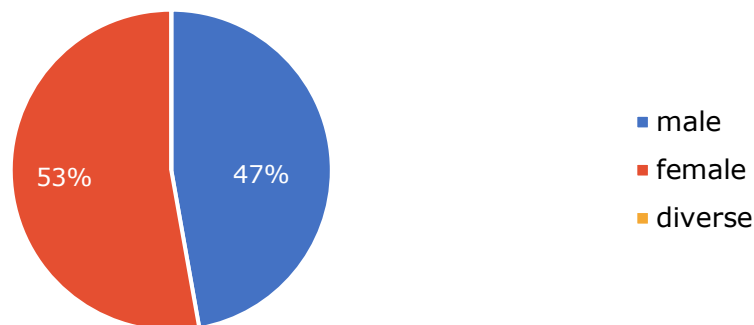
- The classes/subjects that are thought by the participating educators are as follows:
 - Social studies
 - Politics and Society
 - Social Sciences
 - English and Geography
 - Maths
 - Sport
 - Social studies and English

Survey for students

The surveys with the students and youngsters took place in the same period as the one with the educators between February and May 2021. The participating youngsters were recruited mainly by the educators that participated in the educator's survey. Due to lockdown measures the survey was implemented via the same google forms tool. The characteristic of the participating youngsters are as follows:

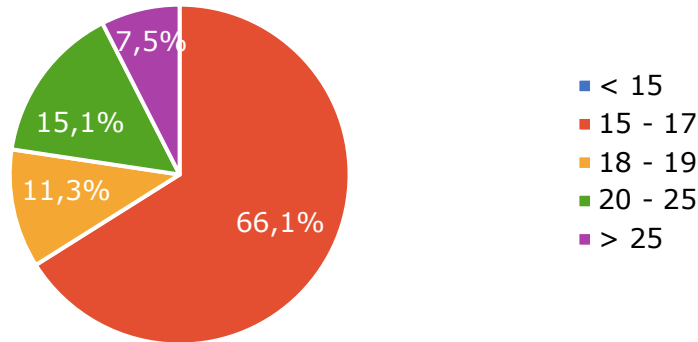
- Number of respondents: 53
- The gender distribution is again balanced:

Figure 4: Gender Distribution Youngsters



- Most of the respondents are between the age of 15-17. The exact distribution is as follows:

Figure 5: Age Distribution Youngsters



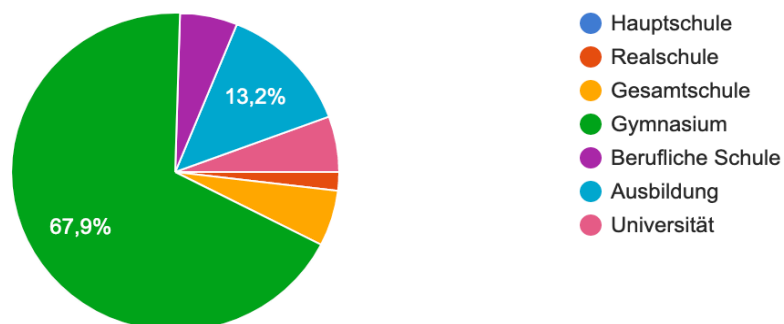
- The youngsters live mostly in small towns. The exact distribution is as follows:

Figure 6: Place of Residence Youngsters



- Most of the respondents attend a "Gymnasium" which enables them to study at a university. The exact distribution is as follows:

Figure 7: Type of School Youngsters



4. THE #IMMUNE FOCUS GROUPS

Unfortunately, the German Country Study is lacking the results of an #IMMUNE Focus Group. Despite numerous recruitment rounds the German partner EuroSoc#DIGITAL was not able to motivate teachers and educators to participate in a focus group. The main reason for this is the pandemic situation during the survey period. This was confirmed by a number of teachers who were interested in the project in principal but were unable to invest their intellectual and time resources due to their heavy workload during the lockdown measure and the reorganisation of their entire teaching.

5. RESULTS ANALYSIS

Survey addressed to Educators

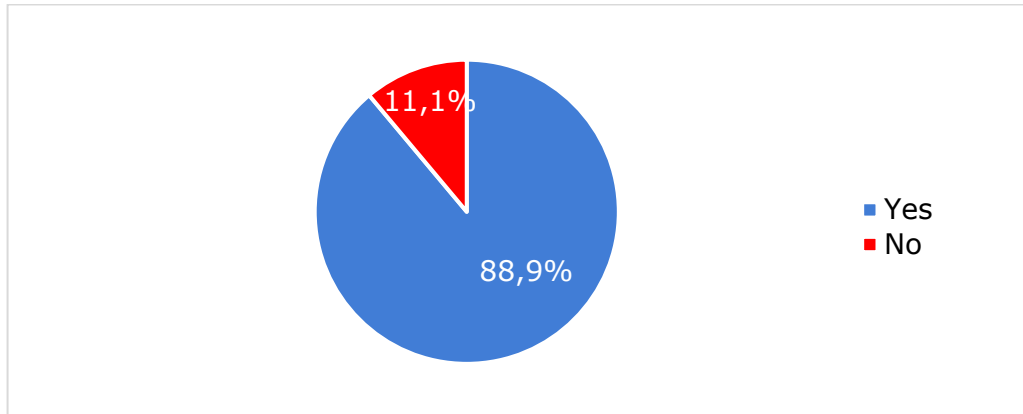
The survey for educators concentrates mainly on questions how they deal with fake news and disinformation on a personal level – whether they recognise fake news and disinformation and what they do if they are confronted with it. Furthermore, some questions also pointed to their opinion how this subject should be treated in the educational system.

Therewith, we intend to enquire whether the educators are familiar with problem itself and with which attitude they deal with the subject in their professional life as educators. This gives important indications how the educational system in which they work is dealing with the challenges that arise from digital communication and the related phenomena. It also gives the #IMMUNE project important indications of what kind of training is needed by the educators and how they could be assisted by the #IMMUNE platform.

The responses can be summarised as follows:

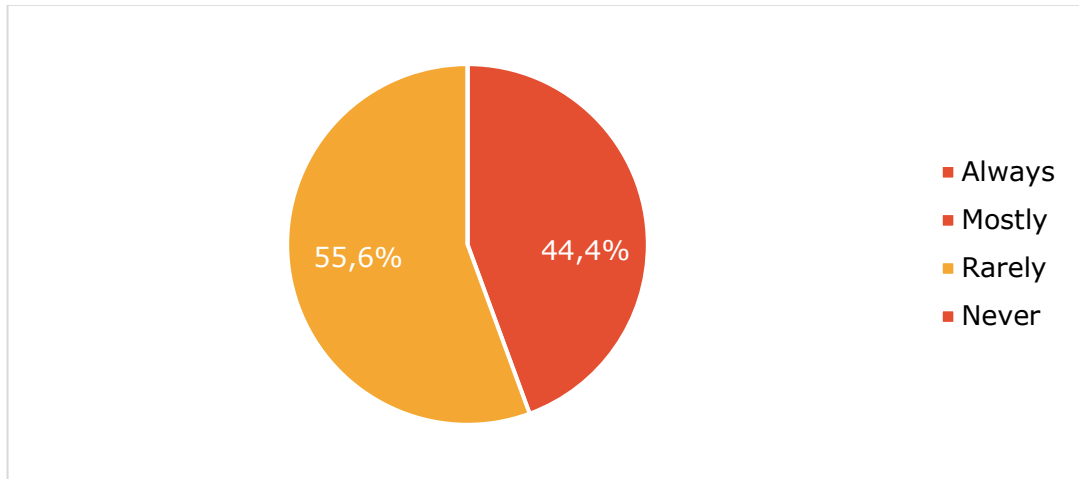
All respondents but one say to have come across fake news recently.

Figure 8: Exposure to Fake News Educators



Furthermore, this does not seem to be a short-term phenomenon but to be the case on a regular basis. Almost half of the respondents say that they usually come across fake news and disinformation when consuming media. The other half reports being confronted with fake news only occasionally.

Figure 9: Fake News and Media Consumption Educators



In general, the respondents seem to be sensitive towards the quality of the information they consume. Asked whether they “usually believe any news they read” more than 80% indicate that they tend to do so. Only 10% seem to be generally sceptical. However, the respondents seem to have a certain scepticism towards news coverages in general: more than half indicate that they usually or occasionally verify information that they are confronted with. Only a minority says that they do rarely or never do this.

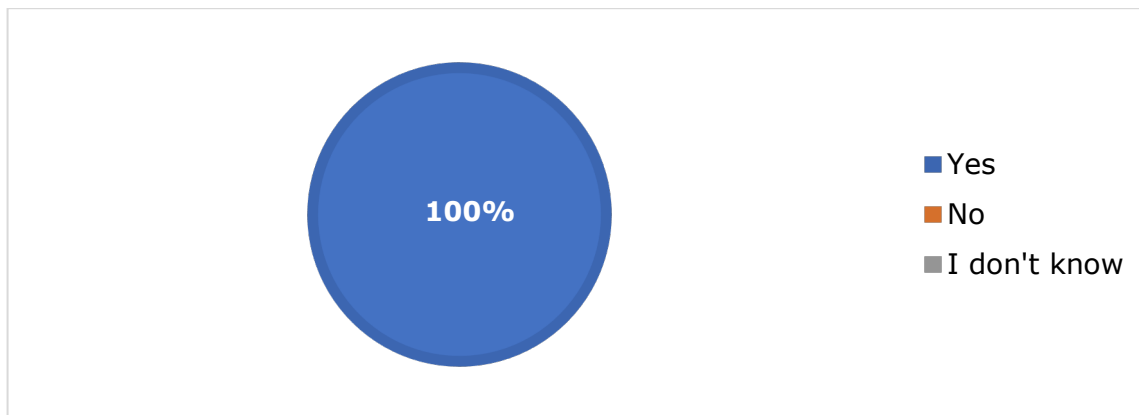
Interestingly, the respondents seem to have a clear idea how to define fake news: distorted or manipulated information that have a specific political or societal purpose. However, the responses show also that the respondents do not have one particular definition in mind but formulate their answers very differently. This hints also to the fact that their take on this subject is very individual and that they cannot resort to one well known and established knowledge.

Asked for the sources of fake news and disinformation the respondents mention social media most often. Here social media platforms like “facebook” are named most frequently. More than a quarter has come across fake news in messenger chats. Two thirds of the fake news combined textual presentation with video or audio formats. This can be well expected. Interesting is, however, that traditional media like newspapers, magazines, TV and radio is named quite often as well.

- The respondents name the following subjects and “alternative media” outlets as examples:
- Denier of the Coronavirus pandemic and opponents of vaccination.
- Comments in the context of the European climate and energy legislation.
- Sebastian Friedel: “Wie soll es weitergehen?”
- RT news
- KenFm

In general, the respondents are confident to recognise fake news and disinformation if they are confronted with it. Asked accordingly, all respondents indicate yes:

Figure 10: Handling Fake News Educators



Most respondents check the sources and compare them with other media outlets. In rare cases they ask friends and family members. Usually, the respondents recognise fake news by the manner in which it is distributed and presented. Some recognise authors that are usually publishing problematic content. In rare cases the respondents judge the content by the publisher.

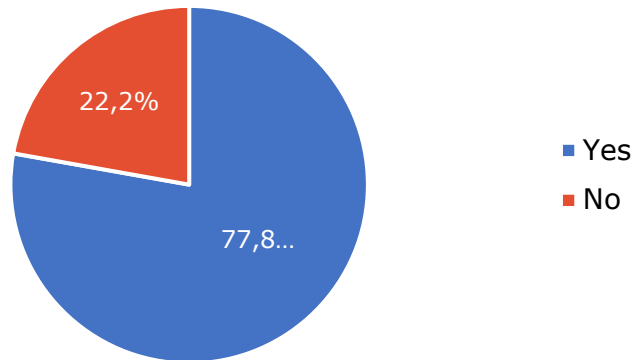
Asked for their reaction if they come across fake news and disinformation the most frequent response was to do nothing and not to pay attention to it. In a number of cases, however, if the content is either highly upsetting or very funny, the respondents become active. They either share the fake news item with their friends or with family members or even contact the publisher or the platform host, respectively to complain about the coverage.

If they are uncertain about the truthfulness of news the respondents used to check the sources, or compare them with coverage in other media outlets. In rare cases they discuss the news item with friends and family members.

These two questions illustrate very well how fake news spread already by the attempt of the consumers to check or verify its content and even if the consumers do not agree with the content.

Despite their answer that they do not pay attention to fake news, more than three quarters of the respondents say that "fake news has an impact on their life".

Figure 11: Impact of Fake News Educators



Being asked for the form of this impact most respondents express their concern that their personal environment is negatively impacted by fake news which would then have an indirect impact on themselves. They also express their worry that the entire political and societal discussion is heated up and that the voting behaviour is influenced.

When being asked for their principal attitude towards the usage of online media in the classroom most respondents say that they do try to include modern communication tools. However, the range of applications seems to be restricted. Modern tools are mostly used for research purposes. Only one respondent says that modern media is used to increase the appeal of the learning content.

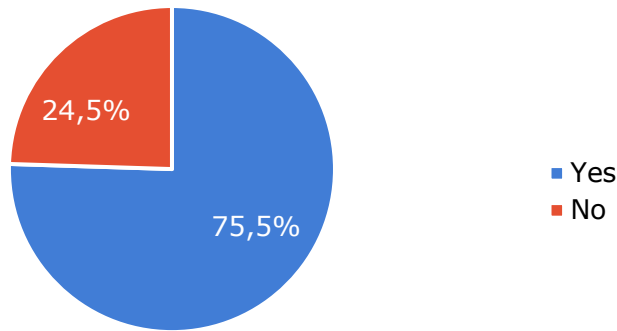
In general, however, all respondents express their personal need as well as the need of the educational system to offer educators training in the context of media literacy in general and of fake news and disinformation in particular. They wish to have specially dedicated university seminars but also as a means of further education for active teachers and educators. One important issue that was mentioned by teachers in particular is to have specially prepared material with little theory and a lot of practical exercises that they can directly use in the classroom. This is a demand that is widely known in the context of civic education.

Survey addressed to Students

The survey addressed to students is, to a large part, similar to the one for the educators. The questions are broadly structured in two categories. The first deals with questions about the personal opinion and experience of youngsters with fake news and disinformation. Furthermore, youngsters were asked whether they think that they can recognise fake news and how they react when they are confronted with them. In the second category students are asked how they perceive the performance of the educational system in the context of media literacy and what kind of support they wish or demand. The results can be summarised as follows:

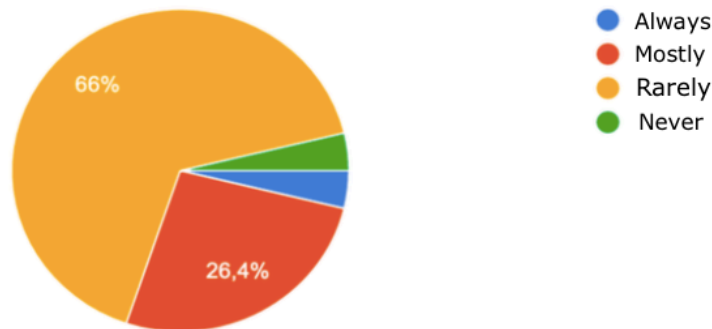
Fake news and disinformation seems to be a relevant topic for youngsters as well. More than 75% of our respondents was confronted with fake news recently.

Figure 12: Exposure to Fake News Youngsters



However, most youngsters also say that they are rarely or never exposed to fake news and disinformation.

Figure 13: Fake News and Media Consumption Youngsters



In general, youngsters seem to consume news with a healthy scepticism. While 85% of the respondents express a rather high trust in the news that they consume they nevertheless indicate that they regularly verify what they read, see or hear on the news. Almost 60% of our respondents tend to do so. In this context, youngsters do indeed seem to differentiate between different media outlets. Asked to which extent they trust different media outlets they gave highly nuanced answers. Apparently, newspapers and radio are considered quite trustworthy whereas magazines, social networks and messengers are not. TV is rated somewhere in the middle.

Figure 14: Fake News and Types of Media I

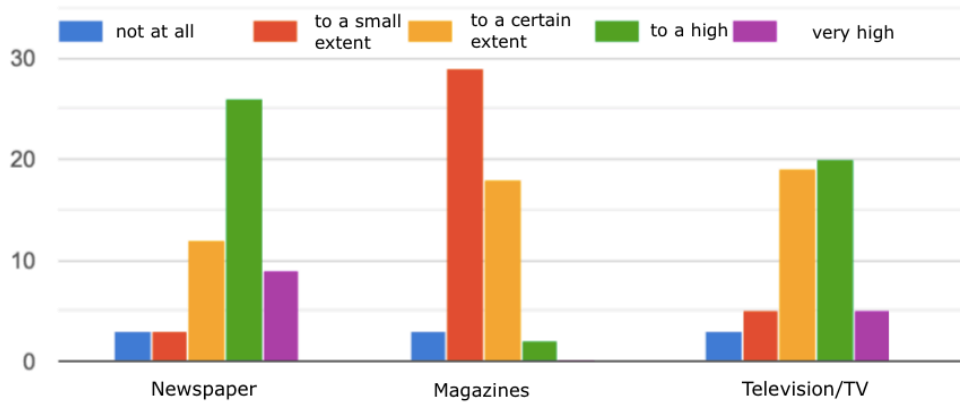
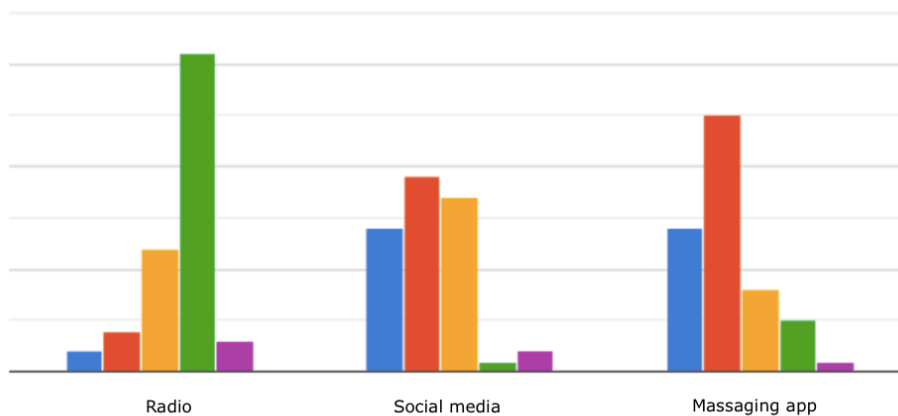


Figure 15: Fake News and Types of Media II



Social media and messengers are the type of media that they spend most time with. Asked for the time they spend with different media they responded like this:

Figure 16: Media Utilisation I

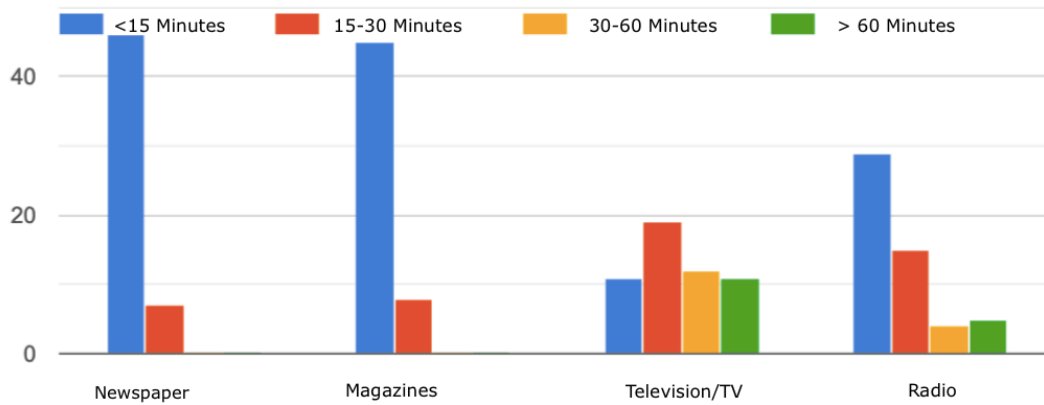
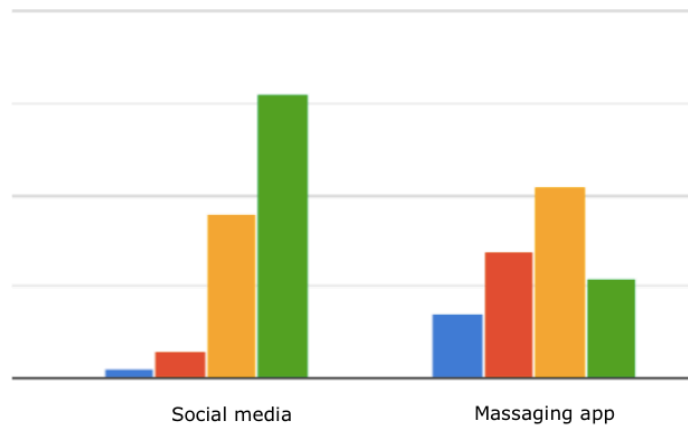
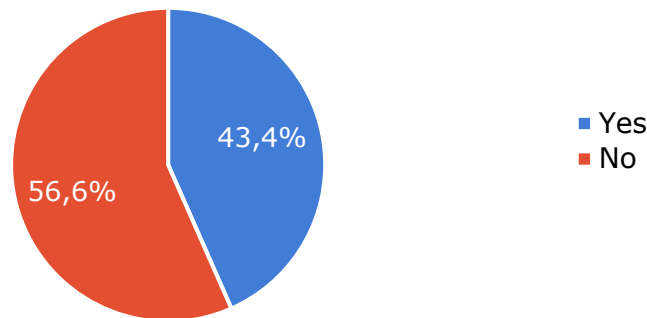


Figure 17: Media Utilisation II



Both questions combined indicate that youngsters spend most of their online time with media that they themselves consider not trustworthy. However, they do not seem to be very stressed by this fact. More than half of the respondents say that fake news and disinformation has no impact on their personal life.

Figure 18: Impact of Fake News on Youngsters



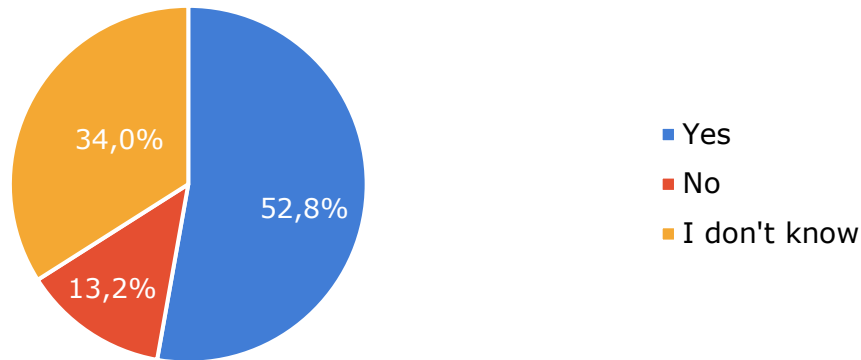
Interestingly, those that express that fake news have an impact on their life say that they are concerned because of the impact on their environment. Only one respondent supposes that fake news coverage could lead to him-or herself to perceive politics wrongly. Most comments indicate that others might be impacted - the impact on themselves is not thematised.

Apparently, youngsters seem to perceive less fake news and disinformation than educators do and they are more relaxed when it comes to assessing their consequences. This might be due to the fact that they consume other media than the educators or that they do not recognise fake news if they see them.

The main sources of fake news and disinformation for the respondents are clearly social media. 95% of the respondents say that they have come across fake news items on social media platforms like "facebook" or "Instagram" or in a messenger chat. 40% indicate to have seen fake news on TV, 25% in newspapers, 12,5% say that they have read fake news in magazines, 5% have heard something on radio. Most fake news items were text based or combined different presentation formats. A quarter saw fake news as a video. Asked for the topics that were dealt with most respondents named the Coronavirus pandemic as well as news from the world of celebrities and sports.

Youngsters seem to be confident in evaluating fake news items. More than 50% hold the opinion that they recognise fake news if they are confronted with them. 34% is uncertain only 13,2% say that they are do not do so.

Figure 19: Handling Fake News Youngsters

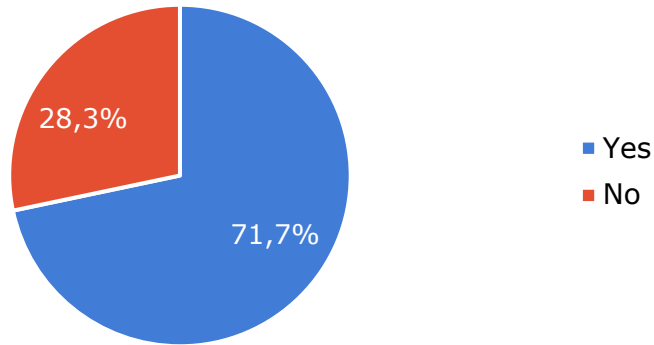


Asked how they recognise fake news the majority of youngsters (71,7%) indicate that the manner in which the fake news item is presented makes them suspicious. 43,4% say that the publisher is a good indicator for whether a news item is fake or not. 30,2% seem to know authors who distribute fake news and need to be handled with care.

Asked for their reaction to fake news and disinformation, 28% of the respondents indicate that they do not do anything and do not think about it. The rest, however, indicate to react. Youngsters tend to forward fake news items to friends and/or family members because they want to know more about it, because they think the item is funny or because they are so mad about it. In a few cases youngsters indicate to contact the platform host to complain about the fake news. This result is similar to the one from the educators' survey: youngsters spread the fake news item even if they do not share the content or oppose it.

Youngsters' high confidence when dealing with online matters is also reflected in their answers concerning their education about media literacy. Asked whether they feel well prepared to deal with the phenomenon of fake news and disinformation an astonishing high percentage of 71,7% indicate that they do so. Only 28,3% state that they do not feel well prepared.

Figure 20: Education about Fake News I



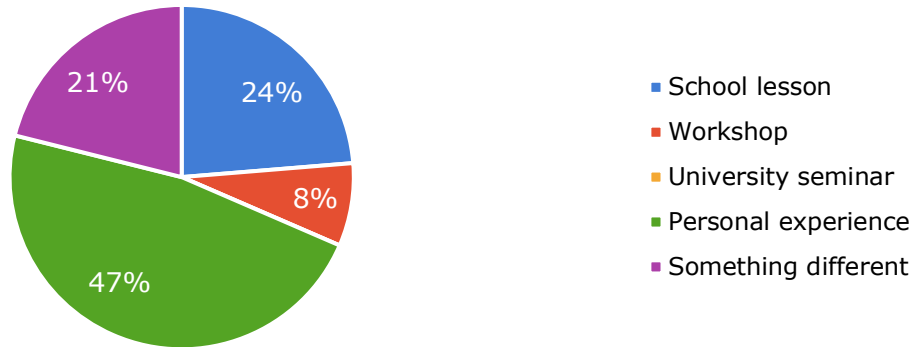
Thereby only a minority of 44,7% indicate that they have received this preparation in school. 52,6% name "other institutions" as the source of their preparation.

Figure 21: Education about Fake News II



Which "other institutions" the youngsters mean becomes a bit clearer through the answers to the next question. Asked in "which form the preparation took place" 47,4% of the youngsters responded that the preparation comes from their personal experience. 21,1% indicate "something else".

Figure 22: Education about Fake News III

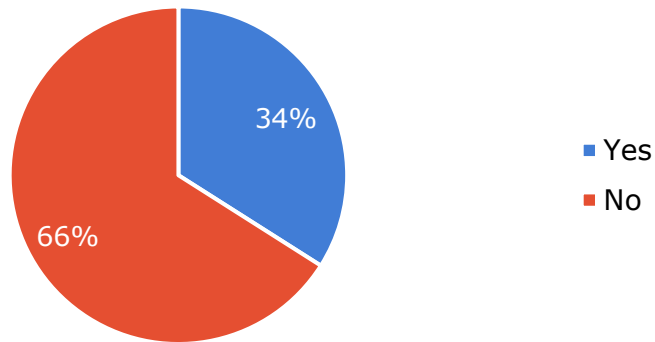


This allows for the interpretation that more than two thirds of the respondents do not receive a structural preparation in media literacy and in particular in the context of fake news and disinformation. If the youngsters have learned about fake news structurally in a seminar or in their school they have mostly dealt with the question how to identify fake news and how to do a proper search of the sources. A deeper analysis of the matter like how social media functions and why this contributes to the distribution of fake news is not mentioned at all. Also more fundamental discussion about what can be understood as “true” and a related debate about the philosophy of science is not mentioned either. None of the respondents mentions input about journalistic standards either.

When asked about their insecurities in the context of fake news most respondents say that they struggle to differentiate between fake news and real news especially if the media outlet has a professional appearance. One response raises the very interesting issue of how to judge information even by serious, traditional media. The respondent described the problem that many news turn out to be “exaggerated” and leading too heated debates. The respondent expresses his or her struggle to differentiate between “real” problems and those that are not particularly severe. This comment points to the development of the entire media landscape to become too fast moving and volatile – creating confusion by the sheer pace of the news coverage.

The minor role of formal educational institutions in the context of media literacy is also reflected in the youngsters’ attitude towards their educators when it comes to this topic. When asked about their opinion if educators are well prepared to teach about fake news and disinformation two thirds say “No”. Only one third says “Yes”.

Figure 23: Assessment of Educators



When asked where the deficiencies of their educators lie the large majority of respondents say that the educators have no media literacy themselves and do not understand the functioning, the dynamics and the importance of social media and online communication for youngsters. Many criticize that educators have no genuine interest in this matter and that the curriculum does not give the time and space to deal with it.

6. CONCLUSIONS

All the elements of this study bear implications for the development of the #IMMUNE platform. On the one hand they relate to the principle setup of the platform itself and how it could complement the existing projects and organisations that are fighting against disinformation and manipulation in the internet. On the other hand the survey results in particular indicate which substantial focus the platform should have in order to meet the needs of the target groups. Educators and youngsters name a number of demands reveal some implicit attitudes and opinions that should also be addressed by the platform.

Conclusions from Current Trends and Actual Examples

What we can learn from the current trends is that the phenomenon of disinformation and online manipulation is virulent and is continuing to harm our democratic societies. Despite broad societal initiatives to counter this negative impact the problem prevails and it is not evident how it could be contained effectively.

Thanks to numerous scientific projects the phenomenon is rather well researched with the principle strategies and effects of (strategic) disinformation and manipulation being well understood. The next important step is to find ways how to deal with the phenomenon as a society, how to counter these disinformation attempts and how to protect our democratic societies from their subversive effects.

And in fact there are numerous initiatives that are trying to do exactly this. This study provides a sample of state organisations and civil society actors that are taking up the challenge and counter disinformation. However, it appears to be the case that there are still many blind spots and even more needs to be done to fight opinion manipulation. Analysing these organisations and projects yields the following results:

1. First, the overwhelming majority of our sample is focusing on fact checking news and debunking disinformation. They combine this with introductions to journalistic standards and educate youngsters and adults alike about journalism or the media landscape.
2. Second, there are a few initiatives that provide extremely rich information and educational material about online communication in general. They include topics ranging from disinformation and manipulation to cyber bullying or cyber grooming as well as lessons how to produce audiovisual material. In fact, there is hardly any topic of online communication that is not thematised. These resources can best be understood as a repository of valuable general information without having an overarching theoretical concept that is binding all the bits and pieces together. In one case ("Medien in der Schule") the topics have an interesting bias: although the resource provides excellent material for all kinds of topics it leaves out the very important question of how modern technology and social media communication in particular is impacting our democratic culture and our communication patterns. A look into the financiers of this resource may explain this blind spot: "Google" is one of the main financial contributors to this platform.

3. Third, there are relatively few initiatives or projects that deal explicitly with methodologies like “Critical Thinking” that can be powerful skill when being confronted with disinformation. Scientific methodologies as they are taught in universities are not addressed in any of our sample.
4. Fourth, the interdependencies between the functioning of modern technologies and disinformation is hardly thematised at all. In general, we have found only two projects that explicitly address the topic of technology and how it impacts our everyday life. Even in those examples that we have found do not lead a thorough, critical analysis about the interrelation between the principles of online communication and social media and the state of our political communication.
5. Fifth, there are very few cross-cutting projects that take up the the issue of disinformation from different angles, e.g. by teaching how to debunk disinformation and connecting this to “Critical Thinking” in general.

Thus, we find that all the projects and initiatives analysed here have a very specific and even narrow perspective on the topic of disinformation. This means that they are leaving out important elements. We consider this an issue. Disinformation and political manipulation is a symptom of more fundamental societal developments. They relate to fundamental changes of how we treat information, how we communicate and how we are impacted by the information that we consume. These developments are not restricted to the political world but but are impacting our entire social interaction. Disinformation and political manipulation have been around for a long time. But, the tools and principles of online communication are boosting the destructive power of disinformation.

Hence, when tackling disinformation one must address its root causes. Focusing on the symptoms – the individual pieces of disinformation and how they can be debunked will not be effective. Considering the sheer extent of disinformation in the public discourse and the large resources that are necessary to debunk disinformation or damask strategic online manipulation it is not possible to contain this phenomenon just by debunking and fact checking. Regardless how quickly disinformation is debunked comes always second which means that disinformation has some time to exerts its influence. Disinformation and political manipulation can only be countered effectively if we start to rethink our principle attitude towards information independent of the question whether or not we are confronted with disinformation or not.

So, if we face information in the public discourse with a healthy scepticism, if we manage not to react to all the emotional triggers that are utilised by manipulators and if we maintain habitual, democratic communication patterns intact both in online and physical communication even the most professional piece of disinformation is missing the mark.

For our #IMMUNE platform this means that it should thematise topics like democratic communication, the impact of social media and digital communication on our democratic societies, that is should address the principles and business model of social media platforms, and instruments to deal with disinformation. The #IMMUNE platform should make the educators and youngsters aware of the societal changes that they are

experiencing and should develop the mental capacities like critical thinking, journalistic and scientific methodologies to control the negative side effects of digital communication and not to allow that the achievements of a democratic society are harmed.

Practically, it may be promising to integrate innovative technical components like the fake news detectors developed by the Co-Inform and the WeVerify projects. Screening technology that show which topics are discussed in a region as developed by other H2020 projects (e.g. CUTLER) may also be a potential add-on in order to enable educators and youngsters to work with live information – and live disinformation.

Survey/Focus Group with Educators

Despite the restrictions of this study and the difficulties arising from the Coronavirus Pandemic the #IMMUNE survey provides valuable information about how educators and youngsters deal with the phenomenon of fake news and disinformation. One very important, more general finding is that the surveys confirm the previous research about fake news and disinformation in Germany and complement them. Many results point into the same direction as other larger and more representative studies as for example the one produced by the Vodafone Foundation (Paus, I. and Börsch-Supan, J. (2020)³ do. This is encouraging as it indicates that the project is heading into the right direction. Our previous research about disinformation in Germany seems to be valid and not distorted by our individual take on the subject.

So, what do we learn from the survey with the educators? First and foremost, educators appear to be aware of the basic problematic – the negative impact of fake news and disinformation on our society and political system. They show a “healthy scepticism” when it come to evaluate or classify information by various media outlets and tend to verify information even if they are presented in established media. They are aware of the fact that fake news, disinformation and propaganda are not necessarily restricted to “alternative media”.

The respondents’ scepticism is matched by their confidence to recognise fake news or disinformation when they are confronted with it. Accordingly, they do not feel impacted by

³ The main results of the study are:

- An increasing number of youngsters in Germany are confronted with disinformation on a regular basis. However, they become increasingly capable to recognise them. One third is still struggling with it, however.
- The extent of disinformation has increased during the Corona pandemic. In particular, youngsters with a lower educational level are struggling to differentiate between trustworthy and false information.
- Youngsters connote disinformation with classical media and political actors. According to their opinion, disinformation worsen the situation during the pandemic and endanger democracy.
- Youngsters consume online information consciously. Disinformation on online platforms have little effect on them.
- Youngsters wish to have more support by their schools in dealing with disinformation. There, this subject is rarely on the agenda.

fake news and disinformation on a personal level. They are, however, concerned about the impact on their environment and on the society. From an outside perspective this seems a little optimistic. Fake news that are designed and produced professionally can hardly be discerned and differentiated from “correct” news. This problem will become ever more important with the broader availability and maturity of software packages that are able to forge or doctor information. Furthermore, our respondents might underestimate the subtle and unconscious impact of disinformation that may trick the most rational spectator. This confidence in their own capabilities is also in contrast to educators’ demand for more training and further education in general. After all, they do feel uncertain about the terminology and the definitions – so they say. They also wish to have a more nuanced knowledge about the question how far-reaching the freedom of speech is in a democratic society is and which opinions or argumentations are still legitimate. This points to the wish to deal more profoundly with the constitutionally guaranteed right of freedom of the speech.

Survey with Students

The major result that can be drawn from the survey with the youngsters is that they do perceive the threats of fake news and disinformation but are more relaxed about it than their educators are. This finding matches neatly with one of the major result of Paus, I. and Börsch-Suppan (2020). Youngsters’ responses express a high confidence about their ability to identify fake news and disinformation as well as not being affected by them. Just like the educators they are convinced that the problems that arise from disinformation are relevant but rather for others and the society and less so for themselves. Individually, they feel little affected.

Striking is the finding that online communication and especially social media platforms are viewed highly sceptically by the youngsters. More precisely, youngsters are very well aware that the information that is distributed via social media is often of very low in quality and riddled with disinformation. Accordingly, they have little trust in the information that they are confronted with in social media.⁴

However, youngsters are also well aware of the fact that fake news and disinformation is not restricted to social media. They are aware that this phenomenon can also be found in established media. Nevertheless, established, standard media, especially newspapers and radio enjoy high trust by youngsters.

One other interesting finding is that youngsters appear to be critical towards the development of the media landscape in general. They notice the ever faster pace of the news coverage. They issue the suspicion that the fast pace comes at the cost of lower quality and a higher emotionalization of the individual news items. This makes it harder to differentiate which news item is really important and which is just exaggerated.

⁴ Against this background one can speculate about the nature of online communication in general. If communication via social media is trusted so little one cannot expect to find sincere and honest communication on social media in general.

When asked about the significance of media literacy in their educational institutions the respondents have a very clear opinion. Briefly summarised, the youngsters feel better prepared to deal with online phenomena – including fake news and disinformation on social media – than their educators. They criticize educators’ lack of interest in this subject as well as the lack of skills to teach about it. They are also aware of the problematic that their curricula and packed teaching timetable do not allow for the flexibility to include such topics. Accordingly, a majority of youngsters indicates to have learned more about fake news and disinformation in private contexts than in schools or in other educational institutions.

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