MAKING STUDENTS MORE RESILIENT TO EXTREMIST CONTENT ONLINE

CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS AND SELF-AWARENESS OF COGNITIVE BIASES

**Prevention of Youth Radicalisation
Through Self-Awareness of Cognitive Biases**

PRECOBIAS

Toolkit for secondary school teachers with 11 ready-to-use lesson plans

Prevention of Youth Radicalisation Through Self-Awareness of Cognitive Biases

Toolkit for teachers with ready-to-use materials

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FOREWORD: OUR PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH TO COGNITIVE BIASES AND THEIR ROLE IN RADICALISATION

›› What is 'radicalisation'?

'Radicalisation' is defined by the European Commission[1] as a phased and complex process in which an individual or a group embraces a radical ideology or belief that accepts, uses or condones violence, including acts of terrorism, to reach a specific political or ideological purpose. During this process, the dominant political order is rejected, as well as dialogue, compromise and tolerance as means to bring change. Instead, violence is more and more adopted as an appropriate method to attain certain goals. Thus, at some point, radicalisation can (but does not necessarily) lead to violent extremism or terrorism.[2]

There are many paths that may lead to radicalisation, including social exclusion, polarisation of views in society, stigmatisation of diversity and difference, conspiracy theories, hate speech and hate crimes. The radicalisation process is similar for all extremisms: religious, nationalist, fascist, and some leftist currents. The choice depends largely on the environment in which an individual is brought up or meets extremists on a daily basis.

One of the most widely recognised models explaining radicalisation is the "Staircase to Terrorism Model" proposed by Fathali Moghaddam, an Iranian-born psychologist with expertise in culture and intergroup conflict, with a particular focus on the psychology of globalisation, radicalisation, human rights and duties and terrorism, in 2005. According to Moghaddam's model, there are five stages a person goes through before reaching the top floor, which is actually committing a terrorist act. This concept focuses on the idea that an individual in the process of radicalisation seeks options to overcome (perceived or genuine) injustices. If they do not see other legitimate options or choices offered or available to them, they climb further to the next stage of radicalisation, even if that means causing harm to themselves and to others.[3]

Radicalisation can take many forms. From ideological extremism, through crimes, to religious fundamentalism. The final stage of radicalisation may be an act of violence or even terrorism. At each stage it is possible to react and prevent an individual or a group from being further radicalised.[4] For this reason it is crucial to raise awareness of this phenomenon and develop resilience to radicalisation, particularly in young people.

[1] European Commission: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/counter-terrorism/radicalisation_en

[2] Young H., Holsappel J., Rooze M., de Wolf A., Russel J., Hasan U., (2014), "TerRa Toolkit. Community Approach to Radicalisation", p. 3, https://terratoolkit.eu/

[3] Ibidem, p. 4

[4] Purski J., "Radicalisation" (2019), International Institute of Civil Society, https://camiso.org.pl/

❯❯ Why talk about cognitive biases and radicalisation in class?

Contact with extremist or radicalised content is a pretty wide-spread phenomenon in our society. According to a European survey[5], 77% of adolescents have already been confronted with invocations to violent behaviour on online platforms. This points out how the radicalisation process today is closely interconnected with online media. Paradoxically, while the content-reviewing techniques have been increasingly sophisticated, the presence of extremists on social media is still a key issue. For example, after analysing how far-right and anti-EU groups were spreading false and hateful content, the US-based non-profit organisation Avaaz reported over 500 suspect pages and groups to Facebook, which were followed by nearly 32 million people, before the EU elections in May 2019. While some extreme content falls between the cracks of social media's content reviewers' net, others remain online given their strategic implicit content. These mainstreaming strategies indicate how much the boundaries between what is considered to be acceptable or not are not static, sometimes like "a sort of slow-acting poison, accumulating here and there, word by word, so that eventually it becomes harder and less natural for even the good-hearted members of society to play their part in maintaining this public good."

Social media can play a major role in online radicalisation. Human brains, too. Scientists agree that humans have limited cognitive abilities. Our brains are constantly flooded with tons of information, and we are simply unable to process every piece of it in a thorough and extensive manner. Instead, our brains often take mental shortcuts that make it easier to process information and make judgements in a fast, efficient and effortless way. This allows us to avoid the cognitive effort of analysing every piece of information elaborately. And that's where cognitive biases come in; they may be regarded as yet another important factor in the "kaleidoscope of factors", creating infinite individual combinations which may contribute to radicalisation and lead to violent extremism.[8] Cognitive biases are seen as "distortions of reasoning"[9] and they cause our brains to deviate from rationality. In taking the shortcut, our brains skip the part where they have to treat the information elaborately and consider all its aspects, which has a negative impact on the quality of our decisions. And the danger lies in the fact that we, humans, are largely unaware of these cognitive biases. Furthermore, cognitive biases are not exceptional phenomena: more than 200 different biases have been listed so far.[10] Social media, where ideas are mostly reduced to some words and expressed through (emotional) visual content, particularly trigger some cognitive biases. This toolkit comprises activities for ten of them, applied to extremist content.

5 Bécuwe, N., Goudet, S. & Tsoulos-Malakoudi, D. (2018) Survey report 'European youth and radicalisation leading to violence', analysis and recommendations for policy-making purposes. https://efus.eu/files/2019/03/D2.3-Survey-PRACTICIES-PdfLIGHT.pdf

6 https://secure.avaaz.org/campaign/en/disinfo_network_report

7 Waldron J (2012) The Harm in Hate Speech. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 4

8 Magnus Ranstorp and Peder Hyllengren, Förebyggande av våldsbejakande extremism I tredjeland (Swedish Defence University 2013) in: Magnus Ranstorp, "RAN Issue Paper: The Root Causes of Violent Extremism", Radicalisation Awareness Network, 4 January 2016

9 Tobena, A., Marks, I., & Dar, R. (1999). Advantages of bias and prejudice: An exploration of their neurocognitive templates. Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews, 23(7), 1047–1058. (page 1084)

10 https://ritholtz.com/2016/09/cognitive-bias-codex/

With this toolkit, we aim to help teachers increase their students' self-awareness by revealing the mental processes and cognitive biases that underlie their interpretations and analyses of the (social) media content they come across. This user-centred approach aims to prevent radicalisation in the long term. Of course, this toolkit will not change and fix everything in a jiffy. But we firmly believe in the key role that can be played by teachers. They are vital actors in networks of other practitioners who can collaboratively contribute to the prevention and countering of radicalisation and violent extremism, such as social and youth workers, law enforcement, community and religious leaders, and local and national policy makers. Teachers have the capacity to offer, on a daily basis, a counter-discourse to young people who may be trapped, consciously or unconsciously, in filter bubbles on social media that impregnate them, day after day, with this slow-acting poison.

➤➤ How does this toolkit work?

Teachers in secondary schools, working with pupils aged 15-18 years, are the target users of this toolkit. We also created another toolkit for social workers, which is also available on www.precobias. eu.

With these two toolkits, we sought to provide specific activities to professionals. To help our users feel comfortable with cognitive biases, the toolkit contains some basic theoretical insights.

If you want to find out more about cognitive biases and their role in radicalisation, we warmly invite you to follow PRECOBIAS' free of charge online course entitled "Prevention of Youth Radicalisation Through Self-Awareness on Cognitive Biases" on www.precobias. eu. Our course is aimed at professionals working with the youth, interested in cognitive biases and radicalisation. It contains clusters about extremism, radicalisation, cognitive psychology and 10 selected cognitive biases, illustrated with many examples from daily life and from extremist contexts. You can start whenever you want and progress at your own pace. If you complete the 10-hour programme of the course, you will get an international university certificate of participation, awarded by two of Europe's premier universities (Ghent University, Belgium and Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, Germany).

This toolkit comprises eleven units: an introductory unit about automatic thinking and cognitive biases, 10 units for the ten selected biases. It is possible to use each of the 10 units devoted to a particular bias independently of the others.

Each unit follows the same structure:

❯ **Teachers' notes** that provide the basic knowledge to address the topic in class. If you want to find out more, we warmly invite you to follow PRECOBIAS' free online course on www.precobias.eu. This MOOC is aimed at professionals working with young people and interested in cognitive biases and radicalisation.

❯ **Expected learning outcomes** of the unit, which also focus on students' direct experience of the cognitive bias in question and help improve their critical thinking skills with regard to online content in their daily life.

❯ **Instructions for the activities**, which focus on participatory pedagogy and active learning in a four-step process:
   • Warm-up activities with examples from daily life, which aim to make students empirically aware of the bias and its pervasiveness in our lives.
   • Theory is induced from real-life study cases.
   • The bias is further explored in explicit extremist study cases, published in various countries, in order to highlight how these phenomena are universal and how online extremism knows no borders.
   • More subtle examples or implicit content are discussed, to highlight how biases do not only concern obvious cases.

❯ **Ready-to-use worksheets** that can be photocopied and distributed in class or adapted.

It is important to note that each and every exercise in proposed lessons is about studying and understanding the cognitive biases, not political events, issues or ideologies as such. It is, of course, important to explain the background of the political situation or particular political issues in particular exercises. We encourage you to explain this to students in a way that zooms out from political issues and focuses more on how biases can get triggered in different situations, regardless of the topic. If any discussion on political issues contained herewith arise in class, feel free to address it, if you feel comfortable doing so. Nevertheless, we encourage you to focus instead on mechanisms of automatic thinking and cognitive biases and on how they can distort our reasoning, which is the core of these lessons.

If students make intolerant, hurtful, hateful or ideological comments to particular issues, you can address them and, for example, discuss them in class from a different point of view by asking students which biases could have influenced such views.

One final remark we would like to add here: we generally provide answers to the questions we propose to use in the classroom in order to guide and support teachers in conducting discussions and show the direction we foresaw for each activity. However, we encourage you to deepen some aspects of the activities or add additional questions and activities yourself as you deem fit according to your experience with a particular class or group. We hope you will find this toolkit helpful and useful to start the reflection process with young people on their own automatic thinking.

About the PRECOBIAS project

PRECOBIAS (Prevention of Youth Radicalisation Through Self-Awareness of Cognitive Biases) is a campaign project that centres around the mental processes and cognitive biases at play when youngsters are faced with extremist or terrorist discourses on social media.
By enhancing the digital resilience and critical thinking of our target audience, we want to prevent and counter radicalisation in the long term. PRECOBIAS helps young people to understand themselves better by revealing the underlying mental processes and cognitive biases that shape their interpretations and analyses of social media content.

To reach these objectives, PRECOBIAS is aimed at:

❯ vulnerable and radicalised youngsters. How? Through a social media campaign with videos, an Instagram contest and a self-test to increase awareness of cognitive biases

❯ teachers and social workers who work with and support young people at risk of radicalisation. How? By offering a free of charge online course entitled "Prevention of Youth Radicalisation Through Self-Awareness on Cognitive Biases" as well as two toolkits with ready-to-use activities.

PRECOBIAS involves partners from six EU countries (Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Poland and Slovakia). The project comprises scientific research on cognitive biases and radicalisation on social media, conducted by researchers from Ghent University (Belgium) and Ludwig-Maximilians-University (Germany). The teaching resources developed thanks to the project focus on ten biases that have been selected through scientific research, among many other biases which could be relevant to approach radicalisation with students.

Introduction to automatic thinking and cognitive biases

1.

TEACHER'S NOTES

❯❯ Cognitive biases and automatic thinking

Scientists agree that humans have limited cognitive abilities. Our brains are constantly flooded with tons of information, and we are simply unable to process every piece of it in a thorough and extensive manner. We're unable to analyze everything entirely, think about every alternative, weigh pros and cons, assess possible benefits or results, or approach every piece of information from every possible angle before making a decision. Our brain does not have the capacity for that. To make information processing a little less hard, our brain has two different paths along which information is processed: a deliberative path, and an automatic path. When we process information through **deliberative thinking**, it means we consciously think about the information, we pay attention to it, and we consider a broad set of factors in order to make a well-informed, rational decision. When we process information through automatic thinking, we don't think about the information actively, we pay less attention. Our decision-making will not be based on rational considerations. Instead, we rely on our intuition, on associations and automatic processes. Emotions often play a key role in **automatic thinking**. Scientists distinguish between **six different basic emotions**: joy, surprise, sadness, anger, fear and disgust.[1] For automatic thinking, our brains have **mental shortcuts** at their disposal that make it easier to process information and make judgements in a fast, efficient and effortless way. These shortcuts allow us to avoid the cognitive effort of analysing every piece of information elaborately. They can be very convenient mechanisms. In fact, it would be hard to function without them, and in many situations they can provide us with the right solution or decision. They have a legitimate function and they are hardwired in our brains. But there's a downside. And that's where **cognitive biases** come in. What are cognitive biases? When you hear the word *bias*, you might think about prejudice or partisanship. When a person is biased, they are, by definition, not neutral or objective.

[1] Even though this distinction is widely accepted, some researchers have made different suggestions and call for a more fine-grained distinction of basic emotions, based on models that differentiate between over 20 basic emotions, for example.

And that's an important notion to remember when we speak about cognitive biases. The Oxford Dictionary defines 'cognition' as the mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding. It follows from that definition that a cognitive bias is a bias that kicks in or takes place when we process information. Cognitive biases can be seen as the pitfall of automatic thinking processes. They are thinking errors that we make as a consequence of taking mental shortcuts. Cognitive biases are no friends of rationality or logic. They are seen as 'distortions of reasoning'[2] and cause our brains to **deviate from rationality**. In taking the shortcut, our brains skip the part where they have to treat the information elaborately and consider all its aspects, which has a negative bearing on the quality of our decisions. We tend to be especially susceptible to cognitive biases in situations where our brains have limited capacity to deal with the information, for example when we are multitasking, under stress, under pressure or distracted, and in situations where we are strapped for time. And the danger lies in the fact that we, humans, are largely **unaware** of these cognitive biases. It's no coincidence that they relate to automatic thinking processes rather than deliberative thinking processes. There's no alarm bell that rings every time a cognitive bias is activated in our brain, or a pop-up that says 'are you sure you want to make this decision?'. The biases just happen, and we are all, each and every one of us, fall prey to them. Even the smartest or most intelligent people are immune to them. Even when we think we're processing information in a rational way. Even when we know about cognitive biases, and we are aware of their existence and how they work. Cognitive biases are not exceptional phenomena: more than 200 different biases have been listed so far.[3]

Automatic thinking and extremist propaganda

Extremist groups want their audience to see, judge and understand the world through their extremist lens. How does extremist propaganda do this? Ingram[4] identifies **three constructs** that shape the way their audience perceives the world: **identity** is essentially constructed in response to a feeling of **crisis** due to the out-group and the **solutions** offered by the in-group. These constructs particularly trigger cognitive biases and automatic thinking: mental shortcuts and emotional content are favoured over rational arguments, especially on social media where ideas are mostly pared down to a few words and expressed through (emotional) visual content. In the process, they fuel one's effortless, emotional and intuitive thinking, rather than one's deliberative and reflective thinking based on reasoning.

2 Tobena, A., Marks, I., & Dar, R. (1999). Advantages of bias and prejudice: An exploration of their neurocognitive templates. *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews, 23(7),* 1047–1058. (page 1084)

3 https://ritholtz.com/2016/09/cognitive-bias-codex/

4 Ingram, H. J. (2016). Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda. *International Centre for Counterterrorism,* 7. Ingram's division into three constructs concerns jihadism but is in line with other research focusing on populism and other forms of extremism, especially right-wing extremism.

Crisis constructs

Anger, sadness, fear and disgust are negative basic emotions that can particularly be triggered in perceptions of crisis. Perceptions of crisis are closely tied with the identity construct because extremist propaganda often implies that the identity of the audience, for example the religious identity or national identities, is threatened and, therefore, **finds itself in a crisis**. The propaganda emphasises the differences between the in-group identity and the out-group identity, focusing on the negative attributes of the out-group and creating a **sense of fear and threat**. The crisis construct can also be directed more at the **individual**. Individuals who are insecure or experience feelings of uncertainty are more likely to support extremism. The narratives and propaganda of extremist groups are designed to evoke feelings of uncertainty among the audience, for example, by casting doubt over the purpose of life and raising existential questions, or by fuelling concerns about finding one's place in the world. Another manifestation of the crisis construct is the **breakdown of traditions.** Extremist propaganda will claim that traditional beliefs, rituals or practices honoured by the in-group are being threatened by the out-group.

Solution constructs

Basically, the idea is that being a member of the group will relieve you from your problems. Anything that causes the sense of crisis is addressed in the in-group's ideology. In a way, the solution construct propagates the **opposite** of the crisis construct.

❯ Where the crisis construct focuses on the negative aspects of the out-group, the solution construct emphasises the **positive consequences** of belonging to the in-group.

❯ Where the crisis construct stimulates feelings of uncertainty, the solution construct is used to lure people in under the pretext of **certainty**. In the extremist group, stability, simplicity and predictability prevail. The group knows what it stands for, what it wants to achieve, and how it sees the world. Join the group and you will be certain of who you are and what you want.

❯ Where the crisis construct focuses on how traditions are broken down and threatened by the out-group, the solution construct offers to **value, protect and reinforce those traditions**.

To find out more about cognitive biases and radicalisation, follow PRECOBIAS's free online course on *www.precobias.eu*.

2.

LESSON PLAN

Learning outcomes

At the end of this lesson, the students will be able to:

➤ Critically experience and understand automatic vs deliberative thinking.

➤ Critically experience and understand the existence of cognitive biases (general approach).

➤ Distinguish between their automatic and deliberative thinking processes, especially when they consume (social) media and come across extremist content.

Structure of the lesson and instructions

Suggested duration: two up to four 50-minute classes, depending on whether you do all the activities with your students or not.

Extra materials needed: none.

2.1.

🕐 10-20 min

WARM-UP

Activity 1

Hang an A4 printout of the images of the two lines on the black-board **(see the corresponding Worksheet, at the end of the lesson plan)** and ask your students to tell you which one is the longest. Of course, it's a tricky question because they are the same length. Intuitively, many of your students will probably think that the bottom line is shorter than the top line. Explain to them that even if you asked them to measure both lines, and they would find that they are in fact the same length, even if they know that it is a visual illusion and the bottom one looks shorter because the arrows are pointed in a different direction, even if they knew that they were wrong to think they aren't the same length, their brain would still insist that the bottom line looks shorter. It would feel counterintuitive to say that they are the same length. This is called a cognitive illusion. Through automatic thinking, our brain draws fast and intuitive conclusions based on tricky visual perceptions.

Activity 2

Ask your students the following questions:

- What colour is a polar bear? (The answer: white)
- What colour is whipped cream? (The answer: white)
- What colour is snow? (The answer: white)
- What do cows drink? (The answer: water, but some students are likely to answer 'milk').

Answering 'milk' is a consequence of cognitive bias, more particularly the anchoring effect, a bias which causes people to focus on the first available piece of information (the 'anchor') presented to them. In this case, one's brain is biased by the recurrence of the white colour in the previous questions, which leads to unconscious and erroneous connections between white, cows' drink and milk.

Activity 3

Distribute the worksheets and ask a student to read Steve's description **(see Worksheet)**. Ask your students whether Steve is more likely to be a librarian or a farmer[5]. Most of them will probably believe that Steven is more likely to be a librarian, based on the characteristics described in the text. We immediately associate those with the stereotypical librarian. Explain to them that we draw conclusions too fast; our brain takes cognitive shortcuts: we forget to consider statistics. There are a lot more farmers than there are li-

[5] Source: Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux

brarians in the world. We know that with certainty. It follows that of all the people in the world there will be more meek and tidy farmers than there are meek and tidy librarians. So statistically, Steve is much more likely to be a farmer. But our brain doesn't think like that. Here, through automatic thinking, we make a quick decision based on associations only, we follow our intuition, and we leave out important factual and logical considerations.

2.2. BRAINSTORMING AND MINDMAPPING: A DEFINITION OF AUTOMATIC AND DELIBERATIVE THINKING PROCESSES

🕐 15-20 min

Activity 1

Write the expression 'automatic thinking' on the blackboard and tell your students that the three examples above fall under 'automatic thinking'. Ask them what this notion might mean, by analysing their thinking processes from the warm-up activities they have done.

❯ How long did it take you to think about the answers?
❯ Did you concentrate a lot to answer these questions?
❯ What is the common answer for question 1 (Activity 1. with the lines) based on?
❯ What is the common answer for question 2 (Activity 2. with cows) based on?
❯ What is the common answer for question 3 (Activity 3. farmer vs. librarians) based on?

With these questions, brainstorm with the students to inductively develop the following definition: Automatic thinking is a fast, effortless and intuitive cognitive way to process information, in which we don't think actively. We pay less attention and we rely on our intuition, on associations and on automatic processes (like stereotypes). After the students pinpoint these elements, let them contrast them with the characteristics of deliberative thinking by filling in the comparison table.

Automatic thinking		Deliberative thinking
Effortless	⟩⟨	Requiring effort
We don't pay close attention	⟩⟨	We need to pay close attention and to concentrate
Fast	⟩⟨	Slow (it needs time)
Based on intuition, emotion, associations and automatic processes	⟩⟨	Based on reasoning

Insist on the fact that automatic thinking is a natural process, which has no bearing on someone's intelligence.

2.3.

🕐 5-10 min

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF AUTOMATIC AND DELIBERATIVE THINKING (+ 6 BASIC EMOTIONS)

Activity 1

Explain to your students that there are six basic emotions which often play a key role in automatic thinking. Try to list them together. Then, ask your students to look at the worksheet and match the six pictograms with the six emotions **(see Worksheet)**.

Answers: surprise, disgust, anger, sadness, fear, joy.

2.4.

🕐 10-15 min

AUTOMATIC AND DELIBERATIVE THINKING THROUGH ADS

Activity 1

Ask your students to compare the two images on global warming[6] **(see Worksheet)** and answer the following questions: Which of the two has a greater impact on them? Why? Do these ads trigger any emotions in you? If so, which ones? Which one rather engenders automatic thinking and which one leads to deliberative thinking? Why? Start with the students' emotions and then analyse the content of the two ads and discuss which are more likely to trigger automatic or deliberative thinking.

[6] Source of image 1: https://onextrapixel.com/40-creative-and-funny-advertisements-using-animals/;

Source of image 2: https://climate.nasa.gov/climate_resources/26/graphic-the-ipccs-four-key-findings/

Image 1 (polar bear): automatic thinking, based on emotions of fear (of global warming), negative surprise (polar bear without its fur), sadness. No rational information; text limited to a slogan and a call to action.

Image 2 (NASA's key findings): deliberative thinking, based on four rational findings. Image of the Earth as a background but focus on textual elements.

Activity 2

Ask your students the same questions about the two ads for lawn mowers[7] **(see Worksheet)**.

Image 1 (Viking): automatic thinking, based on emotions of positive surprise and joy (fun). No rational information; text limited to a slogan and a call to action.

Image 2 (Gravely): deliberative thinking, rational characteristics of Gravely lawn mowers. Gravely insists on the durability of their lawn mowers; they don't try to encourage emotions or impulsive purchases.

[7] Source of image 3 (Viking):
https://onextrapixel.com/40-creative-and-funny-advertisements-using-animals/

Source of image 4 (Gravely):
https://www.pinterest.com/pin/529102656197127162/

2.5.

AUTOMATIC THINKING AND POPULIST OR EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS

🕐 15-20 min

Activity 1

Analyse the image, created by a Belgian far-right political party in 2018, **(see Worksheet)** with your students in order to introduce them to the connections between the identity, crisis and solution constructs on the one hand, and automatic thinking on the other hand. Start by asking them the same question as you did for the four examples above: How do you feel when you see this content? What emotions are triggered? Does this content trigger automatic or deliberative thinking? How?
Text in this content: Protect our people! "Crimigrants" out!

Then, ask your students how migrants are framed in this content, to elicit the following elements:

> Triggered emotions: intense negative emotions such as anger at 'crimigrants', sadness for the lady, fear for our people.
> Crisis construct: Automatic association between crime and migrants in the expression 'crimigrants': the association seems to be taken for granted and self-evident but is not based on any real facts, the visual illustration of the crisis, portraying an injured lady with injuries on full view, who gazes at us (which symbolically calls us to take action) reinforces this impression.
> Identity construct: our people, our identity vs them. People are separated in two groups, in a black and white, Manichean division.
> Solution construct: simplistic solution of kicking the migrants out.

While discussing the image with the students, insist on the fact that 1) automatic thinking is a natural process which is absolutely not a sign of a lack of intelligence, 2) their opinions are respected and probably have understandable backgrounds (that are worth being self-explored in order to see their influence on their thinking): it is understandable one might feel threatened by some out-groups if one's parents have difficulty finding a job; it is understandable to feel anger when people are injured or killed, for example, and 3) countering automatic thinking requires some effort from all of us. The issue is certainly not to make the students feel guilty or stupid while they get drawn into automatic thinking or to reject our automatic thoughts but to see how to counter it with deliberative thinking because automatic thinking prevents us from reasoning. Now that the hidden strategies in extremist propaganda are to some extent unveiled to the students, try to make them feel empowered when they deconstruct their automatic thinking and help them compensate with deliberative thinking. To do so, one possible activity consists in asking them to fill in the table[8] **(see Worksheet)** in order to become more self-aware of the distinction between automatic and deliberative thinking. They only need to fill in the rows about the triggers they reacted to in the automatic thinking process not all the rows need to be used.

Then ask them the following questions:

1. Is there another possible way to view this issue? Are there any facts to back up an alternative view? What would you need to know in order to form an opinion about this issue?

2. What outcomes might I expect if I believed in my automatic thought without challenging it?

8 https://positivepsychology.com/challenging-automatic-thoughts-positive-thoughts-worksheets/

Activity 2

Point out how automatic thinking can be triggered for any issue, through examples from various ideologies. Ask them the same as for activity 1.

Example: Compare how Christian extremism engenders automatic thinking in image 1[9], whereas anti-abortion (see image 2)[10] and pro-abortion (see image 3)[11] are rather expressed through rational arguments that can be discussed in debates based on deliberative thinking **(see Worksheet)**. Compare to the way the crisis construct is intensified in image 1. Highlight that a strict separation between automatic and deliberative thinking processes is often not relevant; our cognitive processes are never 100% automatic or 100% deliberative.

Activity 2

Show your students the picture of the sunset shared on social media by ISIS in 2018, during the heyday of the caliphate in Syria **(see Worksheet)**. This example highlights how extremist groups do not always share negative extremist content based on fear or anger, and often share non-extremist content that instils positive emotions (related to identity and solution constructs) and/or positive mental shortcuts. For example, the picture of the sunset that only lights a mosque in Wilāyat al-Baraka (ISIS' administrative district, in Syria, at that time), can easily trigger positive emotions and romantic automatic connections between the ISIS' caliphate and the power that the sun shining on the mosque can symbolise. As we will find out in the other units of this toolkit, such content can also strengthen biases such as in-group favouritism and/or picture superiority effect.

2.6.

⏱ 15-20 min

AUTOMATIC THINKING AND DOUBLE SPEAK ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Activity 1

Show your students the Facebook post[12] **(see Worksheet)** and ask them why they think this post was removed by Facebook.

9 https://www.huffpost.com/entry/facebook-nazi-clothing-extremism_n_5b5b5cb3e4b0f-d5c73cf2986

10 https://www.facebook.com/focusonlife/photos/a .214486535240976/3059531960736405/

11 https://www.charismanews.com/politics/72945-shocking-billboard-targets-black-women-for-abortions

12 https://www.huffpost.com/entry/facebook-nazi-clothing-extremism_n_5b5b5cb3e4b0f-d5c73cf2986

The answer is that:

> The hooded Klansman is a reference to a hate organisation. It is forbidden to refer to violent organisations like this one on social media without a context that condemns or neutrally discusses the content (neutral or critical thinking is distinguished from propaganda).

> The post contains incitement to violence, which is forbidden.

Explain to the students that Facebook Community Standards are a set of do's and don'ts regarding the types of content Facebook users are allowed to share on the social platform. Hate speech and violence incitement, among other issues, are forbidden. To circumvent such bans, extremists (both amateur and professional ones) as well as populists tend to share more implicit content. Their messages are vague enough to circumvent hate speech regulations but are, at the same time, clear enough to be understood as extremist ideas.

Activity 2

Stick the six images below[13] on the blackboard so that the students can see them in colour. The images were created by Europa Invicta. Europa Invicta is a French alt-right organisation that promotes the foundations of European culture and identity. The organization focuses on attractive visuals that display their understanding of European identity. These images, shared on Facebook and Instagram, perfectly illustrate the mainstreaming process: the language of hate and fear (crisis construct) has been replaced with self-love for the cherished history and culture of white civilisation (identity construct). Furthermore, these images particularly trigger automatic thinking. While most of the posts are graphically more reminiscent of perfume ads than of extremist propaganda and trigger positive emotions and feelings of pride (identity construct), posts like the one with the slogan 'Hail Europe' with a European village in the background reminds us that the coding game with the Nazi repertoire (the Nazi salute 'Heil Hitler') is not far off. Show them these image macros gradually, two by two, in order to show them how the images are increasingly less innocent, yet still vague and implicit.
Ask the students how they feel when they see each of these images, and how their probably positive emotions are triggered by Europa Invicta.

[13] *www.europainvictaa.eu*

> beautiful, hipsterish, glamorous graphic layout (visual codes similar to ads for luxury and hype products).

> attractive people, models.

> beautiful European pieces of heritage (castles, cities, landscapes, etc.).

> self-evident positive statements.

> pronoun 'we' to trigger feelings of in-group identity.

> vocabulary related to emotions (love).

EUROPE BELONGS TO EUROPEANS

EUROPA INVICTA

WE HAVE ALL THE DIVERSITY WE NEED

EUROPA INVICTA

2.7.

🕐 1 h (homework)

+

time needed to share
the findings in class

(Social) media content in your country

Activity 1

Individually or in groups of 2-3, ask your students to look for examples of political/societal content in your own country that particularly engenders automatic thinking. The students might share their findings in the class and engage in discussions.

2.8.

🕐 1 h (homework)

+

time needed to share
the findings in class

Active learning: create your own (social) media content

Activity 1

Select one or several controversial social issues, especially those covered by extremist movements, and ask your students to create a social media post, individually or in teams of 2-3 students. Ask them to present their posts to the other students and point out the techniques they used to trigger automatic thinking instead of deliberative thinking. In this activity, students actively learn how these codes work and can experience how easy it is to create extremist content that triggers negative emotions and automatic thinking. However, it might be tricky since they may create really extremist contents to make fun of it and thus promote extremist narratives. Depending on your students and your preferences and in order to avoid risks of indirectly promoting extremism, you can turn this exercise into a parody and get them to work on fictitious issues such as a 'cats' crisis' instead of a 'migrants crisis', for example. An alternative might also be to invite them to look for examples of contents triggering automatic thinking and try to develop an alternative narrative for it.

>> Worksheets

1. WARM-UP

Activity 1

Look at the two horizontal lines below. Which one do you think is the longest?
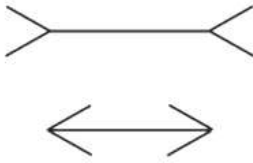
What is our thinking process mainly based on in this case?

....

....

Activity 2

Read the questions below, which your teacher has just asked you orally: What colour are a polar bear, whipped cream, and snow? What do cows drink? What was your answer for questions 1 and 2? What are people likely to answer for question 2? Why?

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Activity 3

Read Steve's description below. Is Steve more likely to be a librarian or a farmer?
"Steve is very shy and withdrawn, always helpful but with little interest in people or in the world of reality. A gentle and organised soul, he has a need for order and structure, and a passion for detail."
What is our thinking process mainly based on in this case?

....

2. AUTOMATIC AND DELIBERATIVE THINKING: DEFINITIONS

Activity 1

How can we define automatic thinking, based on our thinking processes for the three examples above?

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Fill in the table below to compare automatic and deliberative thinking.

Automatic thinking		Deliberative thinking
....	✕	....
....	✕	....
....	✕	....
....	✕	....

3. SIX BASIC EMOTIONS

Activity 1

What are the six basic emotions?

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Match the six basic emotions with the six pictograms below.

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....

4. AUTOMATIC VS. DELIBERATIVE THINKING THROUGH ADS

Activity 1

Look at the two visual contents about global warming below. Which of the two has a greater impact on you? Why? Do these ads trigger any emotions in you? If so, which? Which ad engenders automatic thinking and which one leads to deliberative thinking? Why?

Text image on the left: The earth is heating up. Sign the petition on thebigask.be and ask the Belgian government for a strong climate law.

Text in image on the right: 4 key findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. 1) There is 95% certainty that human activities are responsible for global warming. 2) Carbon dioxide is at an 'unprecedented' level not seen for at least the last 800,000 years. 3) Sea level is set to continue to rise at a faster rate than over the past 40 years. 4) Over the last two decades, the Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets have been melting and glaciers have receded in most parts of the world.

Activity 2

Look at the two ads for lawn mowers below. Which of the two has a greater impact on you? Why? Do these ads trigger any emotions in you? If so, which? Which ad engenders automatic thinking and which one leads to deliberative thinking? Why?

Text in the ad on the left: Viking lawn mowers. Nothing cuts grass better.

Text in the ad on the right: You won't find many Gravelys in the graveyard. In an era that finds most Americans expecting their machines to meet with untimely deaths, Gravelys are a pleasant surprise. Every year, we get letters about Gravelys 10, 15, even 24 years old still on the job. That might surprise you. But it doesn't surprise us. Because we've never tried to just scrimp and produce our tractors to sell for less. We always try to make them work better and last longer. Which is why you will find something on Gravelys you won't find on other lawn and garden tractors: an all-gear drive direct

from the engine through the transmissions to the attachments. So there are no belts to break, slip or wear out. We also precision-cut the gears, which operate in an oil bath for less friction and an extended life. For greater durability, we use cast iron for the transmission housing as well as the pivoting front axle. For improved efficiency, we bolt the engine directly to the transmission in the rear. In short, we build our tractor to be out mowing grass long after most machines its age are out pushing up daisies. For your nearest dealer, check your yellow pages.

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5. AUTOMATIC THINKING THROUGH POPULIST AND AND POPULIST OR EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS

Activity 1

How do you feel when you see the image below? What emotions are triggered? Does this content trigger automatic or deliberative thinking? How?

Text in the image: Protect our people! 'Crimigrants' out! (The image was created by Vlaams Belang, a Flemish far-right political party. Their programme focuses mainly on anti-immigration, Flemish independence and Flemish identity. In the 2019 elections, Vlaams Belang was the second largest political party in Flanders).

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Complete the table below. You only need to fill in the rows about the triggers you reacted to in the automatic thinking process.

Triggers, mental shorctus	Description of the triggers	Automatic thought, emotions felt, intensity	Deliberative adaptive thought, which counters the trigger
Dichotomous 'All-or nothing' reasoning	Viewing things as either black or white, overlooking the possibility that things can be nuanced and may lie on a spectrum.		
Arbitrary Inference	Drawing conclusions without all the facts.		
Minimisation/ Magnification	Over-emphasising the negative situational attributes while playing down positive ones.		
Overgeneralisation	Drawing overly broad conclusions from standalone events; Using singular cases to draw conclusions about all other events.		
Selective Abstraction	Using a single or small negative attribute to draw conclusions regarding a whole scenario.		

Answer the following questions:

1. Is there another possible way to view this issue? Are there any facts to back up an alternative view? What would you need to know in order to form an opinion about this issue?
2. What outcomes might I expect if I believe in my automatic thought without challenging it?

Activity 2

Compare how the abortion issue is presented in images 1, 2 and 3 below. How do you feel when you see the images below? What emotions do they instil? Does this content trigger automatic or deliberative thinking? How?

Image 1
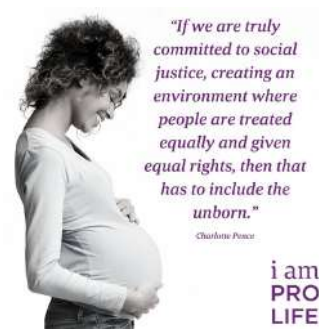
Image 2

Image 3

Text in these images:

Image 1: Baby killer in hell. God sent the shooter.
Image 2: If we are truly committed to social justice, creating an environment where people are treated equally and given equal rights, then that has to include the unborn.
Image 3: Black women take care of their families by taking care of themselves. Abortion is self-care.

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The abortion example above points out how automatic thinking and cognitive biases do not only concern right-wing movements or Islamist extremism, which are more often covered in the media, but can apply to all sensitive social issues: Christian extremism in the abortion context but also far-left extremism against capitalism, etc.

Activity 3

Look at the image below. What visual elements does this picture contain? How do you feel when you see that image? What emotions does it trigger?

Text in the image: a sunset in Wilāyat al-Baraka [ISIS' administrative district, in Syria, at that time], October 2, 2018

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This picture was shared on social media by ISIS, the self-proclaimed Islamic State, during the heyday of the caliphate. What emotions and constructs are likely to be triggered by ISIS' target groups? How does this content instil automatic thinking? What is the difference between this content and posts like the one of the woman with the injuries (see above)?

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6. AUTOMATIC THINKING AND DOUBLESPEAK ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Activity 1

Look at the content below and try to find out why Facebook removes such posts.

Text in the visual content: We want you to enlist today. Join the empire.
Text on the right = characteristics of the T-shirt (containing this visual content) that can be ordered via this Facebook post (not translated).

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Activity 2

In contrast to the removed Facebook post above, now look at the Instagram posts below, created by the alt-right movement Europa Invicta. How do you feel when you see the image macro below? What emotions are triggered? Does this content trigger automatic or deliberative thinking? How?
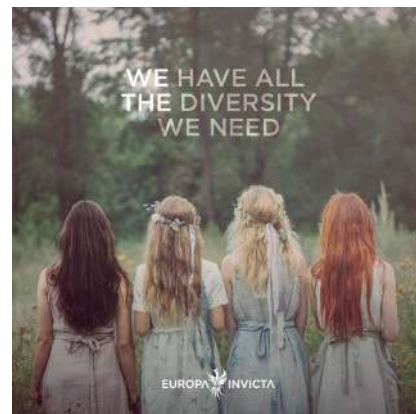
Text in the images: For the love of Europe; Love is like Europe, it makes everything better; Europe belongs to Europeans; We have all the diversity we need; Hail Europa; Fight for the cause.

Answer the following questions:

1. Is there another possible way to view these issues? Are there any facts to back up alternative views? What would you need to know in order to form an opinion about this issue?
2. What outcomes might I expect if I believe in my automatic thought without challenging it?

Sources of the materials:

❯ Reflection based on Steve's description: Kahneman, D. (2011). Thinking, Fast and Slow. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

❯ Image 1 (Six basic emotions): https://mespetitesperegrinationsculturelles.home.blog/2019/01/04/cest-pas-sorcier-joie-peur-tristesse-colere-que-demotions/amp/

❯ Image 2 (Thebigask.be): https://onextrapixel.com/40-creative-and-funny-advertisements-using-animals/

❯ Image 3 (NASA's findings): https://climate.nasa.gov/climate_resources/26/graphic-the-ipccs-four-key-findings/

❯ Image 4 (Viking): https://onextrapixel.com/40-creative-and-funny-advertisements-using-animals/

❯ Image 5 (Gravely): https://www.pinterest.com/pin/529102656197127162/

❯ Image 6 (Vlaams Belang): https://twitter.com/FDW_VB/status/985043311449792512/photo/1

❯ Image 7 (ISIS): https://twitter.com/p_vanostaeyen/status/1340326496414691329

❯ Table in activity 5: https://positivepsychology.com/challenging-automatic-thoughts-positive-thoughts-worksheets/

❯ Image 8 (Huffington Post) : https://www.huffpost.com/entry/kansas-abortion-mark-gietzen_n_3762079?

❯ Image 9 (Pro-life): https://www.facebook.com/focusonlife/photos/a.214486535240976/3059531960736405/

❯ Image 10 (Afyia) : https://www.charismanews.com/politics/72945-shocking-billboard-targets-black-women-for-abortions

❯ Image 11 (Ansgar Aryan) : https://www.huffpost.com/entry/facebook-nazi-clothing-extremism_n_5b5b-5cb3e4b0fd5c73cf2986

❯ Images 12-17 (Europa Invicta) : https://www.europainvicta.eu

Authority bias

1.

TEACHER'S NOTES

➤➤ What is authority bias?

Authority bias is defined as 'the tendency to obey those whom we perceive to be legitimate authorities'. This definition is a quote by Stanley Milgram, a researcher known for doing experiments that established the existence of authority bias, including the well-known experiment in which 'teachers' administered electric shocks to 'students' for wrong answers. The Wikipedia definition adds that authority bias is our tendency to attribute greater accuracy to the opinion of an authority figure, regardless of its content, and to be more influenced by that opinion. We tend to attribute more weight to the opinions of people who are, in our perception, experts, without conducting a thorough analysis of what exactly this person is saying and evaluating the quality of what they are saying.

Many people also confer great authority onto celebrities. Our favourite movie stars are people whom we look up to and admire, and we are eager to take advice from them, because they are so good at life in our eyes. Similar to that is the popularity of influencers. Our perception of someone's authority can also depend on how many followers or fans this person has. The more followers they have, the more credibility we attribute to them, and the more we listen to what they say.

Authority bias also occurs in work settings. Research has shown that innovative ideas from people who have less experience will not be taken as seriously as when they come from employees with more experience or authority, from 'senior team members', for example. According to another study,[1] projects led by senior leaders are less likely to be successful than projects led by junior managers. As a team member, the threshold to give criticism is lower when you are talking to someone who has less authority than when you are talking to a high-status manager. Therefore junior project leaders receive more feedback and criticism, which leads to a stronger and better funded project.

[1] Szatmari, B. (2016, December 16). We are (all) the champions: The effect of status in the implementation of innovations (No. EPS-2016-401-LIS). ERIM Ph.D. Series Research in Management. Erasmus University Rotterdam. Retrieved from http://hdl.handle.net/1765/94633

Authority bias is the result of a natural inclination and provides many benefits to humans. According to Robert Cialdini, the author of Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion, it 'allows for resource production, trade, defense, expansion, and social control that would otherwise be impossible'. Leadership and authority can be vital for societies and cultures to function as a system, they help structure our societies and maintain social order. We are taught to respect and see authority figures from a very early age – in teachers, parents, older siblings, coaches, managers, politicians, celebrities, etc. On an individual level, it helps us learn and develop, and it means we do not have to make all our major decisions ourselves. Under most circumstances, trusting a known authority figure who is an expert in their field is a good decision. Doctors, dentists, lawyers, etc. generally know what they are talking about. It is a valuable shortcut that saves us time. But like many of these cognitive biases, once influence from authority becomes an automatic response, it may cause problems.

►► Authority bias in the context of populist and extremist movements

According to Haroro Ingram, a terrorism specialist, extremist groups want to achieve three main goals through propaganda: provide a system of meaning, enhance their credibility and encourage a change in behaviour in people who consume their propaganda. Knowing that humans tend to accept and value the opinions of perceived authority figures, extremist groups also use this knowledge on social media and other propaganda platforms. They have their messages delivered by people who radiate leadership and authority. They choose charismatic figures, typically men since, following strict gender roles, more authority is attributed to men, they look confident and determined and use forceful language. Furthermore, even referring to an alleged (though not true) authority figure or scientific, expert source of information can trigger authority bias and lend more credibility to otherwise empty and unsubstantiated arguments.

Conspiracy theories are one of the tools used by extremists groups, where authority bias is activated in order to persuade people to believe in them and often to act in a certain way. Many conspiracy theories rely on a charismatic leader or cite an alleged expert source of knowledge or scientific findings as their basis. The Eu-

ropean Commission defines a conspiracy theory as 'the belief that certain events or situations are being secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces with negative intent'. Conspiracy theories have six common characteristics: 1) an alleged, secret plot, 2) a group of conspirators, 3) 'evidence' that seems to support the conspiracy theory, 4) they falsely suggest that nothing happens by accident and that there are no coincidences; nothing is as it appears and everything is connected, 5) they divide the world into good and bad and 6) they scapegoat people and groups. Conspiracy theories can be dangerous as they often target or discriminate against an entire group perceived as the enemy behind a real or imagined threat. They polarise society and fuel violent extremism. Conspiracy theories often start as a suspicion and ask who is benefiting from the event or situation and thus identify the conspirators. Any 'evidence' is then forced to fit the theory. Once they have taken root, conspiracy theories can grow quickly. They are hard to refute because any person who tries is seen as being part of the conspiracy.

Conspiracy theories offer simple explanations of otherwise complex realities, they do not require long analyses. They thus help restore a sense of agency and control for many people, which is particularly important in times of great uncertainty caused by different natural, financial, social and political crises. People use cognitive shortcuts to determine what they should believe. And people experiencing anxiety or a sense of disorder may even rely more on those cognitive shortcuts to make sense of the world. According to research published in October 2020,[2] in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, while a large majority accurately identified misinformation, between 22 and 37 percent of respondents (depending on the country) readily accepted fake news about it - they believed the claim that the coronavirus was engineered in a laboratory in Wuhan, China.

Often people are drawn to conspiracy theories because they distrust and resent the elites - doctors, scientists, professors, politicians. While it seems reasonable to be sceptical and critical of leaders, politicians and experts and to hold them accountable, it is quite different from assuming in advance they can never be trusted. What also links conspiracy theories to authority bias is that people who believe in them usually seek a 'saviour', a strong, influential leader who can help them protect their social group (in-group) from conspiring enemies.

Good news is that, according to studies on conspiracy theories, educating people about the ways in which fake news and conspiracy

2 Roozenbeek J., Schneider C. R., Dryhurst S., Kerr J., Freeman A. L. J., Recchia G., van der Bles A. M., van der Linden S., *Susceptibility to misinformation about COVID-19 around the world,* 14 October 2020, https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsos.201199#d1009245e2085s

theories spread can make a difference and dissuade people from believing in them. People do not like not knowing things and often feel obliged to form opinions about things they do not understand. It thus makes sense to stress that it is rational and often desirable to change one's mind when presented with new information.

You can find out more about conspiracy theories and how to deal with them <u>here</u>.

◇ To find out more about cognitive biases and radicalisation, follow PRECOBIAS's free online course on *www.precobias.eu*.

2.
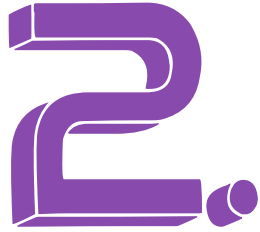
LESSON PLAN

Learning outcomes

At the end of this lesson, the students will be able to:

➤ Experience and understand authority bias.

➤ Identify authority bias in real life examples.

➤ Understand how authority bias may be used in extremist content, for example in conspiracy theories.

Structure of the lesson and instructions

Suggested duration: three classes (45-50 minutes each).

2.1.

🕐 45 min

WARM-UP : EXPERIENCING AUTHORITY BIAS

Activity 1

Tell your students that you will do a brief experiment and talk about art. Explain that you will show them photocopies of four pieces of art (paintings) and that they will choose the one they like the most. Place the photocopies around the classroom (e.g. on the walls, board, desks etc.) so that the students can walk freely around them and see them. All four photocopies of paintings are accompanied with comments from art critics.

Ask the students to take a few minutes and choose the piece of art they like the most - they can stand next to it. Next, ask the students why they have picked a particular painting, what they like about it etc. Listen to their opinions and don't comment on their choices.

Then ask the students how many of them had read the comment from the art critic before they chose their favourite painting. The assumption here is that at least some of the students will read the comment from the art critic, an authority on art, and make their choice influenced by the critic's opinions. Explain to the students that the comments below the prints of the paintings were invented for the purpose of this activity and they do not represent the opinions of real critics but rather describe some of the paintings' characteristics. The comments were provided below the prints of the paintings to try to influence the students' views of these pieces of art and to make them experience authority bias. Discuss this potential effect more in-depth with your class in order to elicit the concept of authority and authority figures and the characteristics of authority figures (what makes them an authority). One of the reasons for people to follow the opinions of experts is that they may not have enough knowledge on a given topic and rely in this respect on an authority. During the discussion you can ask the students the following question:

> ❯ To what extent was the art critic's opinion important to you? Why?

Then you can tell your students that several years ago a similar experiment, or rather a prank, was performed in the Netherlands, where a picture from Ikea was displayed in an art museum and the visitors were asked to comment on it and

guess how much it was worth. You can also read the article in English about this experiment here and/or watch a three-minute video showing the experiment and the museum visitors' reactions to the Ikea picture.

Then ask further questions about authority in order to develop a definition of authority and authority figures that would be helpful for you and your students. In order to do so, divide your students into several smaller groups (of four to five people) and ask them to discuss the questions written in the Worksheet in the next five to ten minutes. Tell them to jot down their main conclusions and to be ready to present them to the whole class.

> Can you name any authority figures? For example, in sports, culture, art, politics, social media etc. Do they represent authority to you? Why?
> What makes somebody become an authority figure?
> Do we need authority figures? Why, why not?
> Why do we tend to trust authority figures? What are the advantages of trusting authority figures? What are the pitfalls?

Then invite the students back to the plenary group and ask each of the groups to present the answers and conclusions they have come up with in their groups. Then invite the whole class to discuss their answers. Wrap up the discussion and, based on what the students have said, formulate a definition of authority bias with them (see Teacher's notes) and ask them to write it down in the Worksheet. You can write down its main characteristics on the board for the students to better understand and remember it. Tell them they will work with authority bias further during the next class.

2. 2.

🕐 45 min

AUTHORITY BIAS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Activity 1

Tell the students that now that they have experienced and defined authority bias, they will examine how authority bias can be activated in different situations in life and what consequences this may have. Divide the students into groups of four to five. Give each of the groups enough copies of   Worksheet 2. with four different case studies to discuss in which authority bias might be triggered. Ask the groups to read about the four situations and to discuss the

following questions regarding each situation:

> How is authority bias activated in this situation?
> What might the consequences of following authority be?
> What can be done to avoid falling for authority bias in this situation?

After they have finished their group work, take it in turns to discuss each situation, asking each group to present their answers and thoughts to other groups. Next, invite the entire class to hold a discussion about their findings. Then, tell the students that each of the four situations they have discussed is based on research and observations of authority bias in everyday life or real cases in which the activation of it has led to some important implications.

Situation 1: In workplace and business situations it has been observed that people usually listen to and assign more trust to opinions and ideas coming from senior team members or charismatic leaders and bosses than any other participants, even if their concepts, experiences and ideas could be more creative and relevant to problem-solving in a given situation.

Situation 2: In 1999 the Korean Air cargo flight 8509 crashed due to instrument malfunction and pilot error shortly after take-off from London. The lack of communication between the pilot and his crew members, influenced by a highly hierarchical and authority-based culture, played an important role in the catastrophe since the pilot repeatedly ignored warnings from one of his crew members. The other crew member, being the youngest and the least experienced in the crew, did not even participate in the exchange of comments, although he could have signalled the error too.

Situation 3: Many celebrities across the world use their fame and popularity to do charity work and to champion various social and political causes, which often carries a risk as they may be seen by public opinion as experts on a range of topics they are not knowledgeable about or they may actively assume this role. Recently many actors and other celebrities have spoken against the COVID-19 vaccines, thus exacerbating already growing related disinformation and fake news.

Situation 4: The exploitation of authority bias is also visible in disinformation and fake news, where its authors often refer to (alleged, self-appointed or compromised) authority figures. This was the case   with an appeal made by a group of scientists and doctors to the Polish government to stop mass-scale vaccination against COVID-19 due to the fact that the available vaccines were not safe and might have grave implications for people's health. The appeal

was initiated by a group of doctors with unsubstantiated medical experience and expertise and the report was full of serious medical mistakes related to microbiology and vaccines. Similarly, the anti-vaxxer movement heavily relies on a medical study published in the renowned medical journal The Lancet by Andrew Wakefield in 1998. In the study Wakefield claimed there was a connection between autism and the MMR vaccine, used against measles, mumps and rubella. The Lancet retracted the study in 2010 and Wakefield was struck off the UK medical register by the country's General Medical Council for misconduct.

Wrap up the discussion, emphasising that there are ways to check whether authority bias might be triggered in a particular situation to counter it, for example:

❯ Firstly, it is important to know that authority bias exists and how and in what situations it may be triggered (for instance in the situations we have just discussed).
❯ It is good to check whether a given authority figure is really an expert in his/her field.
❯ You can also check or research the authority figure's motivation (e.g. financial gains in the case of advertising) and their background (their affiliations with political parties, different groups and movements etc.).
❯ You can research other opinions on a given subject or make sure, during a meeting, that all its participants have the time and space to present their opinions, which are then taken into consideration.
❯ If an opinion of an expert or a decision made by an authority figure does not feel right to you, research it, ask probing questions and challenge it. You may be right and by questioning it you are preventing some troublesome consequences for you and other people. You can also fact-check information or news to make sure it is not fake news, in situations where an alleged authority figure is used to make it credible. To learn more about how to detect fake news, see https://onebravething.eu/check-before-you-share/

2. 3.

AUTHORITY BIAS AND POPULIST OR EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS

Activity 1

Tell your students that you will now talk about how authority bias might be used in populist and extremist content and that you will take one of the currently popular conspiracy theories as an example. First ask the students how they understand the notion of conspiracy theory, write their ideas on the board and tell them you will come back to them later during the class (for more information on conspiracy theories see Teacher's notes). Then ask your students if they have heard about the QAnon conspiracy theory which originated in the US and then spread to many countries in the world (see the information on QAnon in the Worksheet). If some of them are familiar with it, elicit the main beliefs and narratives of this conspiracy theory (see the article about QAnon in the Worksheet).

In the text about QAnon there is brief information about a paedophile ring at the centre of this conspiracy theory. If you assume that this topic might be sensitive for some students in your class and trigger strong emotions (e.g. some might be victims of child sexual abuse), you should perhaps reconsider conducting this activity with the class.

Then divide the students into groups of three and give each of the groups three copies of the worksheets for this activity. In there they will find the story and main facts about the QAnon conspiracy theory and the questions to discuss in the group. Tell your students to spend about five to ten minutes reading the text and discussing the accompanying questions:

❯ What are your first reactions and thoughts after reading about QAnon?
❯ How was authority bias exploited in the QAnon conspiracy theory?
❯ What are the main characteristics of a conspiracy theory, based on this example? How can you detect a conspiracy theory?
❯ Why do you think some people believe in the QAnon conspiracy theory? Why is it becoming popular?
❯ Why and how may conspiracy theories be dangerous? What may be their implications?

After the students have finished working in groups, ask each group to first present their reactions to what they have read in the plenary. Then move on to their answers to the questions from their discussions in the plenary. Then discuss them in the whole class. You can come back to the initial notes on the conspiracy theory and develop, with students, a list of characteristics of conspiracy theories and tips on how to detect them (see the Teacher's notes). Wrap up the discussion and emphasise the dangers conspiracy theories pose to society and the ways in which we can detect and debunk them (see Teacher's notes and the European Commission's related website for help).

If there are students in your class who believe in some form of a conspiracy theory, refrain from causing a heated debate about their beliefs. Do not ridicule their opinions, rather listen calmly to them and try to understand what emotions might be hidden beneath. They may be anxious or worried about certain issues. Encourage critical thinking, ask probing questions to make the students reflect on whether some elements of their beliefs are contradictory or what evidence for them they have. If they can see discrepancies in their theory, they may start having doubts about it and open up to exploring alternative views and evidence.

Worksheets

1. WARM-UP : EXPERIENCING AUTHORITY BIAS

Activity 1

Get in a group of three and discuss the questions below for the next five to ten minutes. Jot down the main conclusions from your discussion and be ready to present them to the whole class.

❯ Can you name any authority figures? For example, in sports, culture, art, politics, social media etc. Do they represent authority to you? Why?

....

....

....

❯ What makes somebody become an authority figure?

....

....

....

❯ Do we need authority figures? Why, why not?

....

....

....

❯ Why do we tend to trust authority figures? What are the advantages of trusting authority figures? What are the pitfalls?

....

....

....

Write down the definition of authority bias:

....

....

....
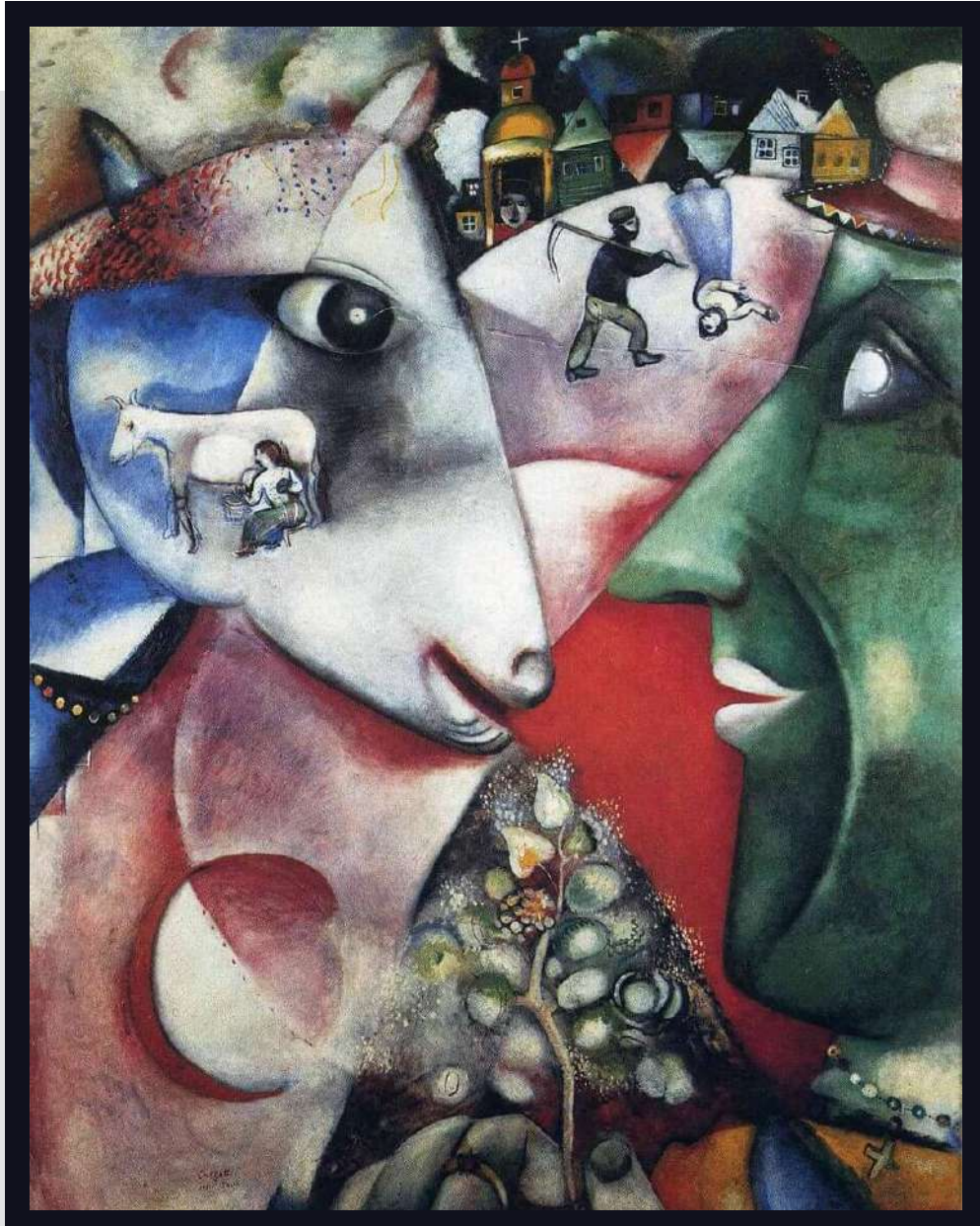
Image 1: "I and the village", 1911, by Marc Chagall.

"This is definitely one of Chagall's masterpieces. This dreamy painting is rich in images of the Russian landscape and symbols from folk stories, especially Jewish folklore. It is a reflection of Marc Chagall's dreams and memories", Adele Campbell, one of the world's top art critics."

Image 2: "Kizette on the balcony", 1927, Tamara de Lempicka.

"This painting depicts Lempicka's only child, her daughter. The painting tries to empha-size the role a woman plays in society through a subjective perspective", James Farago, freelance art writer."

Image 3: "The Ambassadors", 1533, Hans Holbein.

"There are paintings which are contradictions and a puzzle in themselves, they are not what they seem to be. This is one of them, full of surprising symbols of the fragility of our lives and death. Probably the most perfect Renaissance portrait of men that has been painted in Northern Europe", Peter van Eyck, Apollo Magazine."

Image 4: "Flower of Life", 1943, Frida Kahlo

"You can feel the energy and exuberance of life force radiating from this painting of Mexico's most famous and talented female painter. Her passion for life and the bold, vibrant colours she mostly used", Eva Calderon, an expert in Frida Kahlo's art."

2. AUTHORITY BIAS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Activity 1

Read about the four situations where authority bias may be triggered and discuss each situation, answering the questions below.

Situation #1

You are a group of students who have been invited to a meeting with the school authorities and teachers to represent the student community and to discuss solutions for the important and urgent issue of bullying at school. You feel you have some specific suggestions to offer during the meeting. At first they may seem a bit unusual and outside the box but you have consulted them with other students and you firmly believe they might work if you try them in your school, apparently they have worked out in a school of a friend of yours. At the meeting the teachers listen to you with interest and then discuss your ideas. Some say your proposals are great but too risky to try, they would rather go for the solutions suggested by the charismatic history teacher. She enjoys popularity and recognition in school and she has already piloted a few successful initiatives. You would like to discuss your ideas more in-depth and compare them to other suggested solutions but it seems the question has already been implicitly decided - the solutions proposed by the history teacher will be introduced in school.

❯ How is authority bias activated in this situation?

....

....

❯ What might its consequences be? For whom?

....

....

❯ What can be done to avoid falling for authority bias in this situation?

....

....

Situation #2

One of your parents works at a sewage treatment plant. Together with a group of other engineers they have recently written a report about a possible technical weakness of one of the metal elements of a new system of pipes which carry the sewage to be treated in the plant. They have raised concerns that with the passage of time this element might become more and more worn and this might cause the sewage to spill into the nearby river. The top head of the plant is familiar with the report but has decided not to

take any action for the time being, the replacement of the element being expensive. He is also concerned that a repair might undermine public confidence in the plant. Other managers in the plant seem to agree with the decision of the top manager. Your parent believes that a potential breakdown in the plant might be several more times expensive to contain, might threaten the river and cause harm to humans, plants and animals living in and around the river.

❯ How is authority bias activated in this situation?

....

....

❯ What might its consequences be? For whom?

....

....

❯ What can be done to avoid falling for authority bias in this situation?

....

....

Situation #3

One of your favourite football players/YouTubers/actors has recently endorsed a large-scale advertising campaign for a new type of sports shoe. You regularly follow them on social media and know a lot about them; they have a huge following. They have established and funded an initiative to give opportunities for education to children from poorer families, they are also advocates of many environmental issues and often express their opinions on topical social and political issues. Recently they have given their opinion about COVID-19 vaccines and vaccination in general. They are rather sceptical about it, would not get vaccinated against COVID-19 and would not vaccinate their children against some common diseases. They claim the disadvantages outweigh the benefits and quote medical investigations and experts. Their comments about it went viral.

❯ How is authority bias activated in this situation?

....

....

❯ What might its consequences be? For whom?

....

....

> ❯ What can be done to avoid falling for authority bias in this situation?

....

....

Situation #4

You have read news in a friend's post on social media that wearing masks for a prolonged time may cause severe lung infections and does not prevent COVID-19 infections, according to a group of scientists and doctors. The group also said they had written an appeal to the government to urge it to withdraw from compulsory mask-wearing in public space. Out of curiosity, you have checked the news further and apparently it has caused a heated debate on social media, with a lot of people raising similar concerns and opting out of wearing protective masks against the spread of the infection in public places. They say the government is hiding some medical research and is misinforming public opinion.

> ❯ How is authority bias activated in this situation?

....

....

> ❯ What might its consequences be? For whom?

....

....

> ❯ What can be done to avoid falling for authority bias in this situation?

....

....

3. AUTHORITY BIAS AND POPULIST OR EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS

Activity 1

First read part A of the following text and discuss your answers to questions a), b) and c) and your thoughts on questions d) and e), provided below, in your group. Next discuss your group's answers in the plenary. Then read part B of the text and compare your answers to questions d) and e) to the new information from the text; answer question f).

The QAnon conspiracy theory: its origins, evolution and consequences

Part A

The beginnings of the QAnon conspiracy theory can be found in 2016 in the US in so-called Pizzagate, a belief popular on fringe and far-right social media platforms (such as 4chan) that Hilary Clinton and other Democrat politicians are running a global pea-dophile ring out of a pizzeria in Washington DC. In December 2016, one believer in this conspiracy theory (Edgar Maddison Welch, a father of two) wanted to save children, allegedly imprisoned and abused in the pizzeria's basement, and ran into Comet Ping Pong pizzeria in Washington with a semi-automatic AR-15 rifle. There was no basement in the pizzeria and later in court Welch expressed his deep regrets that he had put peo-ple's lives in danger. He was sentenced to four years in prison. However, it is not clear if that made him stop believing in Pizzagate.

In October 2017, an anonymous user put a series of posts on the 4chan message board. The user signed off as 'Q' and claimed to have a level of US security approval known as 'Q clearance'. He wanted his audience to believe he was an intelligence officer or military official with high-level clearance that gives access to classified information that includes nuclear-weapons design and other highly sensitive material. He wrote that Hillary Clinton would be arrested soon and that a violent nationwide uprising would break out. None of this happened but that did not discourage Q from posting other messages, often written in cryptic language like riddles. This single post caused a lot of interest on social media and was picked up on by several conspiracy theorists whose promotion of Q in turn helped build up their own online profiles. By 2020 there have been thousands of what Q's followers call 'Q drops' or 'breadcrumbs' - messages posted to image boards by Q.

In its essence, QAnon is a wide-ranging, completely unfounded internet-based conspir-acy theory that alleges that the former US President, Donald Trump, is waging a secret war against elite Satan-worshipping paedophiles in government, business and the me-dia. This secret cabal of peadophiles is running the world and was plotting against the then President Donald Trump, while operating a global child sex-trafficking ring. QAnon believers have speculated that this fight will lead to a day of reckoning where prominent people such as former presidential candidate Hillary Clinton will be arrested and exe-cuted. True believers think that deliberate misinformation is part of Q's messages - for them the conspiracy theory therefore seems impossible to disprove.

For many believers, QAnon forms the foundation of their support for Donald Trump. Trump has, unwittingly or otherwise, retweeted QAnon supporters, and before the election his son Eric Trump posted a QAnon meme on Instagram. In its four years of ex-istence, the conspiracy theory has spread to more mainstream social media and drawn huge traffic on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and Reddit, attracting hundreds of thousands of dedicated followers. A Pew Research Center study in September 2020 found that nearly half of Americans had heard of QAnon, which is twice as many as at the beginning of 2020. Of those who had heard about it, every fifth American had a positive view of the movement. During the coronavirus pandemic, Q influencers have spread unfounded theories about the illness, calling it a 'deep state' hoax and have pro-moted misinformation about face masks and vaccines. It is said that social-media plat-forms (such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, etc.) were in general slow to take action to contain it, even though they have tightened their rules about QAnon content and taken down hundreds of Q-supporting accounts, videos and merchandise.

The QAnon conspiracy theory has gained popularity in other countries in the world, often morphing into some localised versions of the conspiracy theory, for example in the UK it is Prime Minister Boris Johnson who is supposed to eliminate the paedophile elites. Groups of believers are present in Poland, Germany, the UK, Australia, Canada, France, Italy and New Zealand. On social media there are approximately 500,000 QAnon followers coming from countries such as France, Spain, Romania, Germany and Austria.

> ❯ What are your first reactions and thoughts after reading about QAnon?
> ❯ How was authority bias exploited in the QAnon conspiracy theory?
> ❯ What are the main characteristics of a conspiracy theory, based on this example? How can you detect a conspiracy theory?
> ❯ Why and how do you think conspiracy theories may be dangerous? What might their implications be?
> ❯ Why do you think some people believe in the QAnon conspiracy theory? Why is it becoming popular?

Part B

In 2019 the FBI has designated QAnon as a 'domestic terror threat' because of its potential to incite extremist violence. QAnon supporters coordinate abuse of perceived enemies - the politicians, Hollywood celebrities and journalists who they believe are covering up for paedophiles. It's not just threatening messages online. Twitter says it took action against QAnon because of the potential for 'offline harm'. Several QAnon believers have been arrested after making threats or taking offline action. In one notable case in 2018, a heavily armed man blocked a bridge over the Hoover Dam. Matthew Wright later pleaded guilty to a terrorism charge.

Image 5.

The conspiracy-theory movement made news again on 6 January 2020, when many of its followers were seen participating in the deadly attack on the US Capitol Building, the meeting place of the US Congress. This was the culmination of a rally behind the White House, in which thousands of pro-Trump demonstrators marched on the Capitol to stop the electoral vote count, being presided over by the then Vice President Mike Pence. Trump supporters who believed the 2020 presidential election was fixed and that it was Donald Trump who actually won it were joined by other fringe and right-wing groups such as white supremacists and QAnon conspiracists. The rioters breached the Capitol and in the resulting fights five people were killed: four rioters and one police officer.

Many of the people most prone to believing conspiracy theories see themselves as victim-warriors fighting against corrupt and powerful forces. Although QAnon is definitely pro-Trump, it appeals to people with the greatest attraction to conspiracy thinking of any kind, and that appeal crosses ideological lines. The predilection for conspiracy theories is generally characterised by acceptance of the following assumptions: our lives are controlled by plots masterminded in secret places. Although we ostensibly live in a democracy, a small group of people run everything, but we don't know who they are. When big events occur - pandemics, recessions, wars, terrorist attacks - it is because that secretive group is working against the rest of us. QAnon also responds to people's frustrations with the current political system, education system, financial system and the media. Some believers in QAnon say the movement gives them hope for a radically different and better future.

The QAnon conspiracy theory has also made its way into US politics as in November 2020 one of its supporters, Marjorie Taylor Greene, won a US House seat in Georgia. Some experts predict that after Donald Trump's defeat in the US presidential election the QAnon conspiracy theory may survive as a sort of religious and political movement, a 'digital cult'.

After having read part B of the text, compare your answers to questions d) and e) above to the new information from the text - to what extent were your predictions close to the reality?
Think about your answer to the following question:

❯ How do you think we can avoid spreading such conspiracy theories in society?

Discuss your reflections with the whole class.

Sources of the materials:

➤ Image 1: https://www.marcchagall.net/
➤ Image 2: https://www.wikiart.org/en/tamara-de-lempicka/kizette-on-the-balcony-1927
➤ Image 3: https://niezlasztuka.net/o-sztuce/hans-holbein-mlodszy-ambasadorowie/
➤ Image 4: https://www.fridakahlo.org/
➤ Image 5: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2021_storming_of_the_United_States_Capitol

The text about QAnon is based on the following sources:

➤ La France, A., « The Prophecies of Q », The Atlantic, June 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/06/qanon-nothing-can-stop-what-is-coming/610567/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwv7L6BRDxARIs-AGj-34q71-2bbQE2LNhXddtvOMBjvn5VpJKWR02ds2hVk38_m2EKW2Zjd14aAiK7EALw_wcB
➤ Wendling M., « QAnon: What is it and where did it come from? », BBC News, 6 January 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/53498434
➤ Łuniewski, M., « QAnon. Od Pizzagate do sympatii Trumpa », Rzeczpospolita, 7 January 2021, https://www.rp.pl/Spoleczenstwo/308079994-QAnon-Od-Pizzagate-do-sympatii-Trumpa.html
➤ Greenspan, R. E., « QAnon spread like wildfire on social media. Here's how 16 tech companies have reacted to the conspiracy theory », Business Insider, 13 January 2021, https://www.businessinsider.com/how-every-tech-company-social-media-platform-handling-qanon-2020-10?IR=T
➤ Rushing, J. (Host), « How did the QAnon conspiracy go global », Al Jazeera, 10 February 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/podcasts/2021/2/10/how-did-the-qanon-conspiracy-go-global
➤ Kramer, J., « Why people latch onto conspiracy theories, according to science », National Geographic, 8 January 2021, https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/why-people-latch-on-to-conspiracy-theories-according-to-science

Ingroup-outgroup bias

1.

TEACHER'S NOTES

➤➤ Ingroup-outgroup bias

The basis of our social existence is that we belong to a group, be it on a very micro-level, such as belonging to a family or a group of friends, all the way to a macro-level, we are Christians, Muslims, Jews or atheists. We belong to a certain society or nation. All these make up an identity of a person. We divide our society in order to make some sense of our environment and give structure to it. Consciously or unconsciously, we see ourselves in some groups and that makes us feel like we belong somewhere, that we are a part of something. The term used to refer to a group that an individual identifies with is the "ingroup". Vice versa, the groups we do not belong to are "outgroups".

When belonging to a group, there are two phenomena that can get triggered. One is ingroup favouritism, that is we attribute more worth to people who we think belong to the same group as we do and we see people in the group more positively. We focus on positive aspects and characteristics of our ingroup.[1] On the other hand, that can trigger outgroup derogation. We tend to attribute less worth to the members of the outgroup, we focus on negative aspects and can develop towards them such feelings as hatred or disdain. The reason why we do this is because it puts our ingroup in a positive light and, consequently, it defines our own identity and improves our self-esteem.[2] When considering the outgroup, it is almost invariably seen as a homogenous group where everybody has the same (negative) characteristics, not as an array of diverse individuals just like our ingroup.

The ingroup-outgroup bias is a combination of ingroup favouritism on the one hand, and outgroup derogation on the other hand. It can be defined as a *"preferential evaluation of the ingroup relative to an outgroup".*[3]

[1] Stets, J. E., & Burke, P. J. (2000). Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory. Social Psychology Quarterly, 63(3), 224–237. (page 225)

[2] Appiah, O., Knobloch-Westerwick, S., & Alter, S. (2013). Ingroup Favoritism and Outgroup Derogation: Effects of News Valence, Character Race, and Recipient Race on Selective News Reading. Journal of Communication, 63(3), 517–534. (page 520)

[3] Levin, S., & Sidanius, J. (1999). Social Dominance and Social Identity in the United States and Israel: Ingroup Favoritism or Outgroup Derogation? Political Psychology, 20(1), 99–126. (page 99)

What are some typical characterizations of the ingroup-outgroup bias?

❯ Perceived differences between the ingroup and outgroup are exaggerated.[4] We tend to focus on the one aspect that sets us apart from the outgroup and treat that as the only relevant criterion. For example, fans of two football clubs that are traditional opponents could become rivals almost to life and death because they root for a different football team, overlooking similarities between them, such as that they all love football, hanging out with other fans or drinking a particular beer.

❯ If a supporter of somebody's favourite sports team engages in hooliganism, they are more likely to say "well, that was just one isolated incident, it doesn't speak for all of us", whereas if the hooligan had been a supporter of the rival, they would probably be quicker to say "you see, those supporters are all hooligans. We're better than that". Positive behaviour by an ingroup member is often generalised as a stable positive characteristic of the entire group, and similarly, negative behaviour by an outgroup member is generalised to the entire outgroup as well. It works the other way around as well: an act of negative behaviour by an ingroup member is seen as an isolated incident and attributed to temporal or situational forces, and an act of positive behaviour by an outgroup member is also seen as an exceptional occurrence unrelated to the identity of the group.[5] The ingroup is considered as a heterogeneous group where each member has a separate, individual identity, whereas the outgroup is seen as one homogenous social category.[6]

Why does such bias exist?

❯ According to Social Identity Theory, we define groups and categories in the world and in our social environments because it helps to define our identity. Our identity depends on our membership of those groups. From a cognitive point of view, dividing our social world into distinctive categories, each with either positive or negative attributes, is much easier than having to consider the complex reality with all its nuances. Like other biases, it simplifies our information-processing. Think about all the work our brain would have to do to understand that we can also share views or traits with an outgroup member, that really every individual belongs to hundreds of categories and that we're not defined by just one of those. On the other hand, we often put great effort into rationalising our biased opinions or prejudices (see more about it in Lesson 4 on confirmation bias).

[4] Rothbart, M., & Lewis, T. L. (2006). Attitudes and beliefs in a marching band: Stereotyping and accentuation in a favorable intergroup context. European Journal of Social Psychology, 36(5), 699–719.

[5] Hewstone, M. (1990). The 'ultimate attribution error'? A review of the literature on intergroup causal attribution. European Journal of Social Psychology, 20(4), 311–335.

[6] Rothbart, M., & Lewis, T. L. (2006). Attitudes and beliefs in a marching band: Stereotyping and accentuation in a favorable intergroup context. European Journal of Social Psychology, 36(5), 699–719.

Ingroup-outgroup bias and radicalization/extremism

All this shows how the bias works. But what we're really here to talk about are the **pitfalls**. The danger of the ingroup-outgroup bias lies in the fact that even in arbitrary groups that provide us with no ideology or shared characteristics to identify with, we still resort to ingroup favouritism and outgroup derogation. There doesn't need to be a difference in attitude, behaviour or opinions, or a historical conflict, let alone a legitimate one. In 1975, Henri Tajfel, the founder of the Social Identity Theory, conducted an experiment together with Michael Billig where they divided the subjects into groups that were established on an entirely random basis . There were no explicit similarities within the groups and no explicit differences between the groups and people did not know each other beforehand. It was mentioned to the participants that there were several groups, but no mention of any criterion for categorisation was made. Still, the findings showed that when completing a given task, i.e. dividing resources, people automatically preferred members of their group and **conducted discriminatory behaviour** against members of the outgroup.

And there lies the danger of the bias. For the members of the ingroup, **it can ultimately justify acts of discrimination or outright violence or derogation of the members of the outgroup as long as it benefits "our" own group.** It is also easily recognisable in populist and right-wing extremist agendas, with clearly defined "us vs. them" narratives of good and valiant people fighting less valuable groups of people. It is highly effective, precisely because it draws on our innate cognitive bias to categorise people in the groups to simplify our reasoning and information-processing. Ingroup-outgroup bias is an intrinsic feature of communication and campaigning of any populist or extremist politician. Whenever an outgroup, "an enemy", is defined, populists often speak about an entire homogenous group that has the same - by definition, negative - characteristics and one way or another represents a danger to "us", to our ingroup, "our values". As a downward spiral, homogenisation and negative associations with outgroups can subsequently lead the ingroup members to engage in violence against the outgroup, because the members of ingroup feel that the use of violence is justified. This is one of the foundations of extremist and radicalised violence.

7 Billig, M., & Tajfel, H. (1973). Social categorization and similarity in intergroup behaviour. European Journal of Social Psychology, 3(1), 27–52.

To find out more about cognitive biases and radicalisation, follow PRECOBIAS's free online course on *www.precobias.eu*.

2.

LESSON PLAN

Learning outcomes

At the end of this lesson, the students will be able to:

❯ Critically experience and understand the in-group-outgroup bias.

❯ Spot and identify the bias in real life examples on their own.

❯ Understand the connection between ingroup-outgroup bias and discriminatory be-havior.

❯ Spot the bias in extremist propaganda and under-stand the connection of the bias to extremist violence.

Structure of the lesson and instructions

Suggested duration: two to four 50-minute classes, depending on whether you do all the activities with your students or not.

Extra materials needed: none.

2.1.

⏱ 10-15 min

WARM-UP

Activity 1

To start the learning about ingroup-outgroup bias, let's start with a few easy examples. The aim is to initiate a reflection on how we all understand ourselves as part of certain groups and collectives that are distinct from others.

A short thought exercise. Ask the students to think about what groups they belong to and to write down this list. Which groups do they belong to on a micro-level, i.e. family, group of friends, sports teams, class? Which groups do they belong to on a macro-level, i.e. nation, religion, continent, etc.? Take some minutes to ask some students to share their examples.

Activity 2

Ask the students to write down three characteristics that come to their mind about each of the groups they wrote down in the previous step. What comes to their mind as first associations with these groups, what three adjectives? Take a couple of minutes to ask the students to share their associations. You can continue with the next activity and debrief afterwards, it is important that the students don't know any basics of the bias before the next activity (2.2. Activity 1) so that we can simulate a situation in which the bias can be triggered.

2.2.

⏱ 20-30 min

EXPERIENCING THE INGROUP-OUTGROUP BIAS

Activity 1

This activity aims to simulate a situation where the ingroup-outgroup bias is triggered so that the students can experience how easily the bias occurs, that they might not be immune to it. Experiencing the bias should also deepen the learning process.

Separate students into two groups according to a random and neutral criterion – those who like pizza and those who like pasta, who like cats and who prefer dogs, chocolate or cake or any other. The chosen criterion should not concern any primary trait or material status to avoid any gendered divisions or difficult feelings from such division. The members of each group sit in a circle or get together. The first group of students (pizza group, cats group ..) is asked to list all the reasons they can think of why the people from the other group prefer the other food, animal. And vice versa, the

second group should list all the reasons they can come up with for why people from the other group prefer the other food, animal. Both groups have three minutes to come up with as many ideas as they can. You can possibly motivate them with a reward for those who come up with more ideas.

Assign one or two observers per group. They will be asked to sit aside and not to participate in the debate. Their role will be to observe and write down on a piece of paper what was said in a particular group they were observing and how the discussion was developing. They should try to write down as many things as they hear within the internal discussion in the group.

After three minutes, ask some representatives of the groups to list all the things they came up with on the board. Count the number of positive versus negative reasons and compare what both groups wrote about each other. Then ask the observers to confirm what is written or add other adjectives they overheard from the discussions. They can also share their anecdotes and reflections about what they heard was happening in the group.

This exercise tends to start with neutral ideas, but negative attributes follow soon, often not helped by the fact the groups can overhear each other. The number of negative attributions about the other group will most probably outweigh the positive or neutral attributions (apart from basic assumptions on style or personal choice, students may be quick to judge other group's "poor taste", and so on). The observers at the end share their results, which might confirm and reinforce the ratio between positive and negative attributions.

This activity directly follows the first warm-up activities. Ask students if they noticed that when it came to the "ingroups" of their choice, in the previous activity, they only cited positive attributions? And yet, once divided into two groups based on an entirely random criterion ("liking pizzas"), they were ready to also assume negative things about the other group and pinpoint negative characteristics in light of which their own group looks like the "better" one, with e.g. "better taste"? And that they were ready to assume this even though their close friends happened to be members of this particular outgroup?

It is, of course, possible that the negative attributions will not outweigh the positive ones or negative attributions will not be mentioned at all. In those cases, you can tell them that you are proud that we didn't manage to pull the wool over their eyes and so they won this exercise. Explain that the students were quick to assert positive things about their ingroups in the first exercises and yet, started to come up with the negatives about a group they don't belong to - the second group of

students who like other things. You can tell them that in the setting of this exercise, the negatives usually outweigh the positives 2:1. Continue with the discussion on the basics of the bias.

Ask the students if they can discern a cognitive bias here and what the characteristics are.
This process is an entirely innate mechanism, called ingroup-outgroup bias. We tend to divide people into groups we belong to (ingroups) and those we don't belong to (outgroups). This division tricks the brain into elevating our ingroup in our eyes and derogating an outgroup. It is important to notice that the bias is so strong that it gets triggered even when we are assigned to a group we don't know, following random criteria. Let the students write down the definition of the bias for future use, either a definition you developed yourselves from the cues in the discussion or the one in the teacher's notes.

2. 3.

🕐 30 min in class

INGROUP-OUTGROUP BIAS AND DISCRIMINATION

Activity 1

Divide the students into three groups, it can easily be according to the three rows they sit in. No matter whether you choose rows or randomly allocate numbers 1, 2, 3 to students, make sure they are then seated together as a group. Assign a name to each group: from now on, for the sake of the exercise, one group will represent the tribe of Legends, the second group the tribe called Predators, the third one the tribe of Warriors. Read out loud what happens to their tribes, you can intensify the effect by looking at the groups as you read about them or look at particular members from the group to make it look like you are talking about them:

❯ At the beginning, all three tribes live together in one state. Each one has 100 horses, 1 kg gold and a huge piece of land. There are good trade relations among you, people of all tribes meet and have families together.

❯ One day, the Legends find oil on their land. Their fortunes triple. As there are no taxes in this state, the Legends keep their fortunes for themselves.

❯ It soon becomes obvious the Legends have a higher status. They buy new and nicer clothes, new iPhones. Predators and Warriors don't get a single cent and are not very happy about it. Seeing the Legends rich and beautiful, a sense of shame emerges among the Predators and Warriors for their older and plain clothes and the social status that these entail.

❯ It slowly becomes a custom for the Legends to date only the Legends, as a sign of social status.

- The following year, the Predators have a bad season, their crop does not yield much food. They lose their gold to buy food. The Legends don't send any help, the Warriors do send some horses.
- The Legends invest in the Warriors area. They buy a lot of companies; as new bosses, they make people work longer hours than in their own Legends' area for worse pay.
- The Predators sink deeper into poverty, some people losing their homes. Homeless tribe members can now be spotted in the streets of the Warriors and Legends areas.
- There are elections approaching in the Warriors area. Although without natural disasters, they are less well-off than they used to be. Posts and memes appear on social media, claiming that help to the Predators in times of adversity cost Warriors too much money and that filthy individuals make Warriors' streets unsafe. The posts call them "scum we have to get rid of". Everyone knows it's about the Predator clan.
- The Legends thrive, business booms. They start selling weapons to the Warriors' police. They also ban marriage outside the Legends people.
- The anti-Predators candidate wins elections in the Warriors area. Celebrations are being held in the streets in the area; a couple of homeless people get beaten up in the streets.
- As a response, openly anti-Warriors posters appear across the Predators' area. The Warriors are said to be hostile enemies to the Predator tribe and its citizens.
- The Legends start selling weapons to underground nationalist group in the Predators' area who dream of a time when all three tribes lived on the same piece of land. In those days, their clan ruled the state and the other two tribes were subordinate. The group starts secretly training people in the area who get easily mobilised as they don't have much to lose anymore.
- Things deteriorate. A massive stock market crash hits oil prices badly. The Legends head for a massive economic crisis. Legends-owned companies in Warriors' area go bankrupt. Many Legends and also many Warriors stand in line for unemployment benefits.
- In such terrible times, an incident happens, where a dead child is found in the Warriors' area. People immediately accuse a Predator guy who was spotted nearby; he gets beaten up on the spot. The Warriors eventually declare war on the Predators.

This is the story of the students' state. First, the students should abandon their respective roles, come back to reality and their class to debrief on their emotions from the exercise.

Ask the individual groups:

❯ How did it feel to be a Legend? How did it feel when the stock market crashed and suddenly your status and position changed?
❯ How did it feel to be a Predator? Did you feel a sense of justice when the other tribes suffered in the market crash? Or when it turned out you once ruled the state?
❯ How did it feel to be a Warrior? Did you feel a bit envious of Legends' luck?

The students will now be asked to identify the ingroup-outgroup bias in the story. Tell them to put the economic elements of the story aside and focus on the ingroup-outgroup bias that we already learned about in previous activities.
Ask them to recall the instances where ingroup-outgroup bias appeared, so some acts in which one tribe elevated themselves and derogated another tribe; ask one or two volunteers to write these on the blackboard.

Chronologically, the answers can look like this:

Legends started dating only Legends, for status reasons, derogating other tribes	Predator homeless are beaten in the streets by Warriors
Legends discriminate against Warriors at workplace - they earn less than Legends	Predators claim Warriors are enemies and danger to them, derogating Warriors
Warriors start considering Predators a financial burden, call them dirty, dangerous and "scum" to get rid of	A memory of a glorious past emerges where Predators were the most powerful and subjugated the two other tribes
Legends ban marriage outside Legends, derogating other tribes	Without evidence, Warriors assume the ethnicity of the killer of a Warrior child, collective guilt applied to Predators

Not all of them have to be mentioned, at least some of them. The students can see here that you can spot ingroup-outgroup bias in real-life events and that this bias is a strong basis for discrimination and potentially violence among different groups.

2. 4.

🕐 45 min

INGROUP-OUTGROUP BIAS IN THE VIDEO GAMES

Activity 1

In this activity, we will take a look at how the bias can be triggered in a video-game environment. For this purpose, we will take a look at how, for a significant period of time, popular war-themed games, i.e. games whose purpose was a simulation of fight and where the player is directly involved and sides with one view of the conflict, depicted Western soldiers versus characters from Middle Eastern or predominantly Muslim countries.

For the context: Following the attacks on the Twin towers, New York, on 9/11/2001 by the terrorist group Al-Qaeda, a number of video games reacted to these events and to the climate of 'war on terror' declared by the US government (for more information, see Lesson 9 The Picture superiority effect, part 2.2.4. on propaganda). Hugely popular war-themed games have dealt with the topic of terrorism.

First, ask the students whether any of them have played the games "Call of duty" or "Battlefield". Some of the students may be familiar with some of the games. You can ask them to tell the class what the storylines of these games they played are, depending on how much time you want to spend on the activity. Ask then specifically, whether someone played "Call of duty 4: Modern Warfare" or "Battlefield 3" and whether they want to tell the class the main storylines. If no one knows the games, it's ok, no need to spend time on storylines, but it could be an opportunity for those students who actively play to showcase their skills and show that their free-time activity can be an interesting intellectual issue.

Tell the students that we will next analyse a number of popular war-themed video games where Arabic or Muslim characters are represented. We will look at the protagonists and how the places are depicted where the game is played.

> Let the students take a look at the pictures and screenshots from various games[8] **(see Worksheet)**. You can work with the entire class or divide them into groups, depending on your preferences and experience with the particular class.

1. *Protagonists - Ingroup versus outgroup*

> Ask the students to examine the pictures and write down the main characteristics of who the "good guys" - or allies - and "bad guys" - or enemies - in the mentioned video games are.

"Good guys" are white men, soldiers in uniforms. From the flags on the lapels, it's clear they represent American and British soldiers, with top-notch weaponry.

"Bad guys" are brown-skinned, wear scarves and shabbier outfits; one of them has his face entirely covered so we don't get to see any facial feature, with weapons of lesser quality (some AK-47, some bombs), one of them is a suicide bomber, another wears a chest that reminds of suicide bombs (Image 3). They have more aggressive, more hostile features than "good-guy" soldiers.

2.   *Places - Outgroup derogation*

Next, take a look at an array of places where some of the games, or some missions from the games, take place, on the pictures and screenshots[9] **(see Worksheet)**. The storyline of these games takes place in real countries and cities; the images and screenshots are to depict real places where the players - soldiers - come to do missions. Ask the students to write down what the "enemy" places look like, what the main elements depicted in these places are? What emotions do these places induce in students' minds?

> Ask the students to write down what the "enemy" places look like, what the main elements depicted in these places are? What emotions do these places induce in students' minds?

If the students object to the fact that Tehran is not visible, Battlefield 3: Operation Guillotine in Tehran takes place at night, little is seen from the city. You could ask the student to check the playthrough of the game on YouTube and check the entire setting at home. Tehran is empty, burned remnants of cars are seen in the streets, graffiti on dilapidated walls.

In these examples, the "enemy" places are almost invariably in ruin; there are burnt-out cars in the streets, signs of destruction, broken windows, deserted streets. Image 9 showcases Iraqi town as a sandy, empty landscape, the yellow, dusty colours largely underline this impression. The answers will vary; the emotions triggered can vary from sadness to fear, sense of threat, uncomfortable emotions, unsafe, uneasy feelings, hostility.

> Let the students take a look at the three real pictures of Sulaymaniyah, Tehran and Karachi **(see Worksheet)**. Do they correspond to the games' representations? Which prejudices might the games induce about these cities/countries?

The games uniformly depict Arabic and other predominantly Muslim cities and countryside as ruined, dangerous-looking places, even though these cities are lively in real life; there is no conflict going on in these cities. This can result in a negative association with those particular countries, fear, a prejudice that those countries are more backward, less civilised.

9 Source of image 6: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-iW97iG-6vI

Source of image 7: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k2QO-9Hy7Das

Source of image 8: https://www.engadget.com/2016-03-24-shooting-the-arabs-how-video-games-perpetuate-muslim-stereotype.html

Source of image 9: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sr7GqR-RrT_Q

Source of image 10: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMe-Q3ruTojI

3.   *Prejudices - Outgroup derogation*

> Can the students spot references to Islam (or a hint that the "enemies" are Muslims) in the pictures?
> From the analysis we did here, can the students think of prejudices that the portrayals of "enemies" perpetuate?

In this sample, there are two references: The primary enemy protagonist in image 4 is referred to as "the cleric", inducing a sense of Islamic religious authority, the second one is the presence of mosques on image 5, Iraqi landscape.
These video games take place in many predominantly Muslim countries. The games perpetuate the bias that Muslim countries are war-torn and dangerous, the prejudice that people from these countries are terrorists; they match the identity of Arabs with Muslims and Muslims directly with Muslim fighters and terrorists; they oversimplify the worldview of "good" soldiers and "bad" Muslim terrorists.

Tell the students that research[10] shows that more than 15 war-themed games released in US after 2001 contained Arabic and Muslim characters and these were almost invariably depicted as we saw in this analysis. Given the fact that the Western video-game industry is globally the most popular, millions of people have played these games.

> Ask the students to google real quick, how many copies were sold of "Call of Duty 4: Modern warfare", the game we looked at in this analysis? (If you prefer them not to use the phone, you can tell them the number yourself or set it as homework).

Wikipedia lists Call of Duty 4: Modern warfare as the top-selling game worldwide for 2007, selling around 16 million by the end of 2013.

4.   *Ingroup-outgroup bias*

> Ask the student: from the analysis we did and information you got, could you tell how the game can trigger ingroup-outgroup bias in players?

The answer might be that there is a clear black-and-white distinction between the "good guys" and "villains". The good guys have all the good characteristics, the villains all the negative ones. There is a clear and strong derogation of the outgroup, as we saw in how they are portrayed, the Arabic/Muslim fighters are depicted as threatening, often with covered faces, their outfits look shabbier, their houses are in ruin, their identity is conflated with Muslims. The ingroup-outgroup bias can be triggered because the players are part of the good guys; they actively play against the villains, they are

drawn into the storyline. The players associates themselves with the good guys.

> Ask the students what effect the uniform portrayal of Arab/ Muslims fighters as negative characters and predominantly Muslim countries as ruined states could have on players? Bear in mind that there is a high number of associations with re-al-life people, geopolitical events and places.

These games make allusions to real-life events. Storylines might be fictional, but there are clear parallels with reality, namely Western soldiers who go and fight Muslim fighters in Middle Eastern/African countries. There is a clear conflation between Muslim - fighter - ter-rorist, creating a black and white depiction of Western soldiers vs "Muslim terrorists". The players are part of the "good guys" team of soldiers; they could fall for ingroup-outgroup bias, internalise the derogation of the outgroup, in this case the Muslims depicted as terrorist villains.

Moreover, the games uniformly depict the predominantly Muslim cities and countryside as destroyed, dangerous-looking ruins, even though these cities are often lively and without conflict. This adds to the generally bad associations with those particular countries.

Importantly, this could have a spill-over effect to real life. Players becoming less sensitive to war, violence or suffering sustained by the outgroup.

Explain further to students that it does not mean playing these vid-eo games or video games in general is bad. *If some students share their experiences or talked about storylines of the games at the begin-ning of the class, make sure they won't be regarded as more biased; you can repeat that the biases are triggered subconsciously and it's normal, all the more so in the relaxed atmosphere of playing a game where nobody is paying attention to careful information-processing or deep analysis.*

5.   *Effects*

You can ask the students whether they can think of how the effects of ingroup-outgroup bias in gaming could be measured and wheth-er they can think of ways the army could use such games.

11 https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2012-29075-001

In fact, and experiment[11] was conducted in 2019 where 204 partici-pants were randomly divided into three groups to play different vid-eo games for 30 minutes. One group played a game fighting Arab terrorists, the second one fought Russian terrorists and the third group played a non-violent golf game. Those who played violent games showed an increased level of prejudice against Arabic people regardless of whether they played against Arabs or Russians. The highest level of negative associations were noted when the group played against Arab terrorists. This was measured before and after

12 https://www.muse-umofplay.org/blog/chegheads/2012/10/from-training-to-toy-to-treatment-the-many-lives-of-full-spectrum-warrior

the game. The participants were asked to draw different characters, one of them Arabic characters. Those who played against Arab terrorists tended to draw Arabic characters with weapons and with more hostile facial features. It goes to show, therefore, that video gaming helps promote negative associations with Arabs and Islam as such.

The US army used to use a couple of these video games to "prepare" soldiers for deployment in the Iraq war. In fact, the video game Full Spectrum Warrior was developed by an institution directly funded by the US army.[12]

Optional homework

If the students are interested in the topic and would like to do dig deeper into ways the division into "good guys" and "Muslim terrorists" distorts reality and how it could help trigger the ingroup-outgroup bias, you could set them an optional task. In this homework, they will see in detail how the selected video games help perpetuate negative associations and prejudices against predominantly Muslim countries, and how their depictions are unfairly skewed against them.

Tasks:

❯ Find out how many Muslims live in the world and which country has the highest Muslim population.

Despite popular belief, Muslims do not only live in the Middle East; the biggest Muslim community lives, in fact, in Indonesia.

❯ Find out what languages are spoken in Afghanistan, in Pakistan (there is a wrong language reference in the screenshot from Karachi in our sample of pictures; will the students find out?) and in Iran.

Contrary to popular prejudice further accentuated in these video games, not every Muslim-majority country is Arabic, and being Muslim doesn't mean speaking Arabic. Official languages of Afghanistan are Dari and Pashto, of Pakistan is English and Urdu. In Iran, the official language is Farsi (Persian). None of those has anything to do with the Arabic language. The wrong reference in the video game (Image 8) concerns an Arabic sign on a shop in Karachi, whereas the official language in Pakistan is English and Urdu.

❯ Do some research and try to find out how New York and Paris are depicted in Battlefield 3 (featuring Tehran and Sulaymaniyah in ruin).

While the creators of Battlefield 3 went to great lengths to depict Tehran and Sulaymaniyah as cities in ruin and dangerous-looking, although they are bustling cities and well-organised in real life, New York and Paris are depicted entirely realistically as beautiful cities.

❯ Can you find out whom Hassan "The cleric" from Medal of Honor: Warfighter resembles in real life and which are these similarities?

He resembles Osama bin Laden and may be a fictional stand-in for him. Both are elderly Middle Eastern men, lead terrorist organisations, dress similarly, and were killed in Pakistan.[13]

13 https://medalofhonor.
fandom.com/wiki/The_
Cleric

2. 5.

🕐 60-90 min

INGROUP-OUTGROUP BIAS AND POPULIST OR EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS

Activity 1

In the following activities, we will take a look at how the ingroup-outgroup bias, inherent in all of us, can be exploited by political communication, and populist/extremist communication in particular. The aim of the activities is not to discuss particular ideologies or politicians, but the strategies that trigger the bias in the minds of the audience, regardless of political classification or particular party or what the party or leader stands for. Should the discussion focus on issues in the pictures or quotes used in the following exercises, we advise bringing the attention back to how the brain processes information, how the brain sorts and simplifies the information for us using different biases - this time the ingroup-outgroup bias. If we receive information and messages from pictures automatically and do not pay closer attention, the automatic processes in our brain could process it erroneously without us being aware of this. That is why we look at the political strategies that trigger the bias, not at the content of different ideologies. If you feel some prejudices might be reinforced throughout the exercises, feel free to address them. For example in activity 1, you can pick out images 1 and 5, where the first image sheds a negative light on the "Western culture" and image 5 reflects badly on "immigrant culture" and discuss this in detail, asking questions, like what elements are depicted in the pictures, which stereotypes do they reinforce, what other information is left out of the pictures?

Thanks to the introduction and experience-based exercises, by now, students should have a basic grasp of the ingroup-outgroup bias and of how fast we attribute positive characteristics to our ingroup and negative ones to our outgroup. The next step is to spot and understand how this bias manifests itself in political communi-

cation, in order to spot it in racist and extremist agenda.

Show students the following social media posts and one billboard campaign[14] **(see Worksheet)** - you can either print them, distribute them among students, or show on screen.

Ask questions:

❯ Can you spot the ingroup-outgroup bias in these posts and pictures?

❯ What is the common feature of the pictures, what kind of division is always present?

Description of the five examples:

1. "Us" is Muslims, portrayed as a beautiful family that cooperates, where man helps his wife with household duties.
"Them" is Westerners, non-believers, where man disregards his child and his wife, lays in front of the TV and she is overburdened by household duties.

2. Example by PETA animal rights organization:
"Us" is people who care for animal rights, we are righteous and good.
"Them" is people who don't care about the animals and wear fur, and are depicted as "monsters". They should be ashamed of themselves, they have blood on their hands. This is an attempt to create outgroup - outgroup of those who buy fur products.

3. Example by Donald J. Trump
"Us" is Asians, implicitly also Americans, smart guys who can use computers
"Them" is Mexicans, who are rapists

4. Example by Marian Kotleba, MP for neonazi party in Slovakia
"Us" is people who live in traditional families, marriages of man and a woman
"Them" is LGBT people, who are thus a threat and danger to such families and they must be stopped.

5. Example by Lega Nord, Italian political party
"Us" is Italians, good and humble people.
"Them" is all people of immigrant background, who jump the queue for Italian medical services, housing and jobs, pushing Italians out, making them second-class citizens. They look hostile and aggressive.

The key code in the presented posts and billboard is the division between "us" and "them", or between ingroup and outgroup. Moreover, importantly, "us" is positive and "them" is negative.
Each image codes its message by the division "us versus them", where the ingroup "us" - where the viewer belongs - has positive characteristics, is implicitly better, because "them", the outgroup, does something bad. This can easily trigger ingroup-outgroup bias in the minds of viewers who do not process the content of the pictures consciously or can potentially reinforce existing prejudices.

Continue with following questions

❯   Why is this division, "us versus them" misused in political communication? What is the danger?

The two first examples are rather populist. They are not extremist, nor do they induce violence. They show that ingroup-outgroup bias is coded in many types of communications and is there to induce the viewer into automatic thinking, where the viewer quickly grasps the meaning. Examples 3 and 4 show that the division between the good ingroup and bad outgroup can be much more clear-cut and straightforward. In example 3, the Mexicans are said to be rapists, in example 4, LGBT people are portrayed as a dangerous threat to traditional families. In example 5, we see a group of purportedly immigrants or people from different backgrounds, all hostile, one clutching a knife. The image claims they are first in line to get public services, pushing a nice and feeble-looking Italian grandfather to the end of the queue. The immigrants are depicted as bad people who take rights away from Italians.

This is how ingroup/outgroup bias and the us/them narrative looks in political communication. Some other groups of people are "bad guys". It is often used in political communication, because for the audience, it reduces the world into a picture - almost invariably an erroneous one – of good versus evil, and appeals to ingroup-outgroup bias inherent in all of us.

The danger is, beyond being hateful, examples 3, 4 and 5 perpetuate prejudices against other groups. They can seem to justify negative attitudes, potentially violence, against the outgroups members. The aggravating circumstance is that they are spoken by public figures, the former US President Trump in case 3, Slovak member of parliament in case 4 and Italian political party in case 5.

Activity 2

In this exercise, students will be asked to identify the ingroup-outgroup bias in quotes of well-known people. Print and position the quotes[16] **(see Worksheet)** on the walls or distribute them among students, according to your preference or usual practice. Let students read the quotes and think for themselves for 5 minutes.

> ❯ Who is the group the speaker belongs to?
> ❯ Who is the second group?
> ❯ What collective characteristics does the second group have?
> ❯ Implicitly, what collective characteristics are attributed to the group the speaker belongs to?

The answers may look as follows:

	1	2	3	4
Speaker belongs to	British, Europeans, Americans, "white" people..	Europeans, Christians, non-Muslims	Arabs	Jews
The second group is	Indians, Australians, people of different skin color..	Muslims	Americans	Palestinians, non-Jews, Arabs
The second group's characteristics	"Stronger race, a higher-grade race, a more worldly wise race",..	"Dangerous, threatening our values and identity"	"War-mongering", "corruption-sewing", "infidels"	Do not belong to our state, have not the same citizenship status and the same rights
Speaker's group characteristics	"Weaker, lower-grade, less worldly wise", "stupider",..	"Virtuous", "threatened"	"Good citizens", "non-corrupt", "peaceful", "believers"	Do belong to our state, have citizenship and all the political rights

Explain to students that these are all real-life examples - quotes by well-known politicians. Students can work out for themselves how the ingroup-outgroup bias works in political communication. These are all examples of the "us versus them" narrative.

Activity 3

In the next activity, we will take a look at who are the authors of the quotes. We will then see a quote by Adolf Hitler in which he makes a reference to the use of ingroup-outgroup bias. The point of the exercise is to show that Nazis consciously and openly misused strategies that trigger ingroup-outgroup bias in people's minds, so the students should be aware of such strategies also in current political language.

Let the students then guess the authors of the quotes from the previous activity. Let them make a few guesses before you reveal the true identity of the authors. Ideally, start from 1 to 4.

16 https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-29701767

https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/matteo_salvini_970885

https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/11/al-qaeda-leader-urges-attacks-on-the-west-on-9-11

https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/10/benjamin-netanyahu-says-israel-is-not-a-state-of-all-its-citizens

The authors are as follows:

#1 Winston Churchill, former British Prime Minister
#2 Matteo Salvini, former Italian Deputy Prime Minister
#3 Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda leader
#4 Benjamin Netanyahu, former Israeli Prime Minister

When all four authors are revealed, show them printed or read out loud one more quote:[17]

17 https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/adolf_hitler_101564

> *The leader of genius must have the ability to make different opponents appear as if they belonged to one category.*

Ask students who they think the author is. After a few guesses, reveal that the author of the quote is Adolf Hitler.

Ask the students what they think about the quotes and about Hitler's quote.
Surely, Hitler and Nazis were not the first ones in history to exploit the innate ingroup-outgroup bias so that their audience is triggered and mobilized against outgroup. But the fact that Hitler openly advocates for use of such an approach should ring an alarm for the students when they think about all the examples mentioned. What Hitler essentially proposes is to homogenize the outgroup, to put them all in one category, as "opponents", "enemies", who all share the same negative characteristics.

If some students raise provocative comments, you can further address it. Should they glorify Hitler for this remark, you can spend a minute or two explaining that ingroup-outgroup bias and outgroup derogation - mainly of Jewish, Roma, ethnic populations, LGBT people or political opponents – had horrific consequences and led to their extermination. If, on the other hand, the students feel that comparing the first quotes with Hitler's quote is misplaced, tell them we are not talking about ideology here and not claiming those politicians are neo-Nazis; we are talking about strategies they use and how their political speech, and particularly the quotes here, can trigger automatic thinking and ingroup-outgroup bias in the minds of people to whom the quotes are addressed.

Look back at all four quotes analysed in Activity 2. Look at how outgroups are defined.

Ask questions:

❯ Is it realistic that all people from the outgroup have the same characteristics? Does this portray the reality of the world, where we are simply only good versus evil?

❯ Take a look at how the outgroup is characterised: they are all "weaker, stupider", "corrupted", "don't belong to us", while we are "of course" the good guys. A high-ranking politician says these things. What can be potential consequences, what do their voters think?

❯ Is it possible to address the conflict between ingroup and out-group with peaceful and diplomatic solutions, if the outgroup, other people, are portrayed simply as plain "bad"?

When the debate is framed in "us vs them" and "good vs evil", it is impossible to speak of, for example, underlying economic problems, some justified claims the outgroup may have, or some incidental problems, that have nothing in common with "every" migrant, "every" Muslim, "every" American. It's because we are prone to automatic thinking, to switch on the ingroup-outgroup bias, that helps us simplify the world into good vs. bad.

Activity 4

Ask the students who they think are the "outgroups" for the following ideological groups. Who do these groups fight, when they speak of "us vs. them", who is "they"?
Post these outgroups in a column.

Example of what students can enlist:

Nazis	Jihadis	Christian fundamentalists	White supremacists
Jews	atheists	atheists	people of color
people of color, minorities	women (they should have a traditional role)	women (they should have a traditional role)	minorities
LGBT people			LGBT people
women (they have a traditional role)	people who promote gender equality	people who promote gender equality liberals	religious minorities
religious minorities poor people liberals	LGBT people	non-Christians	women (they should have a traditional role)
radical leftists	religious minorities Christians, Jews, Jazidis	LGBT people	people who promote gender equality
...	liberals/West, US		
	radical leftists		

Ask the students:

❯ When you look at this list, why do you think it is important to know about the ingroup-outgroup bias?
❯ Can you think of how we can avoid triggering it?

You can brainstorm your own strategies of how to deal with the bias. Some of the ideas include:
Essentially, the best protection against triggering the bias is to know it and to be aware of it. Then every time you spot an example, this should set off an alarm bell. There is an oversimplification at play that targets our weaknesses - one of the cognitive biases we have. Look for similarities between yourself and members of an outgroup. Use rational thinking and reasoning. Bear in mind that the outgroup is never homogenous, bear in mind that a political debate put in ingroup-outgroup terms can't potentially be solved; it does not offer practical problems to solve. It can only incite hatred and fear of the other group.

Activity 5

Ask the students to research and think of at least three examples in history or in the present day, where the ingroup-outgroup bias has had violent consequences, where the reduction to "us vs them" led to violence. If you want to go into more detail, students can also present the cases in front of the class.

The obvious example is the holocaust and the Nazis, but the students should find examples beyond this one. These can vary from such examples as the ethnic violence between Hutus and Tutsis in the 90s in Rwanda, the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in Myanmar, or a recent attack on the US Capitol Hill by Donald Trump's supporters who promised on social media to crush their opponents by force.

Worksheets

1. WARM-UP

Activity 1

Write down which groups you belong to on a micro-level. Which groups, including family or sports teams, do you feel you are a member of?

1 ....

2 ....

3 ....

Write down which groups you feel you belong to on broader level, like for example nation, religious groups or other:

1 ....

2 ....

3 ....

Activity 2

Next to each group you mentioned, write 3 characteristics that you feel that describe this group for you.

2. EXPERIENCING THE INGROUP-OUTGROUP BIAS

Activity 1

Write down as many reasons as you can think of in three minutes as to why the other group does not like the same things your group does:

....

....

....

For the observer:

Write down as many characteristics as you hear mentioned in the group you are observing.

....

....

....

Write down the definition of ingroup-outgroup bias:

....

....

....

....

....

....

3.

INGROUP-GROUP BIAS
AND DISCRIMINATION

The teacher will read to your class a story, listen to the story of your tribe. At the end, answer a question according to the tribe you belonged to:

If you were a Legend, how did it feel to be one? How did it feel when the stock market crashed and your status and position suddenly changed?

For Predators: how did it feel to be a Predator? Did you feel a sense of justice when both Legends and Warriors suffered in the market crash? Or when it turned out you once ruled the state?

For Warriors: how did it feel to be a Warrior? Were you a little envious of the luck of the Legends?

....

....

....

Try to recall the ingroup-outgroup bias in the story. Put aside the economic aspects, but write the instances in which one tribe elevated themselves and derogated another tribe:

....

....

....

....

....

4. INGROUP-OUTGROUP BIAS AND VIDEO GAMES

Activity 1

Look at the following pictures or screenshots from famous war-themed video games released after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Image 1: Allies character from Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

Image 2: Allies character from Arma 2: Operation Arrowhead

Image 3: One of the two primary enemy character from Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

Image 4 Primary enemy character "The Cleric" from Medal of Honor: Warfighter

Image 5: Enemy character from Taliban, game: Medal of Honor

Look at the pictures and write down the main characteristics of the "good guys", or allies, and "bad guys", or enemies, in the video games mentioned:

Good guys: ....

....

Bad guys: ....

....

Next, take a look at where the games take place and how these places are represented:

Image 6: Battlefield 3: Operation Swordbreak mission, Sulaymaniah city, Iraq

Image 7: Battlefield 3: Operation Guillotine mission, Tehran city, Iran

Image 8: Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Karachi, Pakistan

Image 9: Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare landscape in Iraq

Image 10: Army of Two: Somalia

Look at the places where different games take place. What do the places look like, what are the main elements depicted in these places? What emotions do these places induce in you?

....

....

....

....

Now take a look at the real life pictures of Sulaymaniyah, Tehran and Karachi:

Image 1: Sulaymaniyah

Image 2: Tehran

Image 3: Karachi

Do these pictures correspond to the games' representations? Which prejudices might the games induce about these cities/countries?

....

....

In the screenshots from the games, can you spot other references to Islam? (hint: there are two)

....

....

From the analysis we did here, can you think of prejudices that the portrayals of "enemies" in these video games perpetuate?

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....

According to research, more than 15 war-themed games released in the US after 2001 and that contained Muslim characters, these were almost invariably depicted as we saw in this analysis. Given the Western video games industry is globally popular and the most sold, millions of players have played these games. Can you find out how popular and how many copies of Call of Duty 4: Modern warfare were sold worldwide?

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From the analysis we did and information you gleaned, could you describe how the game can trigger ingroup-outgroup bias in players?

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What effects could the uniform portrayal of Arabs/Muslims fighters as negative characters and Arabic/Muslim countries as states in ruin have on players? Take into account that there is a high number of associations with real-life people, geopolitical events and places.

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Could you think of how the effects of ingroup-outgroup bias in gaming could be measured? What use could the army make of such games?

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Optional homework

1 Find out how many Muslims live in the world and which country has the highest number of Muslims.

....

....

2 Find out which languages are spoken in Afghanistan, in Pakistan (there is a wrong language reference in the screenshot from Karachi in our sample of pictures, can you spot it?) and in Iran.

....

....

3   Do a little research and try to find out how New York and Paris are depicted in Battlefield 3 (featuring dilapidated Tehran and Sulaymaniyah).

4   Can you find out whom Hassan "The cleric" from Medal of Honor: Warfighter resembles in real life and what are these similarities?

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5. INGROUP-OUTGROUP BIAS AND POPULIST OR EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS

Activity 1

Look at the social media posts or a picture of the billboard below.

> Can you spot the ingroup-outgroup bias in these posts and pictures?
> What is the common feature of the pictures, what kind of division is always present?

Image 1

Image 2

Image 3

Image 4

Image 5

Text in these images:

Image 1: This is culture!! This is Islam
Image 2: Who is the true monster? Stop wearing fur. PETA
Image 3: Donald J. Trump: Why can't Mexicans be more like the Asians? Less rape, more computers!
Image 4: A family is a man and a woman. STOP LGBT! Marian Kotleba, finally a Slovak president
Image 5: Can you guess who is the last one? Housing, Medical services, Work. Only Lega Nord defends your interests
(Marian Kotleba is a head of Slovak neo-Nazi party; he run for presidential elections with these billboards in 2019; Lega Nord is Italian far-right party, headed by Matteo Salvini; it is a strongly anti-immigrant and anti-European party)

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Why is this division, "us versus them" misused in political communication? What is the danger?

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Activity 2

Read the following quotes by well-known political figures.

1.

"I do not admit, for instance, that a great wrong has been done to the Red Indians of America or the black people of Australia. I do not admit that a wrong has been done to these people by the fact that a stronger race, a higher-grade race, a more worldly wise race to put it that way, has come in and taken their place."

2.

"The defense of our values and our identity requires regulation of the Islamic presence and Islamic organizations in [our country]."

3.

"Your countries are littered with American bases with all the infidels therein and the corruption they spread."

4.

"Israel is not a state of all its citizens. According to the basic nationality law we passed, Israel is the nation state of the Jewish people – and only it."

Then try to complete the following table for each of the quotes:

	1	2
Who is the group the speaker belongs to?		
Who is the second group?		
What are the characteristics of the second group?		
What are implicitly the characteristics of the speaker's group?		

	3	4
Who is the group the speaker belongs to?		
Who is the second group?		
What are the characteristics of the second group?		
What are implicitly the characteristics of the speaker's group?		

Activity 3

Take a look at the following quote:

> *The leader of genius must have the ability to make different opponents appear as if they belonged to one category.*

Who do you think the author is? :

Look back at all four quotes analysed in the previous activity. Look at how outgroups are defined.

Is it realistic that all people from the outgroup have the same characteristics? Does this reflect the real world, where we are simply only good versus evil?

Take a look at how the outgroup is characterised: they are all "weaker, stupider", "corrupted", "don't belong to us", while we are "of course" the good guys. A high-ranking politician claims these things. What can the potential consequences be, what do their voters think when they hear such a message?

Is it possible to address the conflict between ingroup and outgroup with peaceful and diplomatic solutions, if the outgroup, other people, are portrayed simply as plain "bad"?

Activity 4

Write down in the columns who you think is the outgroup for these ingroups. Who do they fight in their ideology, in a sense of "us vs them" narrative?

Nazis	Jihadis	Christian fundamentalists	White supremacists

When you look at these lists of outgroup "enemies", why do you think it is important to know about the ingroup-outgroup bias?

....

....

....

Can you think of ways we can avoid triggering the bias?

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Activity 5

Research and list at least three examples in history or in the present day, where the ingroup-outgroup bias has had violent consequences, where the reduction to "us vs them" led into violence.

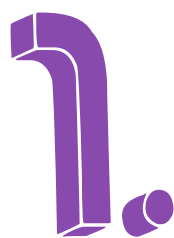..

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Sources of the materials:

❯ Image 1 (Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare 2) https://www.giantbomb.com/john-mactavish/3005-23/images/

❯ Image 2 (Arma 2): http://www.arma2.com/game-features/oa

❯ Image 3 : (TRT World and Agencies): https://www.trtworld.com/americas/turkeys-counter-strike-against-islamophobia-in-video-games-225921

❯ Image 4 (screenshot): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3RdA2dJVeQ&t=1328s

❯ Image 5 (screenshot): https://medalofhonor.fandom.com/wiki/Al-Qaeda?file=MOHAQsoldier.png

❯ Image 6 (screenshot): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-iW97iG6vI

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❯ Reflection on negativity bias in the videogames from Ibaid, Taha (2019): The Waging of a Virtual War against Islam: An Assessment of How Post-9/11 War-themed Video Games Stereotype Muslims, University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Canada https://ir.library.dc-uoit.ca/bitstream/10155/1023/1/Ibaid_Taha.pdf

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❯ Image 11www.Facebook.com

❯ Image 12 https://www.adsoftheworld.com/taxonomy/brand/peta

❯ Image 13 Donald J. Trump Twitter account

❯ Image 14

❯ http://www.romea.cz/en/news/world/slovak-politician-apos-s-billboards-reading-stop-lgbt-removed-after-ngo-petition

❯ Image 15 www.facebook.com

❯ Quote 1 https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-29701767

❯ Quote 2 https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/matteo_salvini_970885

❯ Quote 3 https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/11/al-qaeda-leader-urges-attacks-on-the-west-on-9-11

❯ Quote 4 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/10/benjamin-netanyahu-says-israel-is-not-a-state-of-all-its-citizens

❯ Quote 5 https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/adolf_hitler_101564

❯ Image 15: (Amir Pashaei): https://www.skyscrapercenter.com/city/tehran

❯ Image 16: (Aliraza Khatri): https://www.dawn.com/news/1126355

Confirmation bias

>>

1.

TEACHER'S NOTES

⟫ Confirmation bias

Confirmation bias is a systematic error in thinking that can be triggered while processing information. Cambridge dictionary[1] defines confirmation bias as *"the fact that people are more likely to accept or notice information if it appears to support what they already believe or expect."* Raymond Nickerson, an American psychologist and author of an important reference work on confirmation bias, takes the definition a step further: he says that confirmation bias is *"the seeking or interpreting of evidence in ways that are partial to existing beliefs, expectations, or a hypothesis in hand."*[2] Not only are we more likely to **accept** information that supports our beliefs, we even **seek it out**. Rather than evaluating evidence in an impartial way and arriving at a conclusion based on an analysis of that evidence, we tend to do things the other way around: we have a conclusion or a decision in mind, and without being aware of it, we are likely to select the evidence that fits our hypothesis or to mold information in a way so that it confirms what we believe. Of all the facts that exist on a certain topic, we are likely to pay attention to the ones that overlap with our beliefs on that topic. When we come across evidence that contradicts or threatens our existing beliefs, we tend to disregard or minimize it.

Confirmation bias, like other biases, is **intrinsic to human cognition**. In essence, it comes down to this: being right is easier. It takes a lot more time for our brains to process information that doesn't match what we already think or know. That's what cognitive biases do. They help our brains avoid hard work. We embrace information that confirms our views because it means that we can hold on to our views, which is easier than having to dismiss them. In most cases, our brains don't have the time or the capacity to consider every piece of information and make a well-informed decision. That's why we have to filter out some of the information and select the parts that favour the conclusion we have in mind. What's dangerous about confirmation bias is that it occurs during

1 https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/confirmation-bias

2 Nickerson, R. S. (1998). Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon in Many Guises. Review of General Psychology, 2(2), 175–220. (p. 175)

non-conscious information processing.[3] We select, favour, and remember information that supports our beliefs, and filter out anything that's inconsistent. Yet, we do it without realizing. Confirmation bias is also a common phenomenon in police investigations and forensics. When a crime has taken place, some investigators intuitively lean towards a particular suspect. Investigators who have an initial hypothesis tend to favour information or evidence that suggests that they are right. This can lead to inaccurate judgements and undermine the objective quality of investigations. Researchers have found that police trainees tend to consider evidence as less reliable when it conflicts with their prior suspicions,[4] and investigators consider witnesses less credible when they deny the guilt of a favoured suspect instead of confirming it.[5]

⟫ Confirmation bias and radicalization/extremism

Confirmation bias can also reinforce discriminatory extremist sentiments. People who display racist or discriminatory behavior tend to emphasize their negative experiences with people from a different race or culture (even when they have only a few), and they ignore or minimize the positive experiences. The same goes for people who display racist and discriminatory behavior but have never had any negative experiences with people with a different skin colour or from a different culture or culture; they may be misled by fear. This causes them to generalize people from other races as people who do bad things. You might recognize the following situation: If there's a news story about a black person robbing a bank, there's often someone with prejudices who says: "You see, it's always black people who rob banks." When there's a story about a white person robbing a bank or a black person achieving something admirable, that same person will likely fail to notice or register that because it contradicts what they believe. That's confirmation bias at play. Every time people with extremist views see their opinions confirmed, those opinions are reinforced. And unfortunately, as a consequence of confirmation bias, it doesn't work the other way around. Positive examples or situations that conflict with their beliefs do not lessen or weaken those beliefs. This is simply because their brains hardly pay any attention to those examples.

This example also works in radicalized settings. Whether it be right-wing or far-left extremist groups, salafist extremist organizations, or other forms of radicalization, confirmation bias can lead to an increase in polarization and the consolidation of extremist views.

3 O'Brien, B. (2009). Prime suspect: An examination of factors that aggravate and counteract confirmation bias in criminal investigations. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law, 15(4)*, 315–334. (page 316)

4 Ask, K., Rebelius, A., & Granhag, P. A. (2008). The 'elasticity' of criminal evidence: A moderator of investigator bias. *Applied Cognitive Psychology, 22*(9), 1245–1259.

5 Ask, K., & Granhag, P. A. (2007). Motivational Bias in Criminal Investigators' Judgments of Witness Reliability1. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 37*(3), 561–591.

It's important to understand that people who find themselves in radical or extremist online communities are very susceptible to this because these kinds of websites and forums are bubbles of like-minded people who reinforce and intensify each other's viewpoints.

◆ To find out more about cognitive biases and radicalisation, follow PRECOBIAS's free online course on *www.precobias.eu*.

2.

LESSON PLAN

Learning outcomes

At the end of this lesson, the students will be able to:

❯ Critically experience and understand confirmation bias.

❯ Spot and identify the bias in real-life examples on their own.

❯ Spot the bias in extremist propaganda and understand the connection of bias to extremist violence.

❯ Formulate recommendations on how to minimize the effect of confirmation bias.

Structure of the lesson and instructions

Suggested duration: three to four 50-minute classes, depending on whether you do all the activities with your students or not.

2.1.

🕐 30 - 40 min

WARM-UP

Activity 1

The warm-up activity is to try and test two real-life examples where people often fall for confirmation bias. The test consists of two simple questions. In general, the idea is based on the assumption that people with lower self-esteem would find confirmation that they are less worthy or have worse luck in banal examples and ignore other possible explanations. Without telling the students this activity is about confirmation bias, do a quick test with the students. They should only cross the right answers for themselves on the worksheets.

1 Someone you're interested in is taking a long time to reply to your message. What is your first honest thought?
☐ He/she doesn't care about me.
☐ He/she is busy.

2 The teacher sometimes catches you unprepared and asks you a question in class you are not prepared for. It also happens to you often that you get in the wrong queue in the shop, the one that goes way slower than the other one. It happens to you often and proves what you already know - that you usually have bad luck.
☐ Yes
☐ No

Continue directly with Activity 2. You will talk about the answers and define confirmation bias after the next activity.

Activity 2

The aim of this activity is to simulate how confirmation bias can be triggered. We will redo the experiment psychologist Peter Wason used to study bias in 1960.[6]
Tell the students you're going to play a game. You will write a sequence of three numbers on the board and you're creating these three numbers using a rule in your head. The students have to guess the rule. The only way they can guess it is to give you three numbers and you will tell them if the sequence does or does not follow the rule. You can only answer yes or no.

The rule you have in mind is **three increasing numbers**, and the initial three numbers you give the students are **2, 4, 6**.
Tell the students that in this game, they work as a whole class and have a limited number of guesses - they have 12 guesses. This is to make them more responsible in considering the proposals they

6 https://bear.warring-ton.ufl.edu/brenner/mar7588/Papers/wa-son-qjep1960.pdf

give. Any student can raise their hand and propose a series of three numbers to test if it confirms your rule, and you reply yes or no to these proposals. If the class agrees they know enough and think they know the rule, they can say it aloud. Another variant is you let the students ask questions and once they think they know the rule, they write it down on a piece of paper. You collect the papers and discuss the results together.

At the beginning, the students usually test similar examples, such as if 10,12,14 or 20, 22, 24 fits the rule. The majority of the students might assume the rule is just increasing even numbers. Someone might, after a while, try odd numbers like 5, 7, 9 and continue later to try 10, 20, 30 or increasing multiples. Someone might eventually try a sequence that goes against the rule, like 3,2,1, and what happens afterwards is that students usually go back to test even numbers so that they are still correct.

Once they have guessed the rule or failed to guess it correctly and you had to reveal it, discuss how they proceeded in this exercise. Discuss how they were quick to assume that it was even numbers and continued to verify their early hypothesis. When someone gave an answer that wasn't even numbers or received no as the answer, they just ended up going back to what they knew worked. Point out that they continued this way despite the fact that the best way of knowing if someone is right is not by gaining more support for what one believes, but instead by ruling out all of the instances in which someone could be wrong. To be 100% certain that the rule is increasing even numbers, it's not logical to just give increasing even numbers every time and be correct. Instead, they should give instances of decreasing and odd numbers. If they find out that 3,5,7 works, clearly even numbers are not the rule, but may still be a part of it. Next, give them decreasing numbers or numbers where the amount between the numbers isn't equal or something else that's different.

If your class indeed tested other sequences early on and guessed the rule very quickly, you can congratulate them and explain to the students that the majority of people took a longer time to just test their early hypothesis and came back again and again to even numbers.

It might seem that there are other elements that interplay with confirmation bias here such as social pressure and the students wanting to avoid the shame of suggesting the wrong sequence. Nevertheless, studies show people tend to give similar answers even when they guess individually. It would be good to ask the students what prevented them from testing sequences they thought were false?

Ask the students, seeing how they got stuck confirming their own suspicion instead of testing other hypotheses, what they think the basis of confirmation bias is. Let them name a few characteristics they can discern, and then let them write down the definition, ei-

ther the one you formulated as a class or the one from the teacher's notes:

Confirmation bias is a cognitive bias by which people are more likely to accept or notice information if it appears to support what they already believe or expect.

After they have written the definition down, come back to the test in Activity 1 and ask the students: What could be the basis of confirmation bias in each question?

Question 1: Someone you're interested in is taking a long time to reply to your message. What is your first honest thought?
The answer "He/she doesn't care about me" confirms a pre-existing belief, a hint of low self-esteem, where a single delay in answering seems to be evidence enough to prove the other person is not interested. The other hypotheses are rejected, and we are focused only on that one explanation that we believe proves us right.

Question 2: The teacher sometimes catches you unprepared and asks you a question in class you are not prepared for. It also happens to you often that you get in the wrong queue in the shop, the one that goes way slower than the other one. It happens to you often and proves what you already know - that you usually have bad luck.

The answer "Yes" means those students might have a preconceived idea that they have bad luck. They interpret any negative situation as proving the point, while not paying the same amount of attention to all the other incidents where they had good luck or to all the other times they were standing in the right queue.

2.2.

🕐 25 - 30 min

Confirmation bias in professional settings

Activity 1

Divide the students into two groups - you can leave it up to the students to divide themselves up or play a more preponderant role and divide the class into two groups yourself, according to your experience with the class. Each group will read a different excerpt[7] **(see the corresponding Worksheet at the end of the lesson plan)**.

Before the students read the excerpts, make sure they have a good understanding of what the term hypothesis means so they can fully grasp the meaning of these texts and the exercise. You can ask if anyone can explain what a hypothesis is.

Next, let each group read the excerpt they were given. These are two real-life stories that illustrate how confirmation bias can have serious consequences in various professional environments. Ask the students to underline all the instances in the text where they see confirmation bias influenced the scientist in example 1 and the investigators and the jury in example 2. Ask some students afterwards to read their answers out loud.

Ask them how these instances might illustrate confirmation bias. Let them write down their answers on the worksheet and discuss them together.

Instances from the famous example 1 (full excerpt in the worksheet):

The scientific study that linked the MMR vaccine to autism
Wakefield drew the association between the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism based on a study involving only 12 children. The paper was also a case report. ... In this case, finding that among a group of a dozen children that most of them happen to have autism as well as having recieved the MMR vaccine is not at all surprising. Moreover, Wakefield never replicated his findings. ... Wakefield had been funded by lawyers who had been engaged by parents in lawsuits against vaccine-producing companies ... Wakefield manipulated and ignored much of his data.

Where can we identify confirmation bias? One can see that Wakefield wanted to get particular results (to prove that vaccines cause autism). From his research method, it is clear that he had a hypothesis in mind and focused on "evidence," even though it was of low quality such as with the case reports, that would prove his hypothesis.

The Central Park Five

Five of those young men were arrested and interrogated for assaulting the jogger. During interrogations, the investigators pressured the boys to confess and forced them to lie about what happened. A sample of semen was collected from the crime scene, but it didn't match any of the suspects' DNA. There was no physical evidence whatsoever that connected the suspects to the crime, and yet, in 1990, the jury declared them guilty and the judge sentenced all five of the suspects to prison.

Where can we identify confirmation bias? One can see that the investigators were persuaded they had the right perpetrators. They were so certain, or wanted to be certain, that they pressured the boys to confess and were not persuaded even though the DNA from the crime scene did not match the DNA of any of the boys. The jury must have fallen for confirmation bias as well. The members must have been convinced of the boys' guilt because they sentenced the boys on the basis of vague and unreliable evidence (no matching DNA, forced testimonials).

Next, ask them the questions below and discuss their opinions:

❯ Why do you think people fall for confirmation bias?
❯ Why do we all prefer to focus on confirming evidence and ignore the disproving evidence?

The students can think of many reasons, though confirmation bias has, like other biases, evolved to simplify information processing for the brain. Focusing on confirming information is easier, as it saves energy and time in decision making. It is also important on an emotional level: it makes us feel good to have our beliefs or prejudices confirmed, and we might feel bad or ashamed to be proven wrong in front of other people.

2.3.

🕐 45 - 50 min

Confirmation bias online

Activity 1

In this activity, we will take a look at how Google Search algorithms work and how they can reinforce confirmation bias. We will further apply it to a short reflection on how students' social media accounts could reinforce confirmation bias.

Let's take a look at how Google Search algorithms work. Let them read a short excerpt from Google about the search algorithms[8] **(see Worksheet)**.

Ask the students the following questions and let them write down the answers on the worksheet:

> Can you discern how Google Search tailors results specifically for each person?
> How do you think "past searches" influence the results you get on Google Search?

Google tailors results so that they seem personally relevant to each person according to the context and settings. It means that for the same query, people will not get the same set of results, but they will vary according to their preferences or search history. Google also looks, for example, at the location in which the person is and thus tries to provide locally relevant results.
Past searches show a lot about what people are interested in. This gives Google further hints of what this person might be looking for. The students can think of many examples. If somebody, for example, often searches for articles from certain media outlets, Google might offer results from these media outlets to this particular user in other, unrelated searches. If the Google algorithm assumes a particular person has children, when this user checks Google News, he/she can receive more news involving stories of children than people without children.

Next, ask the students to take a look at random Google searches **(see Worksheet)**. An automatically filled Google search suggests Michelle Obama, the wife of the former president of the USA Barack Obama, is a man and that there is proof of this. Another search yields results that seem to prove the existence of UFOs.

Ask the students the following questions for discussion:

> Seeing such examples, what do you think is the danger of Google Search related to confirmation bias?

8 https://www.google.com/search/howsearchworks/algorithms/

Among other ideas they come up with, the danger related to confirmation bias is that online, one can find confirmation for almost anything one wants to believe. Google will sort the results so that you get more confirming evidence of "what Google thinks you're looking for" in terms of content or sources.

❯ Try to formulate at least 3 pieces of advice on how we can overcome confirmation bias in searching for information.

Together, you can formulate a couple of working pieces of advice for your class and ask the students to write them down on their worksheet. For example, it is important to know bias exists and we are all prone to fall for it; it is good to opt for neutral queries in any information searches. Make it your goal to find the truth and not to confirm your own opinion. Take your time to make a conclusion when it's an important thing. Ask yourself to explain your reasoning. Force yourself to think about alternative hypotheses. Think about the sources you see. Can you find this information elsewhere or is it just on one or two websites? Can you trace the original source of the claim and establish that it is reliable?
I should not let emotions dictate my factual research; I don't feel I have to be right all the time; It is worse to be stubborn and wrong than to change my opinion based on the presented facts; I should encourage myself not to form a hypothesis or an opinion too early.

Activity 2

We will take a look at how confirmation bias could play a role on social media.
Ask the students the following questions:

❯ Why do you think people fall for confirmation bias?
❯ Why do we all prefer to focus on confirming evidence and ignore the disproving evidence?

Try to get some answers from the students. They can give manifold examples of what their social media accounts give them as content. Try to steer the discussion in the direction for the students to be able to reflect on why they mostly see content from friends or people they like.

Normally, users see their friends or family members they interact with the most. **It means these are the people they usually like and/or interact with the most.** The same goes for news sources: the news sources we encounter on social media accounts are **from friends' statuses we tend to agree with and from news or satirical pages we like and tend to agree with**.

❯ Do you know the term "filter bubble?" What does it mean?

On social media, we are surrounded by friends and people we like and agree with, and we follow pages and groups that we like and agree with. This is even true for political groups or satirical pages we prefer. We interact with them more, meaning the algorithms learn to propose even more of this confirming, similar content to us. This is called a « filter bubble », where we are surrounded by people, pages, and news we agree with, and the algorithms propose more of the same kind of things to us.

❯ What is the danger of being exposed to content that mainly confirms your existing opinions?

The danger is we might be wrong, but everybody else around us seems to have the same opinion, so we would have a hard time realizing it.

Activity 3

🕐 20 min

If the technical capacities allow you to do this activity in class or if you allow students to watch videos on their mobile phones, feel free to do this activity together during class. Alternatively, assign the students homework: to watch these three very short videos on confirmation bias by the famous scientist Neil deGrasse Tyson.

❯ Google Search and Confirmation Bias: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1_RX8rWaRg
Does Bias Play a Role in Science? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYPgi1oUqXA
Critical Thinking 101: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=En-l6YdHkp2o

After watching the videos, the students should be able to write down their answers to the following questions:

❯ What do scientists do to minimize confirmation bias?
❯ Which obstacles does Neil deGrasse Tyson cite might prevent people from acknowledging something is right?

Neil deGrasse Tyson says scientists are trained to avoid confirmation bias by scientific approaches, but it is the peer review that aims to prevent such mistakes. The more people check someone's methods, experiments, and results of the study, the less probability there is for confirmation bias to appear because the other reviewers should be able to identify where confirmation bias could have influenced the results.
It's, for example, someone's religion or political philosophy.

2. 4.

🕐 45 - 50 min

Confirmation bias and populist or extremist movements

Activity 1

In this activity, we will take a look at how confirmation bias relates to the spread of fake news and hoaxes (for more in-depth information on fake news, see Unit 11 Sleeper effect).
We will take a look at a historical example.

First, ask the students if anyone can say what fake news is and what a hoax is. Can they give some examples?
According to Wikipedia, **fake news** is when false or misleading information is presented as news, not with the intent to inform, but to disinform, manipulate, or confuse the audience. A famous example of fake news was when there were allegations that Russians meddled in the 2016 US elections, a claim that was not proven by a meticulous US investigation. A **hoax** is a falsehood deliberately fabricated to masquerade as the truth, and it comes with bad intent. Their creators aim for virality, for a hoax to reach wide audiences. A hoax could be \an emotive but completely made-up false appeal to collect money for a victim of a serious illness, an email offering the inheritance of a purported Nigerian prince, or a viral video of a victim where it turns out the described event didn't even happen and the picture is from another completely unrelated event from a couple of years ago.

We will now take a look at some historic fake news and hoaxes that circulated in Europe. Let the students read the description of how Jews were accused of poisoning wells and causing pandemics in the 14th century (**see Worksheet**). You can also divide students into groups where they will discuss the questions following the story and present their answers to the class.

Ask a/some student(s) to summarize the story orally in their own words to make clear the students actively read and understood the text. To provide context, you can explain to students why Jews were blamed for poisoning wells (wells as critical infrastructure in medieval cities) and how "news" was circulating even before the invention of media and mass media communication.

❯ How do they think confirmation bias could have contributed to the ensuing violence against Jewish communities? Let them write down their answers on the worksheet.

Next, ask the students the following questions:

❯ What were the 'perfect' conditions for confirmation bias getting triggered among the 14th century citizens that made them believe this hoax?

There are many possible answers, but what certainly helped was the lack of knowledge and scientific methods at the time, prevalent antisemitism, and prejudices against Jews rampant among people, in other words, pre-existing beliefs which people saw confirmed by the hoax. The disease was dangerous and people lived in fear. This emotion certainly played a role, and they reacted more emotionally than rationally to this hoax. We also see that they ignored other possible explanations as to why Jews could have been less affected by the disease. There are many possible answers, but what certainly helped was the lack of knowledge and scientific methods at the time, prevalent antisemitism, and prejudices against Jews rampant among people, in other words, **pre-existing beliefs which people saw confirmed by the hoax**. The disease was dangerous and people lived in fear. This **emotion certainly played a role**, and they reacted more emotionally than rationally to this hoax. We also see that they **ignored other possible explanations** as to why Jews could have been less affected by the disease.

❯ Which other bias that we have already seen played a role in the ensuing violence against Jewish communities and how?

From what we have seen in previous lessons, ingroup-outgroup bias certainly played an important role. (See Lesson 3 Ingroup-outgroup bias). We see it through outgroup derogation - not only through the history of antisemitism, but also by attributing very negative characteristics to the entire ethnic group - attributing them to the killings of citizens due to the poisoning of wells.

Optional homework

Ask the students to do a bit of research and find recent 21st century examples of how a spread of fake news or hoaxes led to violent incidents. The homework can be delivered in any form: the students can write it down, make an oral presentation, a short podcast, a video, a picture collage, or any other creative form of presentation. They should also try to find hints that confirmation bias played a role, for example, there was already a history of ethnic tension or prejudice against a certain ethnic group or the perpetrator held certain views which served as pre-existing beliefs that were confirmed by the circulation of fake news or hoaxes.
They can find many instances, for example, a hoax on the purported kidnapping of children led to mob violence claiming around 20 lives in India, or the examples of a number of shootings in the US that were attributed to hoaxes circulating online.

Worksheets

1. WARM-UP

Activity 1

Test yourself. Cross the answer that fits you best.

1 Someone you like is taking a long time to reply to your message. What is your first honest thought?
☐ He/she doesn't care about me.
☐ He/she is busy.

2 The teacher sometimes catches you unprepared and asks you a question in class you are not prepared for. It also happens to you often that you get in the wrong queue in the shop, the one that goes way slower than the other one. It happens to you often and proves what you already know - that you usually have bad luck.

☐ Yes
☐ No

Activity 2

Write down which rule you think the teacher has in mind for the sequence of the three numbers:

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Write down the definition of confirmation bias:

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2. Confirmation bias in professional settings

Activity 1

In the text, underline all the instances where you identify confirmation bias influenced the scientist in example 1 or the investigators and the jury in example 2.

Famous example 1:

The scientific study that linked the MMR vaccine to autism
In 1998, an esteemed medical journal published a small study which had enormously negative consequences. The study, led by the now discredited physician-researcher Andrew Wakefield, involved 12 children and suggested there's a link between vaccines and autism. Wakefield drew the association between the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism based on a study involving only 12 children. The paper was also a case report. Case reports are detailed stories about particular patient's medical histories, and — because they are basically just stories — they are considered among the weakest kinds of medical studies. Many children in the world have autism and nearly all recieve the MMR vaccine. Therefore, finding a group of a dozen children where most of them happen to have both is not at all surprising. Moreover, Wakefield never replicated his findings, which is the elementary scientific method to prove one's findings. If you can't replicate the results, then most probably the initial hypothesis was wrong. He has been given ample opportunity either to replicate the paper's findings or to say he was mistaken. He has declined to do either. It was also revealed that Wakefield had been funded by lawyers who had been engaged by parents in lawsuits against vaccine-producing companies. The study was retracted from the British Medical Journal in 2010 after evidence that Wakefield manipulated and ignored much of his data.

Famous example 2:

The Central Park Five
In 1989, a young woman jogging in Central Park at night was assaulted and raped. At the moment of the crime, a group of young African American and Hispanic boys were assaulting park goers elsewhere in the park. Five of those young men were arrested and interrogated for assaulting the jogger. During the interrogations, investigators pressured the boys to confess and forced them to lie about what had happened. A sample of semen was collected from the crime scene, but it didn't match any of the suspects' DNA. There was no physical evidence whatsoever that connected the suspects to the crime, and yet, in 1990, the jury declared them guilty and the judge sentenced all five of the suspects to prison for periods ranging from 5 to 15 years. The case received enormous attention from the media and the public. More than ten years later, in 2002, the real attacker confessed to the crime and the Central Park Five were exonerated, having served years in prison as innocent men.

How do the instances you underlined illustrate confirmation bias? Write down your answer:

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Why do you think people fall for confirmation bias? Why do we all prefer to focus on confirming evidence and ignore the disproving evidence?

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3. CONFIRMATION BIAS ONLINE

Activity 1

How do Google Search algorithms work?

Google bases its Search on a variety of algorithms, or a set of instructions needed for data processing that search the world wide web and billions of websites to deliver relevant results. They consider:

❯ The meaning of the query: To return relevant results for your query, Google search first needs to establish what information you're looking for – the intent behind your query.

❯ The relevance of web pages: whether the page contains information that might be relevant to what you are looking for.

❯ The quality of content: Google Search looks for sites that many users seem to value for similar queries.

❯ The usability of webpages: whether they are technically all right and display properly.

❯ The context and settings: Information such as your location, past Search history and Search settings all help Google tailor your results to what is most useful and relevant for you in that moment.

Google uses your country and location to deliver content relevant for your area. For instance, if you're in Chicago and you search "football," Google will most likely show you results about American football and the Chicago Bears first. Whereas if you search "football" in London, Google will rank results about soccer and the Premier League higher. Search also includes some features that personalize results based on the activity in your Google account. For example, if you search for "events near me," Google may tailor some recommendations to event categories they think you may be interested in.

Can you discern how Google Search tailors results specifically to each person?

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How do you think "past searches" influence the results you get on Google Search?

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Look at some random Google searches:
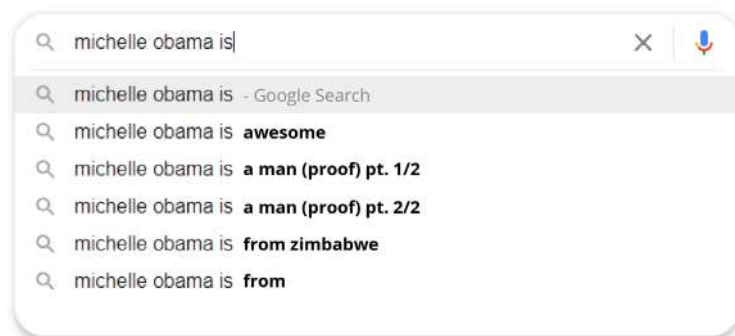
Image 1
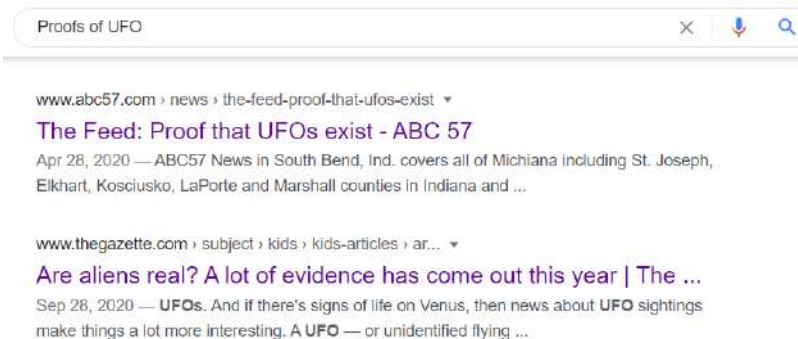
Image 2

Text in these images:
Image 1:
"Michelle Obama is a man (proof) pt. 1/2"
"Michelle Obama is a man (proof) pt. 2/2"
Image 2:
Proof of UFOs
"The Feed: Proof that UFOs exist - ABC 57"
"Are aliens real? A lot of evidence has come out this year"

Look at the random Google Search suggestion. What do you conclude is the danger of Google Search related to confirmation bias?

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Make a list of advice on how to overcome confirmation bias:

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Activity 2

Think about how your social media accounts - Instagram, Facebook, TikTok or any others work. Which other users do you see there the most? Where do you most often get pieces of information and news?

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Do you know the term "filter bubble?" What does it mean?

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What is the danger of being exposed to content that mainly confirms your existing opin-ions?

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Activity 3

Check out some of the short videos on confirmation bias by the famous scientist Neil deGrasse Tyson:

> Google Search and Confirmation Bias: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1_RX-8rWaRg
> Does Bias Play a Role in Science? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYPgi1oU-qXA
> Critical Thinking 101: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Enl6YdHkp2o

Afterwards, answer the following questions:

1   What do scientists do to minimize confirmation bias?

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2   Which obstacles does Neil deGrasse Tyson cite might prevent people from ac-knowledging something is right?

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4. Confirmation bias and populist or extremist movements

Activity 1

What is fake news? Could you give an example?

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What is a hoax? Could you give an example?

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The pandemic of the Black Death and the hoax of poisoned wells

In the Middle Ages, antisemitism was very common, mainly because of religious reasons. Many Christians at the time blamed Jews for the death of Jesus and held them collectively responsible for it. As early as the Crusades, Jews were gradually restricted from certain professions, required to wear a yellow badge, or even expelled from cities and countries (the first expulsion of Jews in Europe happened in England in 1290).[9] In such circumstances, a mysterious disease erupted in the mid-14th century called the Black Death. The disease, caused by bacteria and other pathogens, began in Mongolia and spread quickly to China. It spread to Europe following a battle between the Mongolians and the Genoese army on the Crimean Peninsula. Dead bodies were catapulted toward Italy, in what appears to have been the first use of biological warfare, if you will. The disease spread throughout the Old World, killing 20-25 million Europeans and another 35 million Chinese within a decade.[10] In those times, people did not know about the existence of viruses or bacteria, so deterioration of health was often blamed on poisoning. As soon as the disease arrived in Europe in 1346, some blamed the Jews for poisoning wells, what we could now see as an example of a blatant hoax. This medieval hoax was spread by rumours, people telling it to each other in an era without our concept of media. The wells were an important part of the infrastructure of medieval cities - a source of drinking water. Among other 'confirming' evidence for the hoax, people argued that Jews were less affected by the disease. This could have been attributed to the fact that Jews lived in segregated areas, did not go often to public wells, or to the fact that their religious practices required stricter hygiene.

People in the 14th century fell for the hoax to the point that enraged masses of people committed pogroms against Jewish communities, killing thousands of Jews and burning them at the stake across Germany, Austria, France, and Switzerland. Many Jewish communities were annihilated, and the remaining Jews were often forced to emigrate to other countries.

These events are depicted, for example, in this illustration[11] from a history book written in the 1340s by the French chronicler Gilles li Muisis which depicts the residents of a town stricken by plague burning Jews in Strasbourg:

How do you think confirmation bias could have contributed to the ensuing violence against Jewsih communities?

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What were the 'perfect' conditions for confirmation bias to get triggered among the 14th century citizens that made them believe this hoax?

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9   Source: https://www.britannica.com/topic/anti-Semitism/Anti-Semitism-in-medieval-Europe
10   Source: https://www.anumuseum.org.il/blog-items/700-years-before-coronavirus-jewish-life-during-the-black-death-plague/
11   Source of image (Royal Library of Belgium): https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/08/18/542435991/those-iconic-images-of-the-plague-thats-not-the-plague

Which other bias that we have already seen played a role in the ensuing violence against Jewish communities and how?

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Optional homework

Do a bit of research and find 21st century examples of how the spread of fake news or hoaxes led to violent incidents. Try to find hints that confirmation bias played a role, for example, there was a history of discrimination against a particular group or the perpetrator held racist views or a pre-existing belief that he/she saw confirmed by the fake news or hoax.

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Sources of the materials:

- Peter Wason experiment for the class:
  https://www.reddit.com/r/AcademicPsychology/comments/362fia/cool_way_to_teach_students_about_confirmation_bias/
- Google search algorithms: https://www.google.com/search/howsearchworks/algorithms/
- Wakenfiled fraud https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3136032/
- Wakefield fraud: https://www.vox.com/2018/2/27/17057990/andrew-wakefield-vaccines-autism-study
- Neil deGrasse Tyson: Google Search and Confirmation Bias: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1_RX-8rWaRg
- Neil deGrasse TYson: Does Bias Play a Role in Science? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYPgi1oU-qXA
- Neil de Grasse Tyson: Critical Thinking 101: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Enl6YdHkp2o
  Image 1 (Royal Library of Belgium):
  https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2017/08/18/542435991/those-iconic-images-of-the-plague-thats-not-the-plague

Rosy retrospection

1.

Teacher's notes

›› What is rosy retrospection?

Rosy retrospection is the tendency to remember and recollect events more fondly and positively than they were at the time of the experience.[1] There are two ways of explaining this cognitive bias: on the one hand, positive memories of our past stick better than the negative ones, and we tend to filter out the negative memories, which leads to a distorted perception of the past. On the other hand, we tend to remember past events more positively than we experienced them at the time. The combination of these two tendencies leads to a sentiment that the past was better than it actually was. We like to reminisce about the good old days and go on about how much better everything used to be.

The term rosy retrospection is not to be confused with nostalgia. While both concepts are definitely related, rosy retrospection is a cognitive-psychological phenomenon, whereas nostalgia is a broader concept that's described as an emotional longing for objects, people or events from the past, and it's not necessarily biased.

Interestingly, rosy retrospection does not seem to apply to negative memories. Instead, research has shown that we tend to rationalise negative memories in order to try and minimise their impact on our present lives.[2] We convince ourselves that a negative event "wasn't all that bad". Positive experiences are more accessible for our memory than negative ones, because the latter are more complex, causing our recollection of them to fade more quickly over time.[3]

Mitchell & Thompson, the researchers who published important works on rosy retrospection, identified three stages of cognitive processes that contribute to the mechanism of rosy retrospection. The first stage is rosy prospection, which is the tendency to hold very high and positive expectations of future events. The second stage is dampening, which means that our positive anticipation of a particular event is dampened by our experience at the time of that event. We minimise the favourability of the current events and our experiences are less positive than we had expected. You've probably experienced this before when you look forward to something and build high expectations, and when the day is finally there,

1 Wirtz, D., Kruger, J., Scollon, C. N., & Diener, E. (2003). What to Do on Spring Break?: The Role of Predicted, On-Line, and Remembered Experience in Future Choice. Psychological Science, 14(5), 520–524.

2 Wilson, T. D., Meyers, J., & Gilbert, D. T. (2003). "How Happy Was I, Anyway?" A Retrospective Impact Bias. Social Cognition, 21(6), 421–446.

3 Manzanero, A. L., López, B., Aróztegui, J., & El-Astal, S. (2015). Autobiographical memories for negative and positive events in war contexts. Anuario de Psicología Jurídica, 25(1), 57-64.

you're annoyed by every little thing that goes wrong. And finally, rosy retrospection as the final stage is the tendency to recollect experiences more fondly than we evaluated them at the time of the events.[4]

A psychological theory called reconstructive memory claims that memories are more fluid than you think. They can be altered, forgotten and even created without an event having taken place. Our memories can trick us into thinking something happened in a particular way, when the reality was actually different, or the event didn't even take place at all. Rosy retrospection is one of the cognitive mechanisms that can alter our memories. It's a form of selective memory: we remember the positive parts and we filter out the negative parts. Our memories are simplified, and that makes it easier for our brains to store them.

Some scientists argue that rosy retrospection can have motivational reasons: we construct stories about our past experiences in a positive way in order to gain social acceptance from our audience. It's also suggested that thinking of our past in a favourable way contributes to our sense of well-being.[5] One academic even put it like this: "the major reason that we distort the truth is to enhance our own self-esteem".[6] Thinking about positive events just makes us feel good. On the other hand, rosy retrospection can cause us to ignore past mistakes and thus prevent us from learning from them.

⟩⟩ Rosy retrospection in the political context

Rosy retrospection can also influence events and decisions on a societal level. Since all human beings are susceptible to it, it has the power to affect public opinion and generate large-scale societal consequences. Individual people's decisions about the future are to a considerable extent guided by their evaluation of the past. And since that evaluation tends to be more favourable than our evaluation of the present day, people tend to make political choices related to their desire to relive the past.

Rosy retrospection may also lead to another phenomenon called *declinism* - the belief that a certain entity, such as society, country or a company is declining and is potentially headed towards a future collapse. For example, someone who displays *declinism* might believe that society as a whole is becoming worse and worse every day, even if some facts and statistics prove the contrary. Declinism is particularly common and actively exploited in politics.[7] In particular, populist, nationalistic and far-right movements and politicians often refer to the idealised past in their rhetoric and urge people, or voters, to help bring it back, to return to traditional values and ways of thinking and being, although they may not be recreated in an ever-evolving world and generations of people living in it and reshaping it. A good example of a political narrative which is meant to

[4] Mitchell, T. R., Thompson, L., Peterson, E., & Cronk, R. (1997). Temporal Adjustments in the Evaluation of Events: The "Rosy View". Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 33(4), 421–448.

[5] Mitchell, T., & Thompson, L. (1994). A theory of temporal adjustments of the evaluation of events: Rosy Prospection & Rosy Retrospection. Advances in Managerial Cognition and Organizational Information-Processing, 85–114.

[6] Loftus, E.F. (1980). Memory. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

[7] "Rosy Retrospection and Declinism: Why the Past Looks Great and the Future Is Frightening", Effectiviology, https://effectiviology.com/rosy-retrospection-and-declinism/#The_benefits_and_dangers_of_rosy_retrospection

activate rosy retrospection is the catchphrase used by the former US president, Donald Trump - "Make America great again". In this slogan, it's especially the word "again" that's important. It refers to a vague idea of an idealised past, when, according to Trump, there were lower taxes, fewer Mexicans, fewer gun laws and less international competition.

The feeling that the past was easier and less complex can also be related to a fear of the unknown. Technological development and international mobility have changed the world drastically in a very short period of time. Especially for older people, this might conjure up a longing for the old and familiar and result in difficulty to adapt. Declinism may also make it more difficult for people believing in it to face, adapt and prepare for the future in a realistic manner. Rosy retrospection and declinism are also linked to the three techniques crucial for effective propaganda: the identity construct, the crisis construct and the solution construct (see Unit 1). The identity construct here is anchored in the idealised past, its traditional values, gender roles and ways of living; the current challenging and "declining" reality is presented as the crisis construct and the return to the "good old days" as the solution construct.

Extremist movements, from far-right to Islamic fundamentalist ones, also use these techniques to activate rosy retrospection and thus present their worldview and championed causes as a solution. For instance, Europa Invicta, *an alt-right*[8] movement sees cultural and religious diversity as a threat to European civilization. In its seemingly innocuous imagery, it shows the beauty of Europe's legacy and heritage and the need to protect it. The movement thus refers to some "bygone eras", like the Roman or the British Empire, when Europe was the centre of the world and Europeans perceived themselves as superior to people of other cultures or ethnicities. In reality, society naturally develops and changes to an extent that it's simply not rational or possible to turn back the clock. Islamic extremists also capitalise on rosy retrospection in their propaganda and recruitment. They promote a rigorous and literal application of the laws of the Quran, claiming that they were meant to be interpreted that way and that the Islam religion is being threatened by global secularisation. The strongest manifestation of rosy retrospection in Islamic extremist groups is the Caliphate, a Muslim state ruled by a Khalif, a successor of the prophet Muhammed. There have been many caliphates but the last legitimate one was abolished in 1924. When fundamentalist Islam movements rose in the second half of the 20th century, they wanted to either restore the Caliphate or proclaim a new one. The Caliphate is often used in Islamic extremist propaganda as "a symbol of Islam's historical glory" and an opportunity to "return to previous glories".[9] Jihadists are called upon to fight and gain territory for the Caliphate.

8 The alt right (short for "alternative right") is a segment of the white supremacist movement consisting of a loose network of racists and anti-Semites who reject mainstream conservatism in favor of politics that embrace implicit or explicit racism, anti-Semitism and white supremacy. Many seek to re-inject such bigoted ideas into the conservative movement in the United States. The alt right also includes many racist users of image boards and message forums such as 4chan, 8chan and Reddit who enjoy harassing or "trolling" people who disagree with their views (source: Anti-Defamation League, https://www.adl.org/resources/glossary-terms/alt-right)

9 Ingram, H. J. (2016). Deciphering the Siren Call of Militant Islamist Propaganda. International Centre for Counterterrorism, 7. (page 11, page 14)

⬦ To find out more about cognitive biases and radicalisation, follow PRECOBIAS's free online course on *www.precobias.eu*.

2.

LESSON PLAN

Learning outcomes

At the end of this lesson, the students will be able to:

❯ Experience and understand rosy retrospection.

❯ Identify propaganda techniques which activate rosy retrospection in the political context.

❯ Understand how rosy retrospection may be used in extremist propaganda.

Structure of the lesson and instructions

🕐 Suggested duration: three classes (45-50 minutes each).

🔧 Materials needed: paper (for example scrap paper) for students to take notes; post-it notes in three colours or pieces of paper and magnets/Blu Tack etc., large sheets of paper for posters, colour markers or other materials to make posters.

2. 1.

🕐 40-50 min

WARM-UP: EXPERIENCING ROSY RETROSPECTION

Activity 1

Tell your students that today you will explore the way our memory works. Ask them to take about five minutes and, individually, try to recall what their life was like when they attended primary school - namely their school life, their spare time, their friends, their family, the world around them. Ask them to note down any memories, impressions, ideas and images that come to mind. Then invite them to get into pairs and take around ten minutes and take turns to share their memories. Next, tell them to get into groups of three and again exchange their ideas; this time, ask them to also discuss answers to the following questions and note down the answers in the Worksheet:

❱ Were there any similarities between your memories and those of other people in the group? If so, what were they? Please write them down.
❱ How did you feel talking about your memories? How did you feel listening to the memories of other people in your group? Were they rather pleasant? Rather unpleasant?

In the second part of the activity, ask you students to think, individually, about their current life as secondary-school students - namely their school life, their spare time, their friends, their family, the world around them. This time, in order to ensure a bit more anonymity, ask them to write down their reflections on pieces of paper and stick them to the board (e.g. whiteboard or wall in the classroom). Tell the students that once they are finished writing, they can read what other students have written.

Ask the following questions:

❱ What are your thoughts after you have read what all of you think about your present situation?
❱ In what ways is your past different from your present?
❱ In our memories, is the past always better than our present? In your opinion, is it easier to recall good memories or bad memories? Why? Why not?

Based on the resulting discussion with the students, introduce the concept of rosy retrospection - its definition, mechanism and possible reasons explaining it (see Teacher's notes). Write the key elements of the definition on the board for future reference and ask the students to note down the definition in the Worksheet. Tell the students you will explore together how this cognitive bias can be triggered to influence people's choices in politics.

2. 2.

🕐 45-50 min

Rosy retrospection in political life

Activity 1

Invite the students to form several groups of three people. Give each group a set of photocopies of two excerpts from the media **(see Worksheet)**. In the Worksheet, the names of the countries or other telling cues are blanked out in order to make the activity more engaging for students and have them rather focused on the mechanism of the cognitive bias at first and not the situation in a given country. You will reveal these and the sources of the articles in due course. Ask the students to read them and discuss in groups their answers to the following questions:

❱ On what occasion do you think this speech/statement was made?
❱ What situation and what country does it refer to?
❱ How do you think rosy retrospection is activated in it? Why do you think the person speaking refers to the past?

When the students have finished working in groups, ask them to present their thoughts and ideas. Then reveal the origins of the texts. The first excerpt comes from Donald Trump's inauguration speech he made on 20 January 2017, when he was elected President of the United States.[10] The second one is taken from a speech made during the presidential election campaign in Poland in 2020 by a politician from a right-wing party.[11] Both excerpts are linked to elections and a time of potential changes and promises to solve certain issues and to find a way out of a current crisis. The reference to the past may be used to offer a solution in times of crisis, showing a safe, trusted way forward. The idealised past is recalled in times of changes, uncertainty and crisis, in the face of perceived threat to established identity, with a view to giving hope, mobilising for the future and presenting a solution - the return to the tried and tested "old".

Then ask the students to get into groups of three and invite them to answer the following question:

❱ To what extent is a return to the past possible? How would you imagine a return to the past at (a) your school, (b) during street demonstrations/activist and political life, (c) in family life?

Tell all the groups to choose from the options (a), (b) and (c) the setting they want to work on and ask them to prepare a poster that illustrates it. You can also ask the groups to select a piece of paper with one of the options written on it so that there is roughly an

10 Transcript: Donald Trump inauguration speech in full, Al Jazeera, 20 January 2017, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/1/20/transcript-donald-trump-inauguration-speech-in-full

11 Excerpts from a speech made by one of the politicians from the Konfederacja Party, a right-wing party represented in Parliament, during the presidential election campaign, "Bosak: Polacy zasługują na kogoś lepszego niż Duda czy Trzaskowski.", Polska Agencja Prasowa, 20 June 2020, https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C666017%2Cbosak-polacy-zasluguja-na-kogos-lepszego-niz-duda-czy-trzaskowski.html

even number of groups working on each setting. Distribute the materials (paper sheets, markers etc.) and give the students 15 minutes for the task. Then ask each group to post their contributions to the walls of the classroom. Invite the students to go round and have a look at all the posters. Next, ask them about their thoughts on what they saw.

The objective of this activity is to provide the students with an opportunity to reflect on whether an imagined return to the past, in a situation that is relevant for them, is always good and if not, what kind of dangers does it present. If some students present posters with provocatively negative changes resulting from the return to the past (e.g. family life involving domestic violence or students being beaten at school as a form of punishment etc.) discuss with them the following question:

❯ Does the return to the past that you presented in your poster benefit the students/activists/family members or not?

2. 3.

🕑 10-15 min

Rosy retrospection and populist or extremist movements

Activity 1

Place several colour photocopies of the two images **(see Worksheet)** around the classroom, on a larger (e.g. A3) sheet of paper. Give each of the students post-it notes (or any pieces of paper and magnets etc.) in three colours for the three questions below. Ask the students to walk around the classroom, look at the pictures and think about their answers to the following questions (you can write down the questions on the board):

❯ What could the story behind the picture be? What does it show? Where were they taken? When were they taken?
❯ How do the pictures make you feel?
❯ Where and for what purposes could they be used?

When they're ready, invite them to write their answers and ideas on the provided post-it notes (a different colour for each question) or pieces of paper and stick them next to the pictures. After the students have finished, read their answers from the post-its out loud.

In the second part of the activity, show the students the same photographs but with the captions and the sources. Explain briefly the captions (e.g. the use of the word "Heil", spelt "Hail"), if needed, and emphasise that it is misspelt on purpose to avoid having the image

removed by social media moderators (a clear reference to the Nazi regime). Explain that Europa Invicta is a French alt-right organisation that promotes the foundations of European culture and identity and is known for its seemingly innocent imagery.

Discuss with the students how rosy retrospection was exploited in these pictures - explore all the elements that refer to the past, including the word 'bastion', the meaning of Europa Invicta - invincible, unconquered Europe and an idea of a threat or an attack involved in it - a crisis construct, and its logo - the symbol of the phoenix rising from the ashes, reborn. Explore also the elements that convey the mood of the pictures (e.g. the use of enhanced colours, architecture etc.).

›› Worksheets

1. WARM-UP

Activity 1

Form groups of three, share your reflections about your memories from the time when you were at primary school. Read the two excerpts and discuss your answers to the questions below.

> Were there any similarities between your memories and those of other people in the group? If so, what were they? Please write them down.

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> How did you feel talking about your memories? How did you feel listening to the memories of other people in your group? Were they rather pleasant? Rather unpleasant?

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The definition of rosy retrospection:

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2. ROSY RETROSPECTION IN POLITICAL LIFE

Activity 1

Read the two excerpts and discuss your answers to the following questions:

> On what occasion do you think this speech/statement was made?

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❯ What situation and what country does it refer to?

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❯ How do you think rosy retrospection is activated in it? Why do you think the person speaking refers to the past?

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Excerpt 1

"

We, the citizens of …, are now joined in a great national effort to rebuild our country and to restore its promise for all of our people. We will face challenges. We will confront hardships. But we will get the job done. At the centre of this movement is a crucial conviction: that a nation exists to serve its citizens. [Our citizens] want great schools for their children, safe neighbourhoods for their families, and good jobs for themselves. These are the just and reasonable demands of a righteous public.But for too many of our citizens, a different reality exists: Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system, flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of knowledge; and the crime and gangs and drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealised potential. This carnage stops right here and stops right now. From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. [Our country] will start winning again, winning like never before. We will bring back our jobs. We will bring back our borders. We will bring back our wealth. And we will bring back our dreams.
And whether a child is born in the urban sprawl of … or the windswept plains of …, they look up at the same night sky, they fill their heart with the same dreams, and they are infused with the breath of life by the same almighty creator. So to all [fellow countrymen and women], in every city near and far, small and large, from mountain to mountain, and from ocean to ocean, hear

these words: You will never be ignored again. Your voice, your hopes, and your dreams, will define our destiny. And your courage and goodness and love will forever guide us along the way. Together, we will make [our country] strong again. We will make [our country] wealthy again. We will make [our country] proud again. We will make [our country] safe again. And, yes, together, we will make [our country] great again [...].

Excerpt 2

... is a beautiful country, where we live in harmony and the greatest ecological problem is the issue of droughts [...]. I want a country of people who live peacefully, in concord, united by [our country's] culture and common values, have various faiths and convictions but do not solve their contentions in a way in which they are resolved in Western countries - by tearing down historical monuments [...].

I want a country of people who do not reject their roots and their faith, do not humiliate their authority figures. Such is the majority of [our fellow countrymen and women], they want normality and common sense. They wish to develop [our country's] tradition in an evolutionary manner, and not by dismissing it for the sake of misunderstood modernity [...].

3. Rosy retrospection and populist and extremist movements

Activity 1

EUROPA INVICTA
YOUR MENTAL BASTION

Negativity bias

1.
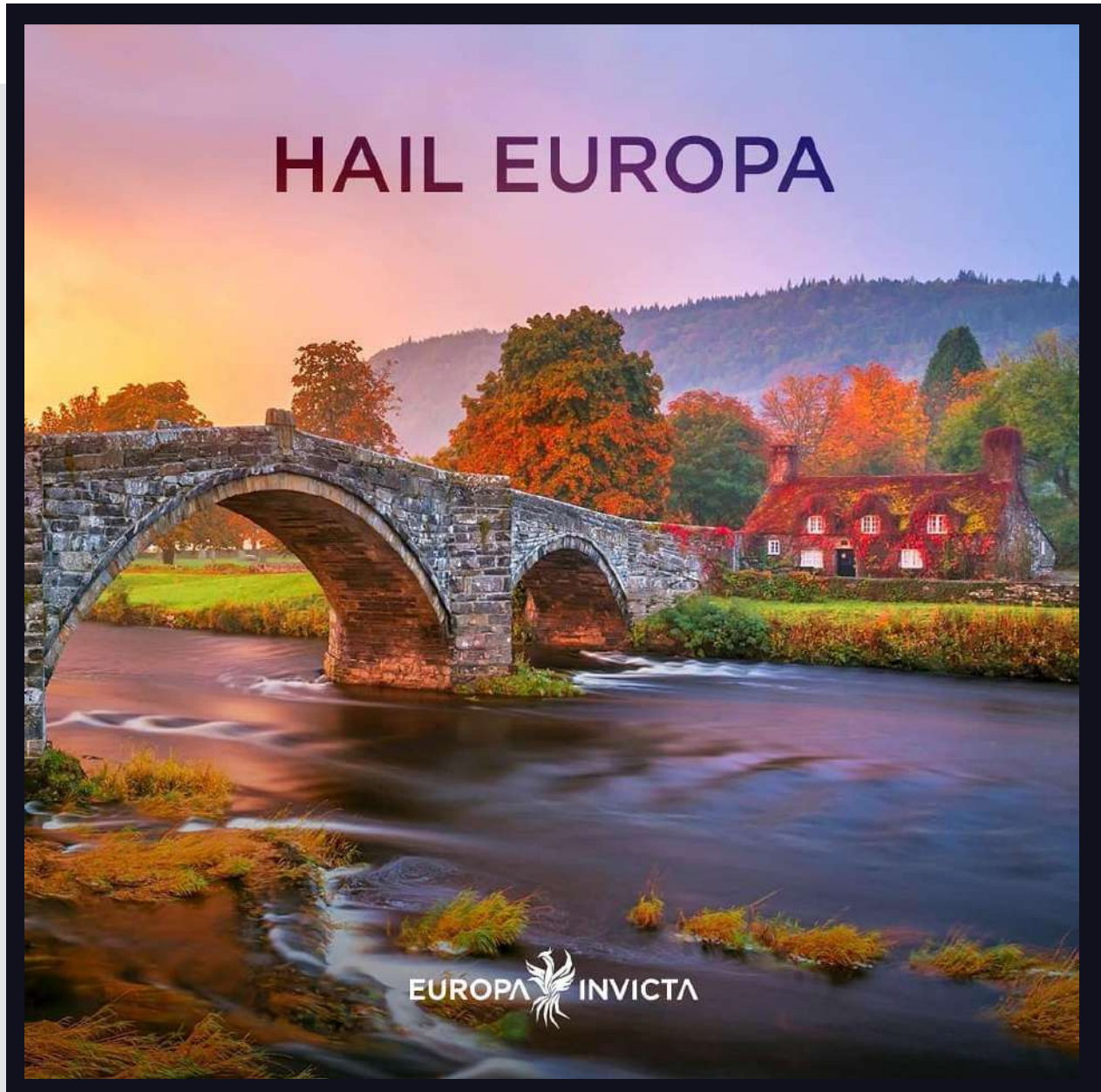
TEACHER'S NOTES

›› Negativity bias

The negativity bias is a cognitive bias by which people tend to remember negative information far better and are impacted much more by negative than positive information, even if those things are of equal intensity. We are more likely to notice negative things and later remember them more vividly. An example of this is feeling and recalling criticism in a stronger way than compliments. It is described as a tendency where unfavourable or negative information has a stronger impact on impressions and evaluations, and it receives more attention than favourable or positive information. For example, even one single unfavourable comment in an otherwise supportive reference or testimonial may create an overall bad impression. Thus, people usually need to hear at least three positive things to outweigh one piece of negative information. However, this ratio is very individual. In romantic relationships this ratio can even be 5:1.

This imbalance of positive and negative thoughts and cognitive information processing is also known as **positive-negative asymmetry**. It refers to the fact that people feel the sting of a rebuke more powerfully than they feel the joy of praise. One could say that people find negative information more valuable and more enlightening, which can be shown by the frequency with which people respond and react to bad news but often fail to appreciate good news. This asymmetry can, however, affect our attention and cognitive processes on a day-to-day basis, and in the long run might have detrimental effects on our well-being.[1][2]

Why do we focus so much on the negative? The negativity bias has been **helpful in evolution**, for example, when our ancestors were confronted with life-threatening problems. Hence, it still builds on our self-preservation instinct. For instance: Would you try to search for food in the presence of a saber-toothed tiger just because the food looks desirable? Or would you refrain from doing that? Back in the day, not taking the risk and focusing on the more negative aspect (the tiger) meant surviving, while going for the positive aspect (the delicious food) meant a potentially brutal

[1] Alberini, C. M. (2010). Long-term Memories: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. Cerebrum: The Dana Forum on Brain Science, 2010, 21.

[2] Cacioppo, J. T., Cacioppo, S., & Gollan, J. K. (2014). The Negativity Bias: Conceptualization, quantification, and Individual Differences. Behavioral Brain Sciences, 37(3), 309-310

death. Today, we know that these psychological mechanisms are called evolutionary psychology mechanisms, which evolved in the past to help us avoid danger. In prehistoric times, being paranoid and anxious was probably more likely to keep you alive than just giving anyone and everything the benefit of the doubt.

A study published in 2019[3] dealt with cross-national evidence of the negativity bias in psychophysiological reactions to news. The authors of this study wanted to find out what accounts for the prevalence of negative news content. This was based on the assumption that people are much more attracted to negative events than positive ones. The study was conducted in 17 countries and on 6 continents. People's reactions to different video-based news content were examined. The results showed that, on average, humans are indeed globally more aroused by and attentive to negative news. Hence, the negativity bias is a globally occurring phenomenon which impacts our lives enormously. It is therefore not surprising that the media also makes conscious use of this cognitive bias, e.g., in their media coverage in general and on socially controversial topics in particular.

Politicians often use this cognitive bias to promote themselves, the party they are in or the political agenda they favour. Negatively charged language can be used to decrease and denigrate political opponents and to influence voters in this way. Additionally, citizens' opinion forming processes could be adversely affected when somebody, for example the U.S. president, is constantly degrading someone else's skills and the media reports this. Or politicians can decide to focus on fear and threats to persuade their voters. Hence, right-wing populist parties in Europe often showcase negatively connoted pictures and slogans that paint, for instance, migrants as a threat to the values and lifestyle of the general public. They do this because A) **negative images and slogans stand out more** and create more attention and B) they count on **negativity** as a news factor to **spread their messages** even further.

❯❯ The negativity bias and radicalization/extremism

In a study conducted in 2018, researchers were interested in examining the connection between news portrayals and radicalization processes. For this reason, they investigated Muslims' perception of negative news coverage of Islam and how these perceptions possibly contribute to radicalization processes. Their findings were as follows: Muslims predominantly doubted the news reports and argued against them. The participants also perceived the news as predominantly hostile and assumed these reports had strong effects on the opinions that non-Muslim Germans have about Muslims. These effects were stronger among Muslims with religious

3 Neumann, K., Arendt, F., & Baugut, P. (2018). News and Islamist radicalization processes: Investigating Muslims' perceptions of negative news coverage of Islam. *Mass Communication and Society*, 21(4), 498-523.

fundamentalist beliefs. The study also revealed that negative news elicited anger, regardless of whether they had fundamentalist beliefs before the study. This shows how much of an impact negative news coverage can have on psychological processing and how this cognitive bias, among other influencing factors, can even facilitate radicalization processes.

As we saw in Lesson 1 on automatic thinking, the negativity bias is a manifestation of mechanisms the brain uses to speed up and simplify information processing. We focus on the negatives automatically. Therefore, negative content and content eliciting negative emotions such as fear, disgust, distrust, a sense of threat, unhappiness, etc., stand out.

As a first step, the negativity bias is easily triggered with crisis constructs. The populist or extremist movement presents a certain political issue as a crisis that looms over an ingroup. This crisis is almost invariably a negative construct, a threat or a danger, thus automatically triggering the negativity bias.

Furthermore, the effect is enhanced by strategies to trigger automatic thinking with threats. This means using imagery that incites feelings of fear, using language and stylistics such as strong wordings (i.e., if something is framed as a "refugee crisis," it gives an entirely different feeling as a "refugee situation"), using capital letters, exclamation marks and other mechanisms to incite a sense of urgency and danger. This is especially important when considering a social media environment where we are bombarded with so much information at once that we might easier respond to cues that particularly jump out at us.[4]

4 Halverson, J., Corman, S., & Goodall, H. L. (2011). Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism. Springer, Wiesbaden.

> ◇   To find out more about cognitive biases and radicalisation, follow PRECOBIAS's free online course on *www.precobias.eu*.

2.
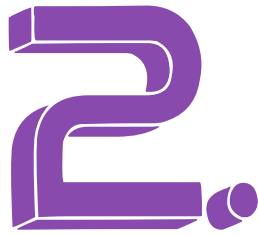
LESSON PLAN

Learning outcomes

At the end of this lesson, the students will be able to:

❯ Critically experience and understand the negativity bias.

❯ Spot and identify the negativity bias in real-life examples.

❯ Spot the bias in populist and extremist propaganda.

Structure of the lesson and instructions

Suggested duration: two to four 50-minute classes, depending on whether you do all the activities with your students or not.

Extra materials needed: none

2.1.

🕐 20-30 min

WARM-UP

Activity 1

Ask the students to write down five positive characteristics and five negative characteristics about themselves. Ask them what was easier, to come up with the positive traits or the negative ones?
In general, most people will have more difficulty listing positive aspects than making a list of things they would criticize about themselves. Continue directly with Activity 2, and after completing it, sum up the main idea of the negativity bias with the students.

Activity 2

Ask the students to recall a moment of strong embarrassment in their life, for example something very embarrassing that happened in front of a class or during childhood. Tell them you will not ask them to talk about the event, but everybody should raise their hand once they recall such an event.
When everybody has their hand raised, ask them to recall another embarrassing moment that they witnessed happen to somebody else, a sibling or a classmate. Again, once they recall one, they should raise their hand.

In general, people feel very strongly about negative – in this case, embarrassing – incidents that happen to them, and dwell on them far longer than necessary. As it was easier to list negative traits about oneself, it was also easier to recall one's own negative embarrassing situations, while those about others have faded away from memory. In the debriefing, add that as the students probably don't remember the embarrassing situations of others as clearly and strongly, they don't have to feel bad about their own embarrassing moments. People tend to quickly forget about these situations for others, just not for themselves.

Stir the discussion so that you can discern some elements of the definition of the negativity bias. Ask questions like:

❯ Why do you think we focus so much on negative experiences?
❯ Have you ever heard of the negativity bias? What do you think it is?

Let them write down the definition in their notes for future use.

2. 2.

🕐 20-30 min

Understanding why the bias evolved

Activity 1

We will now see why it is so. Tell the students the following story: "Imagine you live in prehistoric times with a group of people in a cave. Life would be far more difficult and less comfortable than it is today. When going out into the wilderness, small mistakes could cost somebody their life. You have gone out for food and found a bush of delicious fruit. The problem is that there is a tiger standing next to it. What do you do: Do you go and get the fruit because it's delicious or do you run away because the tiger is dangerous?"
The students most probably answered that they would run away.

Next, ask the students: In the same light, which experience would give you a more important lesson for your life: a couple of great jokes you learned to entertain your prehistoric buddies around the bonfire or the experience of when you lost your temper at the chief of the tribe which almost got you banned from your tribe and sent alone into the wilderness?

The students most probably chose the second option, meaning the experience of a grave mistake in social relations with potentially detrimental consequences was more valuable.

❯ Following those two examples, ask the students the following: What are their ideas about why the negativity bias evolved in human brains?

It evolved because negative information and emotions (such as fear and threats) taught humans **more valuable and important lessons for survival** than positive ones.

Activity 2

Tell the students that "we will see how this bias works now, when we live completely different lives than people thousands of years ago. We can notice how negative information sticks to us more and we dwell on it. Recall the example of embarrassment. Just for this thought exercise, let's imagine the embarrassing situation was that you drew a picture and showed it to the class and one guy started laughing at you and said it was ugly. You feel bad about this feedback, even though other kids liked your picture. Approximately how many pieces of positive feedback do you think you need to hear to outweigh the bad feeling from the negative feedback?"

Let the students make a few guesses, then tell them that according to studies, one needs in general 3 positive things to outweigh one negative piece of feedback, such as an insult, a derogatory remark, a bad review on an essay, and so on. This number is, of course, highly individual for everybody, but gives an estimate of how much negative information outweighs positive information, even if they are of equal intensity. Negative things stick to us longer. Positive emotions, like joy from success, dissipate much sooner. Unfortunately, unlike in prehistoric times, this dwelling and recalling negative information for further use has very little use in modern times. In other words, we recall insults and negative feedback for an unnecessarily long time. Although we are in modern times, we are still more attentive to negative information than positive.

In the next part, we will take a look at how the negativity bias is related to media content. Homework is assigned to the students; if you finish a class at this point, you can assign the homework from the next part so that you can work with the homework during the next session.

2.3.

🕐 45-50 min

THE NEGATIVITY BIAS IN THE MEDIA

Activity 1

In the previous activities, we saw that we have a propensity to focus on the negative and saw why it was important for our survival in the past. Discuss with your students what they think. To what extent can the negative content of some news be related to the negativity bias?

In fact, the negativity bias can get triggered by news that covers negative issues. It means we focus on them more and even pay greater attention to them, consequently remembering and recalling them better. So it's not only the media being full of negative content, it's also us as viewers driving the demand for negative news.

Homework

Assign the students homework. They should watch the evening news (at least 20 minutes of it) sometime before the next lesson. They can watch it online, as it does not necessarily have to be live on TV. You could divide the various broadcasts of your country among the students to ensure diversity, tell them to watch the same news program or let them make their own choice. All options are possible.
From the news that they watch, they should make a list of which type of news had more prominent placing - i.e., at the beginning or

towards the end of the news program, by writing the sequence of how the three types followed each other in the news program (see worksheet). Consequently, they should count negative, neutral and positive news in the evening news.

By negative news, we could mean natural disasters, diseases, threats to the lives of people, wars and conflicts, violence, etc. Neutral events could be new laws implemented, intergovernmental or intragovernmental meetings, daily politics, bureaucratic information, etc. Positive news would count as those events that clearly had positive and joyful outcomes, i.e., the celebration of a peace pact, a ceasefire, important humanitarian aid delivered and other coverage that could be labeled as "good news."

In the next class, ask some of the students to share which news they watched and what their results are. Probably, the majority of the news will fall within the negative news category and will also be posited more prominently, i.e., at the beginning of the news program.

Points for further discussion:

❱ Why do the students think negative content is positioned more prominently?
It is because of the negativity bias - we are automatically prone to pay more attention to negative content, and therefore, we think it is more important content and tend to trust it more.

Feel free to discuss whether the negativity bias is still practical, if it has some value in our lives and what the effects of it on our well-being can be.

Some questions for discussion:

❱ Given we live way more comfortable lives, do you think the negativity bias is still so practical for us? Is it still necessary for us to focus on the negative for our survival?
❱ What effects could it have on us and our well-being if we focused more on negative news and information?

There is no right or wrong answer. The students can freely think about different options, and maybe they will identify some instances in which the bias is still practical. Otherwise, it seems the negativity bias is redundant in more complex societies and in the lives we have now. There is very little value for us in being so attracted to negative news because we now have many more possibilities to deal with the situations that are negative or threatening to our lives. The effects can often be that if the negativity bias gets triggered and we focus on the negative more often, it could influence our sense of well-being and could be linked to increased levels of stress and even depressing thoughts.

Activity 2

We saw that the negativity bias can have negative effects on peoples' lives and well-being. It also makes us dwell on negative information and feelings far more than positive feelings, and on negative feedback more than positive feedback. What can we do to overcome the negativity bias in our own life? Try to come up with a list of "good advice" as a class.

This advice can be very individual, but could include:

> Being aware of the bias will help me dwell less on negative feedback or insults; I will focus more on compliments.
> I will approach feedback (insults, ironic comments, etc.) as a researcher: I will count how much negative versus positive feedback I got, so as to judge more rationally whether I should really feel bad about it.
> I will consciously focus more on positive news and will pay more attention to it than I do now.
> I will tell my parents or my friends about the bias so that they focus less on negativity.

2. 4.

🕐 90-100 min

THE NEGATIVITY BIAS AND POPULIST OR EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS

Activity 1

Print or show on screen to the students the two examples of social media posts[5] **(see Worksheet)**. Explain to them that these are shortened versions of real posts. Post 1 was made by the then opposition MP for the Freedom and Solidarity party in Slovakia, Richard Sulík, and Post 2 by the then opposition MP for the Freedom and Direct Democracy party in the Czech Republic. Let them read the respective excerpts from the posts. As a note of explanation, tell the students that Roma people are an ethnic minority that has been living in Central Europe and beyond for centuries; for systemic reasons, they are faced with higher levels of poverty and exclusion. Roma people were also amongst the minorities both states sent to concentration camps during World War II. The Czech Republic, as a protectorate of the German Third Reich, exterminated the entirety of its Roma population, and that is why their numbers at the end of the war were very low.

[5] Halverson, J, Corman, S, & Goodall, H.

Source of post 1: https://www.facebook.com/RichardSulik/posts/1490908980988825/

Source of post 2: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1017260391618109 L. (2011). Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism. Springer, Wiesbaden.

Then ask the following questions:

> First, examine the content of the posts. What feelings do you get when you read and see these posts? What can you say about the content? Is it positive, neutral or negative?

Why might these posts trigger the negativity bias?

In essence, the content of the posts is the main trigger of the bias. A situation is depicted as a danger, a threat, as negative information. Roma people are depicted as a threat by using numbers, and their sheer number might sound like a threat. These politicians claim these people are a "danger" because of their ethnicity. The numbers are taken entirely out of context, not compared to the growth of the majority of the population or explained in any way. They are just put out so that they look shocking.

> Second, what elements in the posts are used to intensify the bias? Which emotions do these elements elicit?

Second, it's the presentation strategy that matters, that is, to trigger automatic thinking and emotions.
There are:

1   CAPITAL LETTERS used to underline the main message and to catch people's attention and to give a sense of urgency.
2   The choice of words such as "if we are fully aware what is going to happen to us," talking about fellow citizens as "one of the two biggest security threats" and their "unbelievable rise" in numbers to further underline the danger looming over the citizens.
3   The accompanying image in the first post depicts a poor Roma settlement in Veľká Lomnica, accentuating all the negative stereotypes about Roma people: poor, without work, big numbers, shabby living conditions, kids that are not in schools, and so on.

The image automatically brings up negative associations. All the elements are used to give a sense of urgency, threat, danger and to elicit fear.

Activity 2

We'll continue with the previous examples. Tell the students that for the sake of this exercise, we will try to take these purely numerical arguments without context seriously.
Ask them what other information they would need to assess whether the "rising numbers" of fellow citizens of a certain ethnicity in the country are really a "threat"?

To stir a discussion, you can further ask questions along these lines:

❯ What do these posts say about both populations? Do we have any more cues as to why bearing children would be a "problem"? Do we know if the children go to school? Do the politicians mention any particular social problems we could talk about? Do we know if people in Veľká Lomnica are employed or unemployed? What exactly is the problem of the high rise in the numbers of a group of people? Is it just the rising numbers or do these politicians talk about some social issues? Do these people live in poverty? Isn't it then the problem of poverty and not of bearing children?

To properly assess the "danger" mentioned in both posts, any viewer would mainly need to know: the social background of these people, how many of these children in Veľká Lomnica attend school, whether there is really a social problem in the village or it is just a random population statistic, whether in the Czech Republic the rise in numbers means all of those people live in poverty and which portion, what the causes of potential social or work-related problems are, what things the government does and can do to help children in Veľká Lomnica, in addition to other missing factual information.

It should be clear from the discussion, and try to make the students understand, that there are plenty of other pieces of information we need to know in order to even consider that the problem could be that people from an ethnicity in our country are a problem because they have children (not even speaking of the racism of such claims). To conclude the discussion on the bias in this political content, ask the question:

❯ What do you conclude is the danger if the negativity bias gets triggered by such political communication?

The main danger is that our automatic thinking processes the information for us. We are focused on the negative feelings and "vibes" we get from the content, which is enhanced by the different strategies we have seen that target our bias even more. As a consequence, we don't focus on the rational part of the argument.

Following this, look at the totally made-up positive version of the post by Richard Sulík about Veľká Lomnica. Ask the students if they think such a post would get the same massive amount of shares and reactions as the negatively framed post? Why?

The opinions can, of course, vary, and we are speaking hypothetically. But given what we have seen about the negativity bias, it is highly probable that the positively framed post would not get people's attention as widely, and second, it would not be shared as much because it's not negative.

Activity 3

To provide the context for this activity, tell the students that we will take a look at the homophobic climate in Uganda. Uganda is predominantly Christian but has some of the toughest and most inhuman laws in place against LGBT people. Tell the students to look at the quotes by political figures in Uganda. They can either read the excerpts on their own or work in groups - each group on one quote or together as a class, according to your preference and experience with the class.

Then ask the students to define:

❯ What is the main message of the quotes? What do the authors claim is happening? How does it trigger the negativity bias?
❯ Look at the strategies these political figures use. Underline in the text which claims and words are used to denigrate LGBT people? Which emotions might this strategy elicit in the audience?

The main message is common for all the quotes. All three figures claim the country/nation is in danger and the danger is LGBT people. The negativity bias is triggered by invocation of danger and a looming threat over people's lives.

All of the quotes are negative depictions of LGBT people and are associated with "epidemics of divorce, child abuse, HIV/AIDS", it's a "hybrid terrorist organization that wants to create anarchy, break the stability", "don't like the independence of Uganda."
They associate LGBT rights with destabilization of the country and say they are foreign and it's foreigners who bring these people to the countries. All these associations create extremely condemning and negative associations with LGBT people and depict them as a horrendous danger, an immediate threat. In the minds of the audience, this might automatically elicit a sense of fear.

❯ Next, ask the students why they think some politicians use slogans and speech that triggers the negativity bias.

Listen to their ideas and allow for a short discussion. Emphasize two main reasons why some politicians use strategies to trigger the negativity bias: one is that the negativity bias will make sure their negative messages get people's attention easier than those that are positive. This is because the brain has evolved to pay greater attention to negative news and considers negative information more valuable for survival than equally intense positive information. Second, due to our propensity to pay attention to negative news, it will also get more media coverage and thus reach even more people.

❯ What can you personally do to lessen the influence of the negativity bias in the news and in political communication for yourself?

Individual opinions and advice will vary but being aware of the bias is the basis.

When spotting a negatively-charged piece of news, a social media post or a public statement by a politician that catches my attention, I try to think about whether I am missing factual information, whether the message is based on emotions or on facts, and whether I am being tricked into negative political propaganda.

I focus on neutral and more positive information more consciously.

Homework

For the homework, the students should:

❯ Find out whether the strategy with the negativity bias worked for Yoweri Museveni in the 2021 Uganda elections
❯ Find out what consequences homophobic political speech and laws have on the lives of LGBT Ugandans
❯ Pick an example of a country of their choice that was more successful in overcoming the negativity bias towards LGBT people than Uganda. How did the country do it?
❯ Come up with positive strategies that could be used inr Uganda to overcome the negativity bias towards LGBT people

The incumbent president Yoweri Museveni has been reelected.

The rise in homophobic speech and different facets of anti-LGBT laws have seen a rise in attacks on LGBT people in Uganda. A prominent tabloid called "Rolling Stones" published the names, addresses and photographs of 100 alleged LGBT people with the title "Hang them." David Kato, who successfully sued the tabloid, was later found dead. Homosexuality is illegal by law and any mentions of homosexuality are seen as illegal propaganda. Police routinely raid LGBT gatherings and NGO premises, and LGBT people are harassed and some are beaten to death.

The students could pick many different countries in the world. The strategies could include: decriminalization of homosexuality in the law, positive public campaigns, pride parades that focus on the positive aspects of diversity, education at schools that focuses on LGBT rights, positive coverage by the media that focuses on everyday life aspects of LGBT lives such as interviewing parents who have an LGBT child, taking a look at how LGBT couples successfully raise children, among the many other examples the students can find.

The students could be inspired by the answers to question no. 3 and different strategies that took place in different countries. Decriminalization would be the first step and an important signal to Ugandan society that there is no reason LGBT relations should be punishable by law. Police officers should be trained to protect the victims of attacks and not be lenient towards perpetrators of violence against LGBT people.

>> Worksheets

1. WARM-UP

Activity 1

Write down five positive and five negative characteristics about yourself:

Positive: ....

Negative: ....

Activity 2

Write down the definition of the negativity bias:

....

....

2. UNDERSTANDING WHY THE BIAS EVOLVED

Activity 1

Read the story about your previous prehistoric life: "Imagine you live in prehistoric times with a group of people in a cave. Life would be far more difficult and less comfortable than it is today. When going out into the wilderness, small mistakes could cost somebody their life. You have gone out for food and found a bush of delicious fruit. The problem is that there is a tiger standing next to it. What do you do: Do you go and get the fruit because it's delicious or do you run away because the tiger is dangerous?" What would be more important to you in that context?

1   Picking the delicious food or
2   Running away from the tiger?

In the same light, which experience would teach you a more important lesson for your life: a couple of great jokes you learned to entertain your prehistoric buddies around the bonfire or the experience of when you lost your temper at the chief of the tribe which almost got you banned from your tribe and sent alone into the wilderness? **1** Learn from jokes around the bonfire or **2** Learn from misbehaving towards the tribal chief.

Activity 2

If negative feedback (insults, derogatory remarks, bad reviews and so on) sticks in our brain more, approximately how many positive pieces of feedback do you need to receive to "outweigh" the negative emotion? It's, of course, very individual; this is only a scientific estimate. Make a guess:

3. THE NEGATIVITY BIAS IN THE MEDIA

Activity 1

In the previous activities, we saw that we have a propensity to focus on the negative and saw why it was important for our survival in the past. What do you think: To what extent can the negative content of some news be related to the negativity bias?

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Homework

Count the negative, neutral and positive news stories from the evening news program of your choice. Make a list of which type of news had more prominent placing - i.e., at the beginning or towards the end of the broadcast.
By negative news, we could mean natural disasters, diseases, threats to the lives of people, wars and conflicts, violence, etc. Neutral events could be new laws implemented, intergovernmental or intragovernmental meetings, daily politics, bureaucratic information, etc. Positive news would count as those events that clearly had positive and joyful outcomes, i.e., the celebration of a peace pact, a ceasefire, important humanitarian aid delivered and other coverage that could be labeled as "good news."

Name of the media, date of the news: ....

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Note down the sequence as the individual reports follow each other. Use " -" for negative, 0 for neutral and "+" for positive news.

Placement throughout the news program:

Next, write down how many pieces of negative, neutral and positive news you identified in the news program:

Number of negative news stories	Number of neutral news stories	Number of positive news stories

➤ Given we live way more comfortable lives, do you think the negativity bias is still so practical for us? Is it still necessary for us to focus on the negative for our survival?

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➤ What effects could it have on us and our well-being if we focused more on negative news and information?

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Activity 2

What can we do to overcome the negativity bias in our own lives? Try to make a list of "good advice."

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4.

THE NEGATIVITY BIAS
IN THE MEDIA

Activity 1

Look at the following Facebook posts. Post 1 was made by the then opposition MP for the Freedom and Solidarity party in Slovakia, Richard Sulík, and Post 2 by the then opposition MP for the Freedom and Direct Democracy party in the Czech Republic. Roma people are an ethnic minority and have been living in Central Europe and beyond for centuries. For systemic reasons they are faced with higher levels of poverty and exclusion. Roma people were also amongst the minorities both states sent to concentration camps during World War II. The Czech Republic, as a protectorate of the German Third Reich, exterminated the entirety of its Roma population, and that is why their numbers at the end of the war were very low.

Post 3

Excerpt from the post:
"VEĽKÁ LOMNICA (village in Slovakia), 4500 CITIZENS, OUT OF WHICH 2150 ARE ROMA PEOPLE.
In Veľká Lomnica, 85 children were born this year, out of which 76 were Roma children. I don't know if we are fully aware what is going to happen to us, but it's high time someone took action."

Post 2

Excerpt from the post:
"A sharp rise in the Roma population is, in my opinion, one of the two biggest security threats to the Czech Republic. [..] The number of Roma has risen 32x during the past 70 years. Yes, you read correctly, it's an unbelievable rise."

Look at these two Facebook posts. Read the excerpt from the textual information given in the text and try to answer the following questions:

First, examine the content of the posts. What feelings do you get when you read and see these posts? What can you say about the content? Is it positive, neutral or negative? Why might these posts trigger the negativity bias?

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Second, what elements in the posts are used to intensify the bias? Which emotions do these elements elicit? Underline the particular wordings in the post translations.

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Activity 2

For the sake of this exercise, let's take the numbers argument these two politicians make seriously. What other information would you need to assess whether the "rising numbers" of people of some ethnicity in the country are really a "threat"?

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What do you conclude is the danger if the negativity bias gets triggered by such political communication?

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Richard Sulik ✓
22 September 2017 · 🌐

Vo Veľkej Lomnici sa narodilo tohto roku 85 detí, približne 76 rómskych. Ide o okres s druhou najvyššou nezamestnanosťou na Slovensku. Ako poslanec sa chcem zasadiť o to, aby všetky slovenské deti mali rovnaké možnosti rozvoja a boli šťastné

👍 👶 🙌

👍 Like   💬 Comment   ↪ Share

"This year, 85 children, out of which approximately 76 were Roma children, were born in Veľká Lomnica. It's a district with the second highest unemployment rate in Slovakia. As a member of parliament, I will work hard to ensure all Slovak children have the same development opportunities and are happy."

Post 3

Look at this hypothetical made-up positive post by a politician about Veľká Lomnica. Do you think it would get the same massive amount of shares and reactions as the negatively framed post? Why?

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Activity 3

Uganda is predominantly Christian but has some of the toughest and most inhuman laws in place against LGBT people. Homosexuality is officially punishable by life imprisonment, and the death penalty has repeatedly been discussed.

Look at the following quotes from political figures:

Quote 1:

> *"A powerful global gay movement had now set its sights on Africa. The "gay agenda" unleashes epidemics of divorce, child abuse, and HIV/AIDS wherever it gains a foothold. [..]. If you allow homosexuality, you can't stop someone from molesting children [..] It's an evil intuition [..] that aims to defeat the marriage-based society."*

Scott Lively is the head of the anti-gay Abiding Truth Ministries in Massachusetts and the author of The Pink Swastika, which claims that homosexuals invented Nazism and were instrumental in the Holocaust. These quotes were taken from a 5-hour long presentation that was also broadcast on TV at an influential, high profile conference called "Seminar on Exposing the Truth behind Homosexuality and the Homosexual Agenda" in Kampala, Uganda, in 2009. The conference was organized by the 'Family Life Network', financially supported by U.S. Christian-rights groups.

Quote 2:

> *"I want to inform the public that there is a threat to the world called the "Red movement". [It is] a hybrid terrorist organization [...] who wants to create anarchy all over the world, to break the stability of the order of things. [..] It is already here [in Uganda] and is associated with LGBT and is associated with cryptocurrency, with things that want to break the established order of things".*

Ugandan Minister of Security Gen Elly Tumwine in 2019 speaking about the 'People Power' movement, which was later established as a political party. Its leader, Bobi Wine, challenged the long-standing president in the 2021 elections.

Quote 3:

> *"Some of these groups are being used by outsiders ... homosexuals ... who don't like the stability of Uganda and the independence of Uganda."*

President Yoweri Museveni, seeking to extend his 34-year rule in the 2021 elections, speaking about popular protests that erupted in Uganda after his main rival in the presidential elections, Bobi Wine, was briefly detained over alleged violations of anti-coronavirus measures.

What is the main message of the quotes? What do the authors claim is happening? How does it trigger the negativity bias?

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Look at the strategies these political figures use. Underline in the text which claims and words are used to denigrate LGBT people? Which emotions might this strategy elicit in the audience?

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Why do you think politicians use slogans and speech that triggers the negativity bias?

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What can you personally do to lessen the influence of the negativity bias in the news and in political communication for yourself?

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Homework

Find out:

➤ Whether the strategy with the negativity bias worked for Yoweri Museveni in the 2021 Ugandan elections

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➤ How extremist and vigilant groups in Uganda act against LGBT people

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❯   Pick an example of a country of your choice that was more successful in overcoming the negativity bias towards LGBT people than Uganda. How did the country do it?

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❯   What positive strategies could be used in Uganda to overcome the negativity bias towards LGBT people?

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Sources of the materials:

❯ Post 1 (Richard Sulík): https://www.facebook.com/RichardSulik/posts/1490908980988825/
❯ Post 2 (Tomio Okamura): https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1017260391618109
❯ Quote 1: https://prospect.org/world/exporting-anti-gay-movement/ and https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/politics/article/uganda-homophobia
❯ Quote 2: https://twitter.com/nbstv/status/1179676101800579074
❯ Quote 3: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uganda-lgbt-election-idUSKBN29B22W

Bandwagon Effect

1.

TEACHER'S NOTES

›› What is the bandwagon effect?

The bandwagon effect describes the phenomenon where the rate of people adopting beliefs, ideas, behaviours and fashions increases if they have already been enthusiastically embraced by other people. In other words, the more people who are share a certain trend, the more other people will be encouraged to display this behaviour. The bandwagon effect is also described as 'herd behaviour'. It is a social-psychological phenomenon that can be observed when it comes to trends or hypes in various social situations.[1]

It is observable, for example, in stock market bubbles, political circles, especially during election campaigns and when making a last-minute decision to vote, during meetings and group discussions as well as on the micro level in social situations in private circles. The bandwagon effect is thus closely related to 'groupthink' in the way that one will rely on, and conform, to the group opinion for fear of exclusion and rejection by a respected and admired social group. Furthermore, this kind of behaviour can be traced back to people's urge to do the right thing in life. Particularly in meetings and group discussions or every time a group has reached a certain size where a majority and minority can be discerned, people tend to go along with the wishes of a majority. Group contexts usually create situations where it is more pleasant for an individual to support a majority.[2]

The behaviour which consists in following a majority or jumping on the bandwagon is typically socially shaped by the fear of missing out or the fear of being excluded by one's social group, but also by the desire to be part of what seems like a wise decision. Being excluded from a group activates one of our human instincts, namely the self-preservation instinct. Being affiliated with a group has, over the years, ensured our survival and hence, we experience sociability but also conformity and this explanation makes the bandwagon effect not only a social phenomenon but also a very complex psychological issue.[3]

[1] Bouko, C., Rieger D., Carton J., Naderer B., Massive Open Online Course "Cognitive biases in the radicalization process", Cluster 5 Session 1, 2021

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

People are also inclined to align their preferences or behaviours with what they perceive to be existing or emerging among majorities or groups holding dominant positions in society, and this tendency reinforces the bandwagon effect, leading to even more success for majority or winning groups. Consequently, presenting a win in the public sphere, for instance through public-opinion surveys, can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. For instance, a recent study examined, in an online experiment, how poll results affect voters. Why is that so important? Research shows that since the 1980s, the number of political polls, including internet-based polls, has increased enormously. Simultaneously, the internet landscape has developed in a way that false information can be spread via social media rapidly and can lead to disinformation within echo chambers (an environment, for example a group or a community, where a person only encounters information or opinions that reflect and reinforce their own).[4] The results of the study show that seeing pre-election polls increased votes for majority options by 7% and the effect occurred irrespective of whether the majority opinion in the pre-election poll was presented for a moderate candidate or for a politically extreme candidate.[5] Along the same lines, the US presidential elections in 2016 are a real-life example of the bandwagon effect and its impact on the people's voting behaviour. An analysis of poll results and the voting number showcased that in 2016, Donald Trump exceeded his poll results in these areas the most in which his victory became apparent early on.[6]

The bandwagon effect is also observable in our consumer behaviour. For example, we tend to reach for products that have only a few left on shelves or in stock. This is because the scarceness of a product creates the impression that it is apparently bought the most. Regardless of one's own prior preferences, one will tend to find this product more desirable as most other people seem to think so.

Through the pressure of going along with what a perceived majority thinks, we can observe another interrelated societal phenomenon: the spiral of silence effect. The spiral of silence is a phenomenon which leads back to communication research. According to this theoretical approach, the willingness of many people to publicly express their opinion depends on the assessment of the climate of opinion. If one's own opinion contradicts the opinion which is currently seen as the prevailing one, then people are unlikely or reluctant to express it. This adds to an even more uniform canon of opinion, which makes people even more reluctant to speak their minds.

The bandwagon effect can, however, also have positive implications when people follow trends or adopt behaviours which have a beneficial impact on their group, community or society as a whole, for example when they start recycling waste products, modelling their behaviour on, or feeling pressure from, their neighbours, or join a social movement advocating positive changes in society as they see that it is becoming increasingly popular and recognised by

4 Farjam, M. (2020). The Bandwagon Effect in an Online Voting Experiment with Real Political Organizations. International Journal of Public Opinion Research.

5 Ibid.

6 Bergmann, Dr. K., & Diermeier, M. (2017). Die AfD: Eine unterschätzte Partei. Soziale Erwünschtheit als Erklärung für fehlerhafte Prognosen. Köln: Institut der Deutschen Wirtschaft in: Bouco, C., Rieger D., Carton J., Naderer B.,Massive Open Online Course "Cognitive biases in the radicalization process", Cluster 5 Session 1, 2021

a growing number of people. On a micro level, our friends, their values, interests and aspirations, may have a huge impact on our life.

≫ The bandwagon effect and extremist movements

Since the bandwagon effect has a persuasive impact on social behaviour, it can also pertain to radicalisation processes. According to an analytical report[7] developed by the Center for Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence and based on a study of radicalisation (jihadism) of some students in schools in Quebec, Canada, the close ties between individuals who had known each other for a long time played a more important role than ideological factors in their radicalisation process. As the authors of the report stated, "One does not become radicalized just because of the worldview one espouses, but also out of consideration for the personal ties one has with a network of individuals one trusts, and to whom one is attracted. In the case of the young people from the Collège de Maisonneuve, these relationships of trust and friendship played a crucial role as the process of collective radicalization took hold".[8]

[7] Center for the Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence (2017). "Analytical Report. Radicalization leading to violence in Quebec schools". *Issues and perspectives*, https://info-radical.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/rapport-cprlv.pdf

[8] Ibid., p. 42

◇ To find out more about cognitive biases and radicalisation, follow PRECOBIAS's free online course on *www.precobias.eu*.

2.

LESSON PLAN

Learning outcomes

At the end of this lesson, the students will be able to:

❯ Experience and understand the bandwagon effect.

❯ Identify the bandwagon effect in real life.

❯ Understand how the bandwagon effect may lead to adopting extremist beliefs and joining extremist groups.

Structure of the lesson and instructions

Suggested duration: two classes (45-50 minutes each).

2.1.

🕐 15-20 min

WARM-UP: EXPERIENCING THE BANDWAGON EFFECT

Activity 1

The objective of this activity is to invite students experience the bandwagon effect, namely the effect of group conformity, and see to what extent they tend to "follow the masses" - make decisions based on the behaviour of a majority. This experiment draws on an experiment staged by National Geographic and filmed in the video entitled "Question the Herd: Brain Games". It is recommended that you watch the short three-minute video to see how the experiment is technically organised. Slightly more than a half of the class (about 60%) will receive the same instruction written on a piece of paper to choose a certain answer. The other half of the group will also receive an instruction on a piece of paper but telling them to follow their own judgement. In the experiment, the first group will have the power to influence the choices of the second group and later as a class, you will discuss with the class how the students from the second group made their decisions - to what extent they were influenced by others.

Tell the students they will play a game in the classroom. Ask each of them to select a piece of paper from a container (e.g. a bag, a box) with an instruction on how to play the game. There are two types of instructions **(see Worksheet)**:

❯ You will be shown a line. Stand at the front of the queue. When asked which length it matches: A, B or C, choose A.
❯ You will be shown a line. Decide which length it matches: A, B or C.

Those who select the piece of paper with instruction 1. will be complicit in the experiment and will influence the other students. The students who draw the piece of paper with instruction 2. will be the real "subjects" of the experiment, having the freedom to choose the line which they think is the correct answer. The correct answer is line C but all the students from the first group will say it is line A.
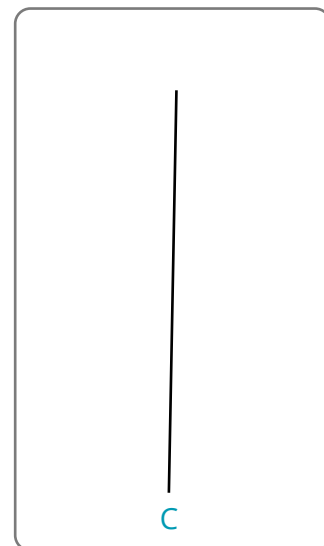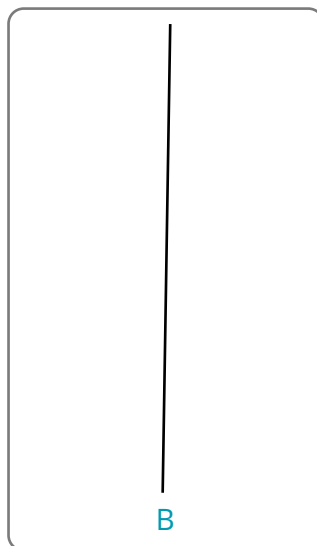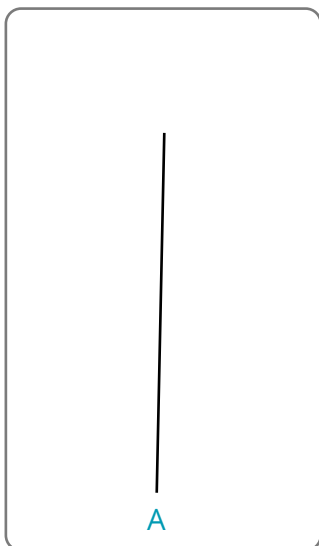
The lines are as follows:
The line about which the question is asked:
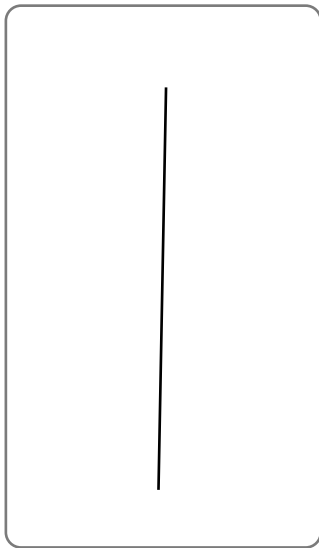
The three lines the students compare the first line with:

A

B

C

Start the experiment by placing the photocopy of the first line on one side of the classroom (it can be fixed to the wall or to the board) and the other photocopy of the three lines together on the other side of the classroom **(see Worksheet)**. Then place three photocopies of the letter A, B and C in separate corners of the classroom so that the students can group there, depending on their answer. Ask the students to form a queue so that they face the two photocopies with the lines; make sure that most of the students who are complicit in the experiment, given the instruction to choose line A, are standing at the front of the queue (do not tell them to do so, rather check whether they have followed the instruction telling them to stand in front of the queue). Tell all students that they will have to decide which line (A, B or C) the first line matches and go to the corner of the classroom with the chosen letter (A, B or C). Let the students make their choices.

Once everybody has made their choice, see how many students have chosen line A and how many C. In the experiment it is as-

sumed that some of the people from the second group (about 40% of the class) will be influenced by the decisions of the majority (about 60% of the class) and will opt for line A, even if the correct answer is line C. The group which will choose line C will be most likely smaller in size than the group which will choose line A. First, ask some students from "group C" how they felt choosing the less popular option, seeing that the majority has chosen line A. Listen to their answers and comments. It is possible that some of the students will admit they thought it was better to follow the majority group although they intuitively believed C was the right answer or so many people could not be wrong etc.

At the end of the experiment, tell the class that the majority of them had received an instruction to deliberately choose line A, their role was to try to influence other students who were free to choose. Build on the comments made by the students and say that you will look deeper into this phenomenon of following the majority group or trends, which is called the bandwagon effect, in the next activity. It is another important cognitive bias that influences our everyday lives.

If the majority of the students from the second group did not fall for this trap and were not influenced by the first group, tell them that such experiments only indicate a certain tendency and that the bandwagon does not always have to occur. It is also important to reassure the students who made their choice being influenced by others that this is perfectly OK since we are all prone to this cognitive bias. Underline that most of us become influenced by other people in some contexts and situations and the bandwagon effect is a universal and widespread phenomenon.

2.2. UNDERSTANDING THE BANDWAGON EFFECT

🕐 20 min

Activity 1

Ask the students to read the text about the bandwagon effect in the Worksheet **(see Worksheet)** and to individually think about the three pieces of information that they have found the most interesting and write them down on the Worksheet. Then tell them to discuss their ideas in pairs. Ask several pairs to present their reflections in the class.

Next ask the students to get into groups of three and summarise the text they have read by answering the following questions on the Worksheet and noting down their answers on post-it notes (or other pieces of paper):

❯ How would you define the bandwagon effect?
❯ Why do people display this kind of herd behaviour?

Then ask each group to send one representative to stick their post-it notes on a common board, flipchart or large sheet of paper. When all groups are finished, ask two-three students to sort the notes into categories and on the basis of these categories, develop and write down for everybody to see a joint definition of the cognitive bias and the causes for it. Let the students know they will use this definition in the next activity.

2. 3.

🕐 20 min

THE BANDWAGON EFFECT IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Activity 1

Tell the students that now that they have learnt about the bandwagon effect and defined it, they will look for both positive and negative examples of it in real life, in three areas: (1) their groups of friends, (2) their community and (3) society at large. The situations may relate to lifestyle, fashion, sports, culture, food, political and social life etc. Ask the students to work in groups of three, discuss the examples they have experienced themselves, and note them down on the Worksheet.

Next, invite each group to present their situations to the whole class and after all the groups have finished sharing these, ask the entire class to discuss their reflections. Wrap up the discussion by saying that the bandwagon may have both a positive and negative impact on our lives and on society. In the next class, you will cover a negative impact of this cognitive bias.

2. 4.

🕐 20 min

THE BANDWAGON EFFECT AND EXTREMISM: EXIT FROM HATE

Activity 1

Explain to the students that they will see how the bandwagon effect may be triggered in the process of radicalisation when an individual embraces extremist beliefs and joins a radicalised group or movement. The activity is based on a real-life story of one man from Poland who, as a former extremist, now sees helping other people leave radicalised groups and movements as his mission (it is called deradicalisation or exit work).

Before you watch the video together, distribute the Worksheets and ask the students to read the questions on them. Then play the six-minute video interview with the above mentioned exit activist, Stanisław Czerczak (the link to the video, 'Exit from hate' on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VKS0HBbOf7A&t=304s).

You can use a computer (a laptop) and an overhead projector for this part of the activity.

When you have finished watching it, ask the students to reflect individually on the questions on the Worksheet and note down their thoughts and answers. Then invite them to discuss them in pairs for 5-7 minutes. Finally, discuss the thoughts and answers to the questions with the entire class.

The questions are the following:

> What are the three things in this interview that were the most interesting/surprising/moving for you?
> Why did he join the extremist group when he was young? What benefits did he get from being a member of this group?
> How was the bandwagon effect triggered in his case?
> What arguments and narratives did those who recruited him use?
> Why did he leave the extremist group?
> In what ways was it difficult for him?

In this activity, it is important to emphasise how universal human needs and fears, such as the need to belong (particularly to a successful, winning group) and be appreciated and valued, feel safe and make a positive contribution to the world ('change the world') and fears of being excluded may all contribute to triggering the bandwagon effect in the process of radicalisation, as presented in the video.

It is also worth drawing attention to the narratives used by those who encourage others to join extremist groups. The narratives described in the video also relate to the sense of being unfairly treated, the resulting frustration and resentment, they are also based on a construct of an enemy - an opposing group. These narratives are often based on another cognitive bias - ingroup and outgroup (for more in-depth information and activities, see Unit 3), where one's own group is opposed to the other one, portrayed as hostile and responsible for injustices and harm.
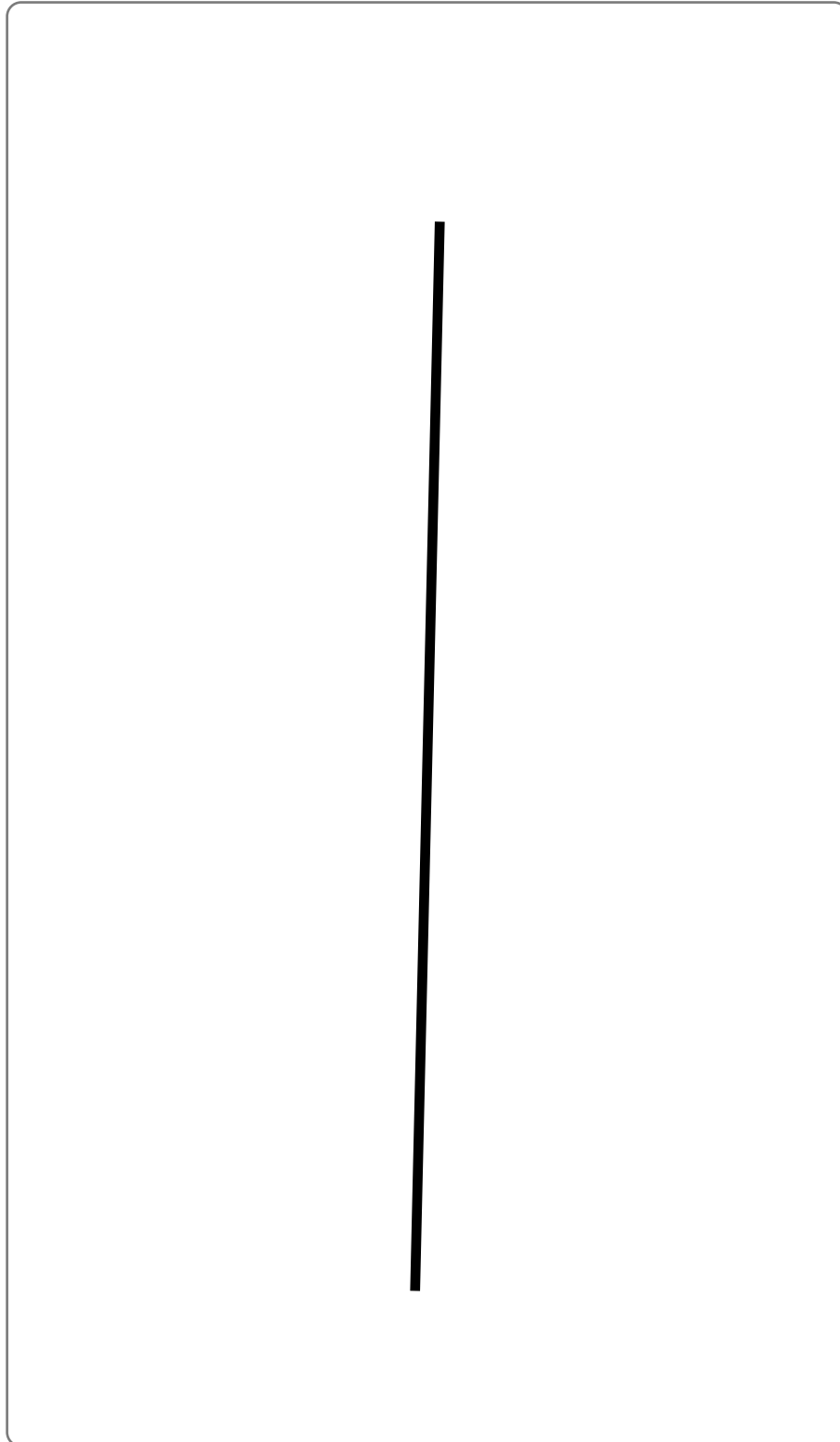
Worksheets

1.   WARM-UP

Activity 1

Cards with the two types of instruction for students :

You will be shown a line. Stand at the front of the queue. When asked which length it matches: A, B or C, choose A.

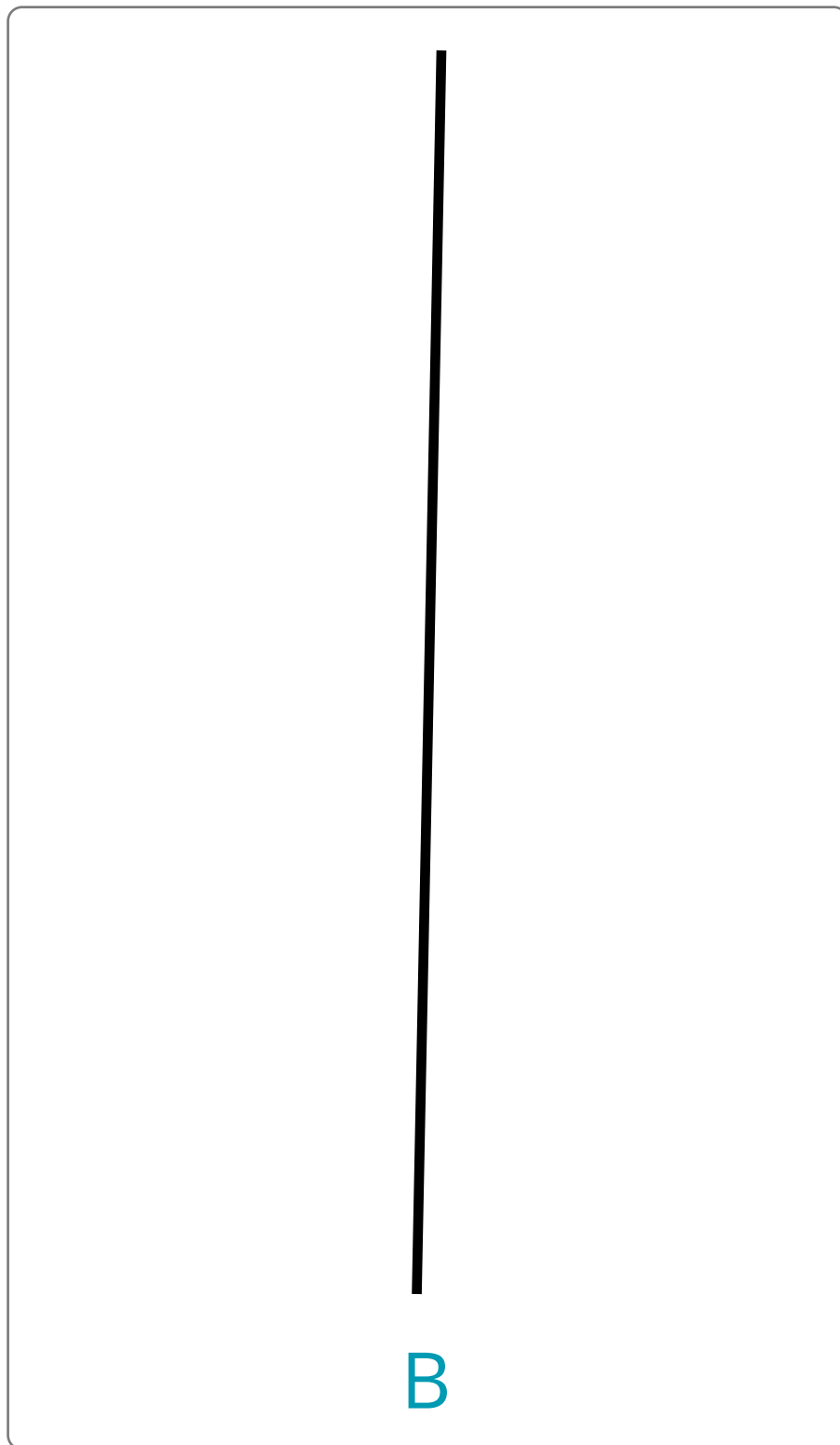You will be shown a line. Decide which length it matches: A, B or C.

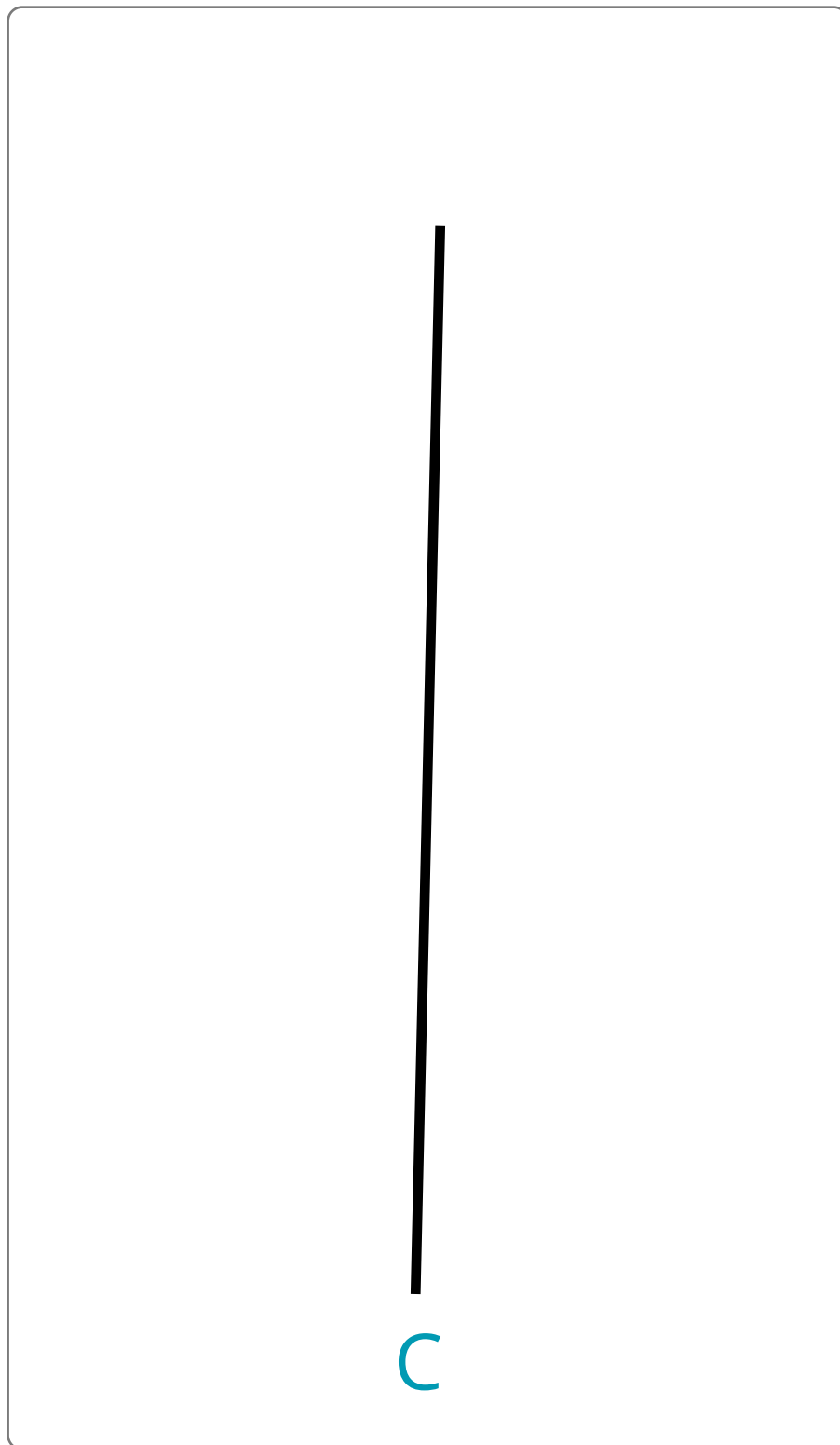# WARM-UP

Activity 1

Cards for the teacher:
The line about which the question is asked:

A

B

C

2. UNDERSTANDING THE BANDWAGON EFFECT

Individual work

Read the text about the bandwagon effect below and individually think about the three pieces of information that you have found the most interesting; write them down on the Worksheet.

What is the bandwagon effect?

The bandwagon effect describes the phenomenon where the rate of people adopting beliefs, ideas, behaviours and fashions increases if these have already been enthusiastically embraced by other people. In other words, the more people who are taking part in a certain trend, the more other people will be encouraged to jump on the bandwagon. The bandwagon effect is also described as 'herd behaviour'. And it is a socio-psychological phenomenon that can be observed when it comes to trends or hypes in various social situations .

This behaviour, closely related to 'groupthink', is typically socially-shaped by the fear of missing out or the fear of being excluded by one's social group but also by the desire to be part of what seems like a wise decision and to belong to a respected and admired social group. Being excluded from a group activates one of our human instincts, namely the self-preservation instinct. Being affiliated with a group has, over the years, ensured our survival and hence, we experience sociability but also conformity and this explanation makes the bandwagon effect not only a social phenomenon but also a very complex psychological issue .

Image 1

The bandwagon effect can be observed, for example, in stock market bubbles, where people follow other investors, which drives the prices of assets very high at first and then they suddenly lose their value, which usually leads to a 'bubble burst' or a 'crash', such as the huge crisis in the US in 1929, followed by the Great Depression in the 1930s. This cognitive bias can also be observed in politics, especially during election campaigns. The results of one study show that seeing pre-election polls increased votes for majority parties by 7% and the effect occurred irrespective of whether the majority opinion in the pre-election poll was presented for a moderate candidate or for a politically extreme candidate . Along the same lines, the US presidential elections in 2016 are a real-life example of the bandwagon effect and its impact on the people's voting behaviour. An analysis of poll results and the voting number showcased that in 2016, Donald Trump exceeded his poll results in these areas the most in which his victory became apparent early on.

The bandwagon effect also affects our consumer behaviour. For example, we tend to reach for products that have only a few left on shelves or in stock. This is because the scarceness of a product creates the impression that it is apparently bought the most. Regardless of one's own prior preferences, one will tend to find this product more desirable as most other people seem to think so.

On a more individual level, we can experience the bandwagon effect in social situations in private circles of our friends and family - our friends, their values, interests and aspirations, may have a huge impact on our life. Also, during meetings and group discussions or every time a group has reached a certain size where majority and minority are observable, people tend to go along with the wishes of a majority. This behaviour is linked with another phenomenon: the spiral of silence effect. It describes situations in which people are reluctant to express their opinions publicly if they contradict the opinion which is currently seen as the predominant one in a given group or meeting. And this further reinforces the groupthink and uniformisation of opinions.

The bandwagon effect can, however, also have positive implications when people follow trends or adopt behaviours which have a beneficial impact on their group, community or society as a whole, for example when they start recycling waste products, modelling their behaviour on, or feeling pressure from, their neighbours, or join a social movement advocating positive changes in society as they see that it is becoming increasingly popular and recognised by a growing number of people.

Three most interesting pieces of information

❯ ....

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❯ ....

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❯ ....

....

Pair work

Then get into pairs and discuss the following questions: talk about those bits of information from the text that appeal to you the most. See if you have picked the same or different sections.

Group work

Get into groups of three and summarise the text you have read by answering the following questions:

❯   How would you define the bandwagon effect?

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❯   Why do people display this kind of herd behaviour?

....

....

....

2. THE BANDWAGON EFFECT IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Activity 1

In groups of three, find and describe one positive and one negative situation which exemplifies the bandwagon effect in one of the following areas: (1) your group of friends, (2) your community or (3) society at large. The situations may relate to lifestyle, fashion, sports, culture, food, political and social life etc.

Describe a positive example of the bandwagon effect in the area of ....

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Why do you think it is positive? ....

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4. THE BANDWAGON EFFECT AND EXTREMISM: EXIT FROM HATE

Activity 1

Before you watch the video, read the questions below. After you have watched it, reflect individually on them and note down your answers:

❯ What are the three things in this interview that interested/surprised/moved you the most?

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❯ Why did he join the extremist group when he was young? What benefits did he gain from being a member of this group?

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❯ How was the bandwagon effect triggered in his case?

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❯ What arguments and narratives did those who persuaded him to join the group use?

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❯ Why did he leave the extremist group?

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❯ In what ways was it difficult for him?

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Then discuss your thoughts and answers in pairs for 5-7 minutes. See what both of you think about Staszek's story, what elements from the interview have attracted your attention the most.

Sources of the materials:

> Image 1: Sheep being herded at a USDA research facility in Arkansas, USDA, author: K. Hammond, Wikimedia Commons

Hostile media effect

1.

TEACHER'S NOTES

» The hostile media effect

The hostile media effect is described as a cognitive bias which occurs when supporters or opponents of an issue perceive identical, balanced news coverage of that issue to be biased against their own side. However, impartial readers or listeners would view this same content as being relatively objective and neutral. In order for the bias to occur, it first has to address a controversial issue that is important to the recipient. Secondly, the issue has to be in the context of the mass media and the recipient has to be aware that a huge audience is being reached by it.

To understand the effect of hostile media perceptions, we first have to make the point that in quality media outlets, journalists try to report facts, weigh perspectives, and paint holistic images about the issues they report on. Yet, even balanced reporting can cause perceptions of unfair treatment and hostile reporting in some individuals. This potentially occurs if there is a **controversial** issue that is discussed and this discussion is received by strongly **polarized audience members**.[1] The majority of media users actually perceive most objective media coverage as balanced, while the recipients that perceive it as one-sided have the impression of it being biased against their own opinion.[2] This way, a situation emerges where the followers of opposite positions feel unjustly treated by the same report that a neutral, unaffected majority tends to consider as well-balanced.[3] The hostile media phenomenon thus also supports the assumption that there is an active, rather than a passive, media audience that actively selects and receives media content and selectively interprets it in light of their own values and predispositions.[4] This effect is reinforced by the properties of the media content and the followers.

Researchers have found that the hostile media effect is a **situational response** that emerges from an individual's identification with a partisan group or issue.[5] This means that more involved partisans are more likely to perceive news content as hostile and are therefore subject to the hostile media effect. This leads back to group identification and **involvement with a certain group**. Yet, whether attitude extremity or **involvement with**

1 Giner-Sorolla, R., & Chaiken, S. (1994). The Causes of Hostile Media Judgements. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 30(2), 165-180.

2 Vallone, R. P., Ross, L., & Lepper, M. R. (1985). The hostile media phenomenon: Biased perception and perceptions of media bias in coverage of the Beirut massacre. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 49(3), 577–585.

3 Kimmerle, J. (n. d.). Hostile-Media Effekt. Dorsch Lexikon der Psychologie. Retrieved October 16, 2020, from https://dorsch.hogrefe.com/stichwort/hostile-media-effekt.

4 Feldman, L. (2012, April 24). Hostile Media Effect. Oxford Bibliographies. Your Best Research Starts Here. Oxford University Press. Retrieved October 16, 2020, from https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199756841/obo-9780199756841-0079.xml.

5 Reid, S. A. (2012). A Self-Categorization Explanation for the Hostile Media Effect. Journal of Communication, 62, 381-399.

an issue are also factors that explain the occurrence of the hostile media effect has not been sufficiently examined.[6] We have already learned about the role of involvement in information processing, but research still has some way to go to clearly specify which type of involvement exactly predicts the hostile media effect.

In order to explore perceptions of media bias with stimulus materials and partisan groups, in the 1980s, researchers conducted a study[7] during the Beirut Massacre. The aim was to study the responses of pro-Arab and pro-Israeli observers to a specific, fairly extensive, and highly engrossing sample of media coverage. The partisans' perceptions and evaluations of the media presentations as well as how they differed amongst each other were interesting. The students were asked to count the amount of pro- and anti-Israeli and pro- and anti-Palestinian references. Both sides found that the media was biased against their own side: pro-Israeli students counted more anti-Israeli references and fewer pro-Israeli references than the students who favored the Palestinians, and vice versa.

Finally, studies have revealed that the occurrence of the hostile media effect is related to the perceived reach of an information source or a media outlet. Information that is scattered through the media with a large reach and which thereby exerts a broad influence on public opinion generates less favourable perceptions and is more likely to be classified as hostile.
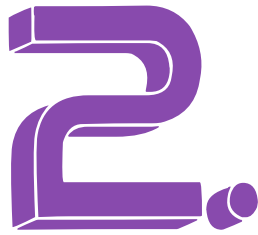
❯❯ The hostile media effect

The communication environment has changed drastically in the past decades. We have experienced a digital revolution which sparked a **growth of partisan and so-called "alternative" media and selective exposure to media content** on the part of the audience.[8] In the USA, there is strong evidence of increased affective polarization among political partisans, which is encouraged by the growth of critical cable news programs and websites. This is because when people do not see their opinions, positions, or thoughts represented by the media, the hostile media effect is easily created. In the USA, for instance, the hostile media effect is fostered by a polarized media landscape in which CNN represents a more liberal worldview, while Fox News represents conservative opinions. People will choose one or the other depending on which broadcaster best represents their own opinions. This leads to a consumption of one-sided and biased media content. As a result, in the long term, this leads to the assumption – which is a common misconception – that the medium one has chosen is objective. Actual neutral and objective information is then believed to be distorted. Partisans experiencing hostile media perceptions – who are often involved in right-wing movements – believe their opinions are not adequately or not at all represented by the media. Consequently, they might go as far as to **deny the existence of an existing democratic media landscape altogeth-**

6 Kim, K. (2018). The Hostile Media Phenomenon: Testing the Effect of News Framing on Perceptions of Media Bias. Communication Research Reports, 36(1), 35-44.

7 Perloff, R. M. (2015). A Three-Decade Retrospective on the Hostile Media Effect. Mass Communication and Society, 18, 701-729.

8 Arlt, D., Dalmus, C., & Metag, J. (2019). Direct and Indirect Effects of Involvement on Hostile Media Perceptions in the Context of the Refugee Crisis in Germany and Switzerland. Mass Communication and Society, 22, 171-195.

er. This misperception can also lead to people accusing the media of reporting inaccurately or lying, which incites fake news debates. Therefore, partisans might resort to niche, "alternative" media outlets to deliberately seek out and receive a supportive media repertoire that matches their own opinions. This holds the risk of creating echo chambers, where radical groups raise their voices and share their ideas on the internet even more when politics and the mainstream media are not representing those ideas.

◇　To find out more about cognitive biases and radicalisation, follow PRECOBIAS's free online course on *www.precobias.eu*.

2.

LESSON PLAN

Learning outcomes

At the end of this lesson, the students will be able to:

❯ Understand the hostile media effect.

❯ Spot and identify the effect in real-life examples on their own.

❯ Understand the connection between the effect and extremist propaganda.

Structure of the lesson and instructions

Suggested duration: two to four classes, depending on whether you do all the exercises or not.

2.1.

🕐 60-90 min

Exploring the hostile media effect

Activity 1

The first activity serves as a simulation where the hostile media effect could occur and (some) students could experience the effect themselves. The students will read an excerpt from an article on a controversial issue – complete legalization of all drugs – where we can assume some could have strong opinions about the subject. Therefore, two preconditions of the hostile media effect are ensured: it's a controversial topic with a polarized audience, and we have the context of mass media (Huffpost, formerly known as The Huffington Post, American media).

Before reading the excerpt, first ask the students what their stance regarding the complete legalization of all drugs is.
Some of them might strongly agree with it, some of them might disagree with legalization, some might not have a clear stance or not have any opinion about it. Ideally, let the students sit together according to their opinions – so that throughout the activity you would know which opinion they held at the beginning. This allows you to see whether the hostile media effect occurred or not. The effect might lead to those who hold pro-legalization views thinking the article is biased towards the opposite position and vice-versa, those who hold anti-legalization views might be likely to consider the article (even slightly) as biased towards pro-legalization. Those who do not have an opinion on the subject might consider the article as rather balanced and objective.

Let the students read the excerpt of the article from HuffPost: Drug legalization[9] **(see the corresponding Worksheet at the end of the lesson plan)**.

Once finished, ask the students if they consider the article neutral or biased towards some stance.
Try to get several answers from students of all initial opinions to see whether there are any differences in the perception of the content.
If there are any students who feel the article is biased towards other stances, ask them why they think so and where they see it. Why do they feel the article is "hostile"? These can be manifold things, such as there not being the same number of pro and con arguments, the pro/con arguments taking up more space in the article, more influential personalities (such as Barack Obama) being used for the con arguments giving greater weight to them, the article ending with a pro stance meaning it leaves the reader with the feeling the right answer is legalization, and so on.
You can also ask the neutral group why they see the article as neutral and objective.

[9] https://www.huffpost.com/entry/drug-legalization-pros-cons-drug-war_n_1834417

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If all the students initially perceive the article as neutral, you can induce them by insisting and asking them if they really think the article is objective. If your class happens to unanimously agree the article is rather objective, you can congratulate them on passing an experiment on the so-called hostile media effect and you will further discuss with them what it is.

The full name of the article is indeed « Drug Legalization: Pros And Cons As To Its Viability As A Means To End The Drug War ». The title itself already gives the idea that it is a rather balanced article that summarizes both positions. Let the students fill in the title on their worksheets.

> Ask them: What type of article is it?

It is not an opinion of a journalist, but a reportage from the mentioned summit.

> Is it then skewed towards a certain position or is it neutral?

It can really be claimed that the article is objective and does not give a strict answer. It does not lean towards any particular position.

Try to summarize the main points of the bias with the students so that they figure out the idea of the bias themselves. Ask the students following questions:

> Why is it then that some people (some students in your class potentially) consider this article as unbalanced? Why do you think people can feel that an article is "hostile" towards their stance?
> What do you think is the basis of the so-called hostile media effect?
> This bias entails different groups of people. What kind of groups?
> What do these groups of people disagree on?
> What are two necessary conditions to have this bias triggered?

Someone who has a strong opinion on drug decriminalization reads an article that summarizes the pros and cons of decriminalization. This person can have a strong opinion for or against this issue. For example, it can be someone who believes the long jail times for people who have a small amount of marijuana on them for personal use are immoral; or someone who might know somebody who was a drug addict, saw how it destroyed his/her life, and is absolutely against decriminalization.

A neutral article does not take a particular stance. A reader with a strong opinion might consider it biased precisely because it does not take "his or her" stance, and that could feel as if the article does

not tell "the truth." That reader might also focus more on negative cues than on positive ones, resulting in a feeling that the article is more negatively-charged and not objective. Feeling that an objective, neutral article is hostile means that we feel it somehow does not reflect the position we believe is correct and want to be represented in the article.

Attention: we are speaking here about a neutral article, not about opinion pieces or biased articles that do lean towards a certain position. Why do we do this? If people have a strong opinion about an issue, they like to see themselves confirmed. Being confirmed is easier for the brain and it saves energy. Like any other bias, the hostile media effect relates to automatic thinking. It is triggered subconsciously and helps us create stances without us fully realizing it. It is a psychological process, not a process based on the characteristics of the news items.

This bias entails people who follow news and who have different, strongly opposing opinions on a certain controversial issue. At the end, the students should note down the definition of the effect and two important preconditions for bias to occur, i.e., it needs to be a controversial issue one has a strong opinion about and it has to be in the context of the mass media.

Optionally, if your class passed Lesson 4 on Confirmation bias, you may further ask the students:

❯ Do you recognize any similarities with confirmation bias? What are they?

It is similar to confirmation bias, but while we like to see ourselves confirmed with confirmation bias, the hostile media effect is about negative confirmation and we evaluate the article more negatively. While confirmation bias is a tendency to search for and interpret information that confirms our existing beliefs, the hostile media effect is a tendency to consider certain media coverage as biased if it's not aligned with our worldview regarding an issue we have a strong opinion about.

In the example of drug decriminalization: those who have a strong opinion about it (pro or against) might search for information that only confirms their worldview - confirmation bias kicks in. If they read an objective article on the pros and cons of drug decriminalization, they might evaluate it as biased because it does not confirm their strong, existing belief.

Like with confirmation bias, humans prefer agreements over disagreements because they takes less effort for the brain and require less energy and cognitive effort. We don't like to see ourselves challenged and pushed to reconsider our positions.

Activity 2

Some students might rightly argue that some articles or some news sources indeed are not objective. This is true and to better understand the hostile media effect, there needs to be a discussion on what makes media content objective and what doesn't. For this purpose, let the students read an excerpt from Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists by the International Federation of Journalists,[10] which outlines some principles that should be intrinsic to journalism. You can work together as a whole class or you can divide the students up and assign group work according to your preference and experience with the particular class.

Ask the students questions along these lines:

❯ What do you think: Why should journalists be independent?
❯ According to the Charter, what are the preconditions essential to the independence of a journalist?
❯ How should a journalist use facts?
❯ According to the Charter, what else can lead to a biased or inaccurate perspective in journalists' work?

According to the Charter, the essential preconditions are time, resources, and means to practice. The journalist should distinguish factual information from commentary and criticism and report only in accordance with facts of which he/she knows the origin. The journalist shall not suppress essential information or falsify any document. If the journalist is in a hurry, the urgency should not be more important than the verification of facts.
A journalist may produce biased content if he/she is in a conflict of interest, serves any other interest than public interest, when he/she is getting an advantage or financial gain for producing certain content, if he/she confuses his journalism with propaganda or advertising, or if he/she misuses his/her position to engage in insider trading or market manipulation.

❯ Of course, these are standards and journalists are also humans, so some cognitive biases can influence their writing, and some journalists are less professional than others. But the hostile media effect is about something else. Look at the post by Donald Trump, the former US president[11] **(see Worksheet)**. What does he say about the media? What does he refer to when he says the media is hostile? Do you recognize the hostile media effect? Is the effect about the quality of the media or about one's perception of how they report?

Donald Trump refers to the mainstream media as the "lamestream media," claiming they ask "hostile" questions and report inaccurately about the answers. He claims all of them produce so-called "fake news," i.e., they lie in their content. He mainly claims they're hostile because he is not satisfied with how they report - he doesn't specify

in which issues or why it is they are all so hostile other than saying he dislikes the way they report. This is an example of the hostile media effect - perceiving content as biased against oneself or one's own position. It has nothing to do with the quality of the media, the journalist, or the article, it is about the biased perspective of the reader and the audience.

2. 2.

🕐 45-50 min

THE HOSTILE MEDIA EFFECT AND POPULIST OR EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS

Activity 1

The main danger of the hostile media effect is that the readers might end up considering media as biased and unrepresentative and consequently seek out information on "alternative media," which is often far-right conspiracy outlets. Let's take a look at examples where political figures help this process.

Let the students take a look at two examples of statements[12] by politicians who use the hostile media effect to their advantage (see Worksheet). Let them look at the first statement by Alice Weidel, the co-leader of Germany's far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). Discuss the meaning together or assign the work to the students in groups.

Ask the questions below:

❯ What is Alice Weidel accusing the media of? Why do you think she is doing it?

The German media has uncovered that her party might have received illegal financing. She blames the media for only attempting to discredit her while giving no further explanation about what the media is asking about. This seems like she is appealing to the hostile media effect, blaming it for a lack of impartiality and a biased perspective towards her. Although the question about party financing is very valid, she misuses the opportunity to explain the nature of the donations and instead accuses the media of, essentially, hostility.

❯ Look at the second post written by a parliamentary neo-Nazi party. How does this party see the media in its country?

This neo-Nazi party claims the mainstream media is a "sell-out." It is sold to someone's interest and one can't trust them because they are all biased. The party started their own newspaper that provides "the truth" to their readers.

12 Source of statement 1: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-politics-afd-idUSKCN1NL1J3

Source of image 2: https://www.facebook.com/1817519238567186/posts/2707614889557612/

❯ We saw together before that not all articles are always 100% neutral, but that the media in general strives for quality work. What impressions could the voters and followers of the afore-mentioned political figures get? What are the dangers of such rhetoric?

Do you recall the "filter bubbles" we discussed with confirmation bias?
According to Cambridge dictionary, a "filter bubble" is "a situation in which someone only hears or sees news and information that supports what they already believe and like, especially a situation created on the internet as a result of algorithms (= sets of rules) that choose the results of someone's searches."[13]
How can these political statements and the hostile media effect re-inforce different "filter bubbles?"

Both political figures allude that the media is hostile or generates fake news, doesn't tell the truth, and that it is biased. Such per-suasive comments by political figures can reinforce the perceptions among the audience and make them switch to other alternative sources of news that feel more representative. In the Slovak case, the presented alternative is a neo-Nazi newspaper printed by the party itself. This way, people get alienated from the mainstream discourse and can get trapped in their own "filter bubbles" of infor-mation, being confronted only with their own opinions.

Activity 2

Together, make a list of advice for someone who wants to avoid the hostile media effect. You can start by asking the students to work and reflect individually for several minutes, and then proceed to make a group list together.

If we fall into the hostile media effect, we are unable to critically reflect on why we regard a report as hostile.
I will ask myself why I feel it's hostile and biased. If I perceive the report to be hostile, I will approach it like a researcher and try to identify the arguments on both sides and weigh them against each other.
Also looking into what genre of media content I am confronted with should help in my assessment of whether a media outlet is truly biased, as opinion pieces don't have the same claims of being ob-jective and balanced as traditional reports.

>> Worksheets

1. EXPLORING THE HOSTILE MEDIA EFFECT

Activity 1

Read the following excerpt from a news article about the legalization of drugs:

Huffpost: Drug Legalization:

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Drug legalization is increasingly being presented as the only remaining viable solution to a "failed" war on drugs. In April — at the Sixth Summit of the Americas in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia — the legalization question played a key and controversial role as 33 heads of state gathered to discuss issues affecting the region. Several Latin American leaders proposed legalization or regulated drug markets as strategies to end the drug cartel-related violence spreading across their homelands. The United States, however, remained firmly opposed to legalization — citing risks of increased corruption and the potential loss of civic order.

"First, decriminalize possession of small amounts of any drug for personal use. That will have little impact on overall demand for illicit drugs, but it will significantly reduce the arrest and incarceration of millions of people worldwide, most of whom are poor and often members of vulnerable minority groups. It will also cut down on low-level corruption by police," said Ethan Nadelmann from the Drug Policy Alliance.

A 2010 Cato Institute study found: "The report concludes that drug legalization would reduce government expenditure about $41.3 billion annually. Legalization would also generate tax revenue of roughly $46.7 billion annually if drugs were taxed at rates comparable to those on alcohol and tobacco."

Gil Kerlikowske, the director of the ONDCP, adds: "The tax revenue collected from alcohol pales in comparison to the costs associated with it. Federal excise taxes collected on alcohol in 2007 totalled around $9 billion; states collected around $5.5 billion. Taken together, this is less than 10 percent of the over $185 billion in alcohol-related costs from health care, lost productivity, and criminal justice. Tobacco also does not carry its economic weight when we tax it; each year we spend more than $200 billion on its social costs and collect only about $25 billion in taxes."

Some countries (Spain and the Netherlands) have been moving towards decriminaliza-

tion since the 1970s with the result that their drug use rates are lower than in the United States. Though the Drug Enforcement Administration claims that "for example, when the Netherlands liberalized their drug laws allowing the public sale of marijuana, they saw marijuana use among 18-25 years olds double, and the heroin addiction levels triple. They have since reversed this trend and have begun implementing tighter drug controls. Indeed, today over 70 percent of Dutch municipalities have local zero-tolerance laws. Similarly, when the United Kingdom relaxed their drug laws to allow physicians to prescribe heroin to certain classes of addicts, they saw an entirely new class of youthful users emerge. According to social scientist James Q. Wilson, the British Government's experiment with controlled heroin distribution resulted in a minimum of a 30-fold increase in the number of addicts in 10 years."

Jorge Castañeda, the Former Foreign Minister of Mexico, says "[Legalization] does not take away everything [from the cartels], but it would reduce it. A large part of the extraordinary profits of drug lords come from the illegal nature of their business. If you remove the illegal nature, profits will drop. When profits drop, inevitably the violence will also decrease." Viridiana Rios, a Harvard Kennedy School doctoral fellow, adds: "What the legalization debate has missed is that it won't be easy for ex-criminals to find a legal job, and that this may increase other criminal activities that hurt Latin American citizens more directly...Indeed, it is quite plausible that legalization would cause newly unemployed criminals to engage in kidnapping, extortion, robbery, and other forms of local crime. A criminal outburst may be the unintended consequence of legalization."

According to Peter Moskos from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice, "legalization does not mean giving up. It means regulation and control...But we can't regulate what we prohibit, and drugs are too dangerous to remain unregulated." There is no guarantee that the Federal Drug Agency in the USA would be able to regulate newly legalized drugs. The agency holds limited power to control alcohol and tobacco.

President Obama has acknowledged the United State's role in the drug war. "We can't look at the issue of supply in Latin America without also looking at the issue of demand in the United States." Obama opposes legalization, opting instead to fight the demand in the U.S. through education and treatment for addicts. Caught in the middle of the drug trade's flow from South America to the United States, Guatemala's homicide rate of 41 murders per 100,000 people has been attributed to the drug cartels by President Perez Molina. The violence in the country has prompted Perez Molina to advocate for legalization. "What I have done is put the issue back on the table," Perez Molina told CNN en Español. "I think it is important for us to have other alternatives. ... We have to talk about decriminalization of the production, the transit and, of course, the consumption."

First, fill in the full title of the article above the text.

What type of article is it?

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Is the article neutral or is it biased towards a certain stance?

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> ❯ Why is it then that some people consider this article as unbalanced? Why do you think people can feel that an article is "hostile" towards their stance?
> ❯ What do you think the basis of the so-called hostile media effect is?
> ❯ This bias entails different groups of people. What kind of groups?
> ❯ What do these groups of people disagree on?
> ❯ What are two necessary conditions to have this bias triggered?

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Write down the definition of the hostile media effect and two important preconditions for it to occur:

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❯ What are the similarities between the hostile media effect and confirmation bias?

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Activity 2

Read the following excerpt from a news article about the legalization of drugs:

**Excerpt
Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists[14]**

International
Federation
of Journalists

Preamble

The right of everyone to have access to information and ideas, reiterated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, underpins the journalist's mission. The journalist's responsibility towards the public takes precedence over any other responsibility, in particular towards their employers and public authorities. Journalism is a profession, which requires time, resources, and the means to practice – all of which are essential to its independence. This international declaration specifies the guidelines of conduct for journalists in the research, editing, transmission, dissemination, and commentary of news and information, and in the description of events, in any media whatsoever.

1 Respect for the facts and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalist.
2 In pursuance of this duty, the journalist shall at all times defend the principles of freedom in the honest collection and publication of news, and of the right of fair comment and criticism. He/she will make sure to clearly distinguish factual information from commentary and criticism.
3 The journalist shall report only in accordance with facts of which he/she knows the origin. The journalist shall not suppress essential information or falsify any document. He/she will be careful to reproduce faithfully statements and other material that non-public persons publish in social media.
5 The notion of urgency or immediacy in the dissemination of information shall not take precedence over the verification of facts, sources, and/or the offer of a reply.

14 https://www.ifj.org/who/rules-and-policy/global-charter-of-ethics-for-journalists.html

13   The journalist shall not use the freedom of the press to serve any other interest and shall refrain from receiving any unfair advantage or personal gain because of the dissemination or non-dissemination of information. He/she will avoid - or put an end to - any situation that could lead him/her to a conflict of interest in the exercise of his/her profession. He/she will avoid any confusion between his/her activity and that of advertising or propaganda. He/she will refrain from any form of insider trading and market manipulation.

➤   Should journalists be objective?
➤   According to the Charter, what are the preconditions essential to the independence of a journalist?
➤   How should a journalist use facts?
➤   According to the Charter, what else can lead to a biased or inaccurate perspective in a journalist's work?

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Donald J. Trump ✔
@realDonaldTrump

What is the purpose of having White House News Conferences when the Lamestream Media asks nothing but hostile questions, & then refuses to report the truth or facts accurately. They get record ratings, & the American people get nothing but Fake News. Not worth the time & effort!

8:01 AM · Apr 26, 2020 · Twitter for iPhone

53.4K Retweets   244.2K Likes

Text in the post:
"What is the purpose of having White House News Conferences when the Lamestream Media asks nothing but hostile questions, & then refuses to report the truth or facts accurately. They get record ratings & the American people get nothing but Fake News. Not worth the time & effort!"

❯ What does Donald Trump say about the media? What does he refer to when he says the media is hostile? Do you recognize the hostile media effect? Is the effect about the quality of the media or about one's perception of how it reports?

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2. THE HOSTILE MEDIA EFFECT AND POPULIST OR EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS

Activity 1

Take a look at the following social media posts:

Statement 1
Alice Weidel, a co-leader of Germany's far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), talks to the media, which investigated the allegations that her local AfD party had received 130,000 Euros from a Swiss firm in 2017 and later 150,000 Euros from a Dutch foundation. Donations from non-German citizens living in non-EU countries such as Switzerland are illegal in Germany, and all gifts of more than 50,000 Euros must be declared in a parliamentary register - something the AfD did not do for either the Swiss or the Dutch donations. Reacting to the accusations, Alice Weidel says:
"The accusations made against me regarding apparently illegal party donations are known to me only from the media. They lack any basis in fact and are an attempt to discredit me personally and politically." She gives no further comment as to the nature of the donations.

Statement 2

Marian Kotleba - kandidát na prezidenta Slovenskej republiky
26 August 2020 ·

Nočná informačná vojna je v Púchove opäť v plnom prúde. Noviny Ľudovej strany Naše Slovensko - Noviny v ktorých sa dozviete pravdu, nie tú, ktorú vám podsúvajú zapredané médiá😉

Text in this post:
"A new information war is here again in [the city of] Púchov. The Newspaper of the People's Party called Our Slovakia – the news where you find the real truth, not the one you are served by the sell-out media   "
(The People's Party's "Our Slovakia" is a Slovak neo-Nazi party that is represented in the parliament with 8% and whose leader Marian Kotleba ran for president in 2019).

❯ Look at Statement 1. What is Alice Weidel accusing the media of? Why do you think she is doing it?

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❯ Look at Post 2 written by a parliamentary neo-Nazi party. How does this party see the media in its country?

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❯ What impressions could the voters and followers of the aforementioned political figures get? What are the dangers of such rhetoric?
❯ Do you recall the "filter bubbles" we discussed with confirmation bias?
According to Cambridge dictionary, a "filter bubble" is "a situation in which someone only hears or sees news and information that supports what they already believe and like, especially a situation created on the internet as a result of algorithms (= sets of rules) that choose the results of someone's searches."

❯ How can these political statements and the hostile media effect reinforce different "filter bubbles?"

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Activity 2

Formulate advice on how you could avoid the hostile media effect:

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Sources of the materials:

❯ The Huffpost: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/drug-legalization-pros-cons-drug-war_n_1834417
❯ Post 1: www.twitter.com
❯ Statement 1: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-politics-afd-idUSKCN1NL1J3
❯ Statement 2: https://www.facebook.com/1817519238567186/posts/2707614889557612/
❯ Definition of "filter bubble": https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/filter-bubble

Picture superiority effect

1.

Teacher's notes

❯❯ Picture superiority effect

The cognitive bias of the picture superiority effect has been demonstrated in numerous studies. The results commonly indicate that the human brain is more susceptible to the presentation of symbolic information and can more easily recall visuals compared to words. All these investigations are based on the assumption that human memory is extremely sensitive to the symbolic memory of presented event information.[1] You may well know the quote by Henrik Ibsen: "An image is worth a thousand words." It exactly describes how we process pictures faster and easier than written texts. We remember information that is textual in form and accompanied by pictures relevant to the text far better than just plain text.

If information is presented orally, in three days people are only able to retain about 10% of the information. If it is accompanied by visual support, memory recall improves up to 65%. To increase students' attention, comprehension and retention of learning content, the picture superiority effect can be employed by teachers. Using pictures instead of texts is also a long-established praxis in marketing. The important aspect is that bias is not triggered for just any image; it has to be an image that relates to the content, reinforcing the message from the content. Moreover, the more graphic tools are used and the audience is targeted, the more the picture superiority effect is reinforced. This results in more people viewing certain imagery associated with a certain topic.

There are several explanations why this bias exists. Some scientists argue it is because of the so-called dual coding theory.[2] This theory stipulates that images have advantages over texts because they are coded dually – they convey verbal and image code. This is also how memory is encoded - either verbally or through in imagery. The sensory semantic theory[3] stipulates that pictures have two encoded advantages over words. Firstly, pictures are perceptually more distinct from each other than words, and are therefore encoded more uniquely in our memory. Secondly, they convey meaning more directly than words.

[1] Yuille, J. C. (Ed.). (1983). Imagery, Memory and Cognition. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

[2] Rigby-Seilkop, M. C. (2019). The Picture Superiority Effect on Encoding and Reminding. Florida State University Libraries.

[3] Childers, T. L., & Houston, M. J. (1984). Conditions for a Picture-Superiority Effect on Consumer Memory. Journal of Consumer Research, 11(2), 643-654.

The preference for pictures over textual information sounds, of course, intuitive, but facts and figures support this claim. Our brain only needs 1/10 of a second to understand an image. Reading 200-250 words takes an average of 60 seconds. According to studies, people remember visual information 6x better than information they have read or heard.[4] This also translates into how social media works and how social media content gets spread across audiences. Infographics, explanatory pictures with some data, are shared 200% more often online than posts without images, and Facebook posts with images get over 3.2x more engagement (reactions) than those without images.[5]

4 Yuille, J. C. (Ed.). (1983). Imagery, Memory and Cognition. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

5 idem

» Picture superiority bias and extremist propaganda

Grasping the meaning of a picture is faster and more engaging for the brain than written text. This technique is widespread, and populist and extremist groups are no exception to the rule. They use images to get their messages across, be it in subtle ways that only hint at or bring up some coded messaging, or with shocking, negative images to illustrate their ideology or propaganda. Extremist groups master social media, where the use of images is often key for success, and they use cartoons, infographics, memes and other visual tools to convey messages. In the lesson on deliberative vs. automatic thinking, we described the three constructs extremists use in their propaganda (see Lesson 1). Pictures can be used to accompany, enhance and visualize the text on crisis constructs, such as portraying victims, martyrs and suffering. They are also used to visualize solutions construct, a topic we tackle in part 2.2.5 of this lesson by discussing ISIS propaganda. The images catch our attention, and we process them automatically, instantly. The emotions created can motivate an individual to action - to seek vengeance for victims or to mobilize for the extremist group's cause.

6 Baugut, P., & Neumann, K. (2020). Online News Media and Propaganda Influence on Radicalized Individuals: Findings from Interviews with Islamist Prisoners and Former Islamists. New Media & Society, 22(8), 1437-1461.

According to a study that investigated the effects of online propaganda and news media on Islamists, the chosen portrayals (pictures) influenced Islamists' rejection of non-Muslims and the Western world in addition to increasing their willingness to employ violent measures. This was evident, for example, when pictures of Muslim war victims were presented to Islamists ; it increased their willingness to use violence. Interestingly, the choice of images matters greatly. The willingness to engage in violence remained among Islamists when they were presented with pictures depicting male victims of terror. But when presented with women and children being victims of terror, even radical jihadists were questioning the use of violence as a justified means of revenge.[6] Therefore, the use of pictures matters greatly, and it can both increase and decrease radicalization.

◇ To find out more about cognitive biases and radicalisation, follow PRECOBIAS's free online course on *www.precobias.eu*.

2.

LESSON PLAN

Learning outcomes

At the end of this lesson, the students will be able to:

❯ Understand the picture superiority effect.

❯ Spot and identify the bias in real life examples on their own.

❯ Understand the connection between the bias and extremist propaganda.

Structure of the lesson and instructions

Suggested duration: : up to three 45-50-minute classes, depending whether you do all the exercises or not.

It is important to repeat here that each and every exercise is about studying and understanding the picture superiority effect, not political events or issues as such. It is, of course, important to explain the background of the political situation in individual exercises. We encourage you to explain this to students in a way that zooms out from political issues and focuses more on how bias can get triggered in different situations, regardless of the topic.

If a discussion arises in the class, feel free to talk about the feelings of justice or injustice. It is important for students to understand that political events are rarely black and white or good versus evil. When speaking of the Iraq War and the subsequent rise of ISIS, inhuman acts were committed by the coalition forces in the so-called war on terror and also by Islamist terrorists. The sense of injustice and the suffering of the people involved was and is real. Unless justice is served and peace is established, people could be attracted to the idea of revenge. The sense of injustice against Iraqis has been greatly exploited by ISIS for all the wrong, brutal and unjustifiable ends. The use of violence outside legal limits is never justified, and there should always be legal ways to judge actions and responsible individuals.

2.1.

⏱ 5 min

WARM-UP

Activity 1

In the short warm-up exercise, the students will gain a basic understanding of how the picture superiority effect works with an easy example with textual versus visually coded information presented. Show the students two examples[7] **(see the corresponding worksheet at the end of the lesson plan).** There are two ways of showing the same content. Ask the students which explanation is easier for them to grasp: option a) or option b)?

Explain to the students that this is an easy example of the picture superiority effect, or an effect by which the brain gives preference to visual information. It is because pictures are more distinct for the brain than only words, and thus images are also easier to recall. The information conveyed by a picture is grasped much faster, so the picture superiority effect is one more example of automatic thinking biases that our brains developed to help with information processing (see Lesson 1 about automatic thinking).

[7] Source of image 1 : https://www.britannica.com/science/hydrogen

Source of image 2: https://rnrachicago.org/covid-19-update-new-cdc-guidance-deciding-to-go-out/

Source of Image 3: https://www.monega.boleyntrust.org/news/?pid=6&nid=8

2.2.

⏱ 15-20 min

PICTURE SUPERIORITY EFFECT AND CODED MESSAGING IN ADVERTISING

Print and distribute the worksheet or show on screen the examples of advertisements[8] **(see Worksheet)**. Ask students to write

down in the column what the characteristics of the product being sold are, and in the second column, which messages and emotions are conveyed by the picture. Discuss some of the responses they give.

The answers may look as follows:

	Characteristics of the product sold	Message conveyed by the picture
1.	(e-)cigarette Unhealthy, damaging	You're only cool when you smoke. Smoking is an integral part of having fun at the party. Smoking adds an edge to your style. Good-looking girls smoke.
2.	Coca-cola Unhealthy in big amount, too sweet, packaged in plastic bottles that are uselessly damaging to the environment	There is no Christmas without Coke. Coke has to be on the Christmas table, the red color of Christmas and the red color of Coke is one Christmas only starts when Coke arrives. Even Santa drinks Coke, so should you this Christmas.
3.	Bottled water Normal non-mineral water like tap water, packaged in plastic bottles that are uselessly damaging to the environment	Although it's bottled water, the picture conveys an image of absolute purity, as if this water was environmentally-friendly and conscious, bringing to the customer a piece of unscathed paradise.

Ask the students:

❯   How do you think the picture superiority effect is at work in the advertisements?

Essentially, in advertisements, it is easy to spot how images convey important messages that easily get ingrained in peoples' memory recall. No matter the characteristics of the product sold, it is the image used with the picture that conveys the important message. The image catches the viewer's attention. This is where marketing draws heavily on the picture superiority effect. We have here more or less useless bottled water at best, or products damaging to health (such as smoking), but the pictures focus on positive vibes and aspects, thus giving people the feeling that this product means much more than it does in reality.

2.3.

🕐 45-50 min

THE PICTURE SUPERIORITY EFFECT ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND IN THE NEWS

Activity 1

Let's start with some facts about how we can spot the picture superiority effect on social media.

Let your students take a few guesses, then tell them the figures:

How much time does our brain need to understand an image?	1/10 of a second
How much time on average does it take to read 200-250 words?	1 minute
How frequently are infographics shared on Facebook compared to the plain explanatory text (status)?	3x
How much more engagement – meaning reactions, likes, shares etc. – get posts with images than posts without images on Facebook?	3.2x
Final easy question: why is Instagram so popular?	Because it's based on images.

As pictures are faster and easier for the brain to grasp, they are also way more successful on social media. Images are the basis of Instagram. Facebook for example advises to limit how much text businesses use in the pictures if they want their Facebook advertisement to be successful. The text in the picture should take less than 20% of the picture. Such images perform better, in terms that they are more likeable, shareable.[9] Success of pictures and infographics on Facebook and Instagram, or infographics over textual information alone (statuses), that all are due to picture superiority effect.

[9] https://www.facebook.com/business/help/980593475366490?id=1240182842783684

Activity 2

Print and distribute the worksheet or show on screen the examples of conspiracy theories, namely that climate change is a hoax and that vaccines cause autism and other dangerous diseases **(see Worksheet)**. These pictures have been selected to reinforce the textual information and trigger an emotional response in the target audience.

Ask the students following questions:

❯   What does image 1 suggest?
❯   Who is targeted with Image 2, and what message does the image convey?
❯   In both cases, which element triggers a more intense response, the text or the accompanying picture?

Image 1 suggests the difference in color, i.e., the color red being used in 2019 to outline the high summer temperatures in Germany. This may create a sense of alert, danger or burning, whereas the weather forecast in 2009 did not use the same red alert color for temperatures that rose even higher than 30. It may insinuate that higher temperatures were normal, and people are being stressed and scared by some made-up claims on climate change.
Image 2 targets parents of young children. The textual information stipulates a claim to which it gives no evidence, but uses an image that triggers a strong emotional response, depicting a small, crying baby being threatened and attacked by multiple doses of vaccines. The image imprints on parents an image of suffering, pain and some bad things happening to their children with vaccines.

In both cases, the images are much more important than the text. The images are there to trigger automatic thinking and automatic associations, and when an emotional response is triggered, people are much less likely to rationalize the meaning or to be persuaded by facts.

Activity 3

The third activity focuses on how migration is depicted in the news. Show students a generic example of negative imagery of immigrants used in the media[11] **(see Worksheet)**. Tell the students this example was taken from a real media article.

❯   Ask them what they think was the accompanying title?

Source of image 1:
https://www.blick.ch/politik/trotz-viel-spott-koeppel-verteidigt-seinen-manipulation-tweet-aufgeregte-rote-glutofen-farben-id15395110.html

Source of image 2:
https://www.sott.net/article/302965- Anti-vaxxers-want-to-sidestep-immunization-laws-Start-your-own-religion

[11] Source of image:
https://www.foxnews.com/world/the-latest-90-migrants-feared-drowned-off-libyan-coast

Let some of the students read the titles they came up with out loud. Then reveal to them that this particular image accompanied an article from Fox News in the American media with the title **"90 migrants feared drowned off Libyan coast."**
Ask the students whether they think the picture appropriately depicts what the title of the article suggests.

Let's look at some other examples of imagery related to migration. Print or show students three images[12] **(see Worksheet)** of some other examples of accompanying pictures to news on migration (they can work in groups or as a whole class, depending on your preference, your class and your experience with them). To provide context, explain to them that Image 1 is from the Council of Europe, accompanying information stating that "For the first time since the beginning of the refugee and migrant crisis in Europe, women and children on the move outnumber adult men. While in 2015 about 70% of the population on the move were men, women and children now make up nearly 60% of refugees and other migrants crossing into Europe." Image 2 depicts a meeting between the French president Emanuel Macron and Mamoudou Gassana, an immigrant from Mali without legal papers in France. He was dubbed the "French Spiderman" because he climbed four floors to save a toddler falling from a balcony in Paris in 2018. Image 3 depicts the unmoving body of a small child named Aylan, who tried to make it to Turkey with his family but died on the way.

Ask the students the following questions:

❯ Now we are not discussing the migration itself, but the use of images and the picture superiority effect. What kind of emotions do these three images trigger?
❯ Does it matter what kind of pictures the news outlets chose to accompany the articles?
❯ How is the use of pictures related to automatic thinking?

The answers will vary. In essence, these less threatening images spark less fear and an array of emotions such as compassion for women and children (Image 1), pride in the positive achievements of immigrants (Image 2), and sadness and compassion towards the danger immigrants, particularly small children, face (Image 3).
After listening to the students' opinions and sreflections, you can underline that images can create powerful emotions independently of the text they illustrate, and they are often used for this purpose in the media. This may be misleading since the images themselves may convey a different story than the actual article or news. In such situations, the cognitive bias of the picture superiority effect may be triggered and influence our perception of the issue.

This is an example of automatic thinking. An image triggers automatic associations, and the more often we see that imagery, the

stronger the associations become. It is similar to the example with the advertisements: we can develop positive associations with something as negative as smoking. With the repeated use of imagery causing negative emotions, we can shape the negative perception of a given subject or social issue without people being fully aware of it. This phenomenon is also closely related to negativity bias (see Lesson 6).

2. 4. PICTURE SUPERIORITY EFFECT IN PROPAGANDA

🕐 20 min

Activity 3

Print or show on screen the pictures - images and screenshots from the media **(see Worksheet)**. Explain to the students the background of these events. On 9/11/2001, an infamous terrorist attack was carried out against targets on US soil. The images of the burning "Twin Towers" in downtown Manhattan, New York, might be known to the students. These attacks were carried out by an Islamic extremist terrorist group called Al-Qaeda. As a response, the US government launched a so-called "war on terror," a big military response to the threat of international terrorism. In 2001, the US attacked Afghanistan, where members of Al-Qaeda were hiding. In 2003, both the US and British governments linked the Iraqi tyrannical leader Saddam Hussein to terrorism and claimed the Iraqi government possessed weapons of mass destruction and was ready to deploy them against Western countries. In 2003, a coalition of Western countries attacked Iraq, and the war lasted 14 years. The weapons of mass destruction, nevertheless, were not found in Iraq; more than 200,000 civilians lost their lives in the war in Iraq alone. The Islamic extremist group known as ISIS was a local offshoot of Al-Qaeda and was formed in 2004. At first, ISIS was weakened by the ongoing war, but it emerged amid the consequent destruction and impoverishment of the country and seized parts of Iraq and Syria. In these areas, ISIS claimed to have created a caliphate governed by strict Sharia law, where the members of ISIS committed atrocities against local populations, the Yazidi minority and LGBT people. The US, Kurds in Syria and armies of other countries further engaged in military operations to defeat ISIS, which lost a majority of its territory in 2017.

Look at how some of the Western media outlets depicted the events shortly before the war against Iraq and later the escalation of action against ISIS in 2016. You can work with the entire class or divide the students and work in groups, according to your preferences and experience with particular classes.

13 Source of image 1: https://www.newsmuseum.pt/en/na-frente/iraq-body-news

Source of image 2: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2003-01-01/palestine-iraq-and-american-strategy

Source of image 3: https://www.foliomag.com/update-least-six-staffers-let-go-news-week/

14 https://www.iraqbodycount.org/

15 https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/timeline-the-rise-spread-and-fall-the-islamic-state

Ask the students the following questions:

> Look at how pictures are used to support the reason for war in the US. Which elements are used and what do the pictures induce in the audience - American citizens?
> In particular, look at the use of Image 2, which accompanies an article in the influential news outlet called Foreign Affairs. The title is neutral: "Palestine, Iraq, and American Strategy." Is the image neutral? What message does the image convey?

In essence, the pictures induce a sense of danger, imminent threat and fear. The elements they used are basic - they depict guns and weaponry. In Image 1, we can see a large number of them, and Image 3 depicts guns directed towards Washington, the capital of the United States, in close proximity. Image 2 is particularly interesting because it accompanies a neutral title, but the picture depicts a brown-skinned hand holding a big gun. It is clear it alludes to a military or at least an armed person from Iraq or Palestine, creating the impression that the question of Iraq (and Palestine) is a question of violence, danger and threats coming from those countries. By inducing a sense of danger, the images are persuasive; they could have the effects of Americans being more accepting of a violent response and military engagement against violent-looking threats.

2. 5.

🕐 30-45 min

THE PICTURE SUPERIORITY EFFECT AND POPULIST OR EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS

Activity 1

Print out or show on screen the images[16] of ISIS propaganda. In this imagery, we will analyse how ISIS constructs solutions (see Lesson 1, part Automatic thinking and extremist propaganda) for their audiences.

Ask the students the following questions:

> In their propaganda, ISIS responds to the crisis looming over Iraqi state - violence related to the US-led attack and consequent impoverishment and chaos in the country. Look at the images 1 to 5.
> How do you think the use of these pictures might trigger the picture superiority effect? Would any type of image trigger it?
> Which specific elements are so powerful to trigger the bias - meaning the viewer will be drawn to and will recall the image?
> Can you also define what solutions do these images offer to the audience?

The answers might be as follows:

Images 1 and 2 depict violence, violent military figures, convey some fascination in violence and pride related to it and to use of weaponry. They use low-angle shot that is used to symbolize power, the depicted person gazes towards the viewer, to increase a virtual relationship between the character and the viewer. The two persons depicted are in combat mode, they look powerful, fearless, ready to fight. There are elements that clearly depict involvement, how to get involved to solve the perceived crisis - explicit images of bombs, guns, with explicit mentions of the target - London tower and British flag, with ISIS flag raised over London tower, to show "victory".
The solution construct that is proposed is explicit: vengeance, to use violence to stand up and fight injustice.

Images 3 to 5 focus on different aspects. They focus on the creation of ISIS's caliphate. Image 3 is a powerful representation of Noah-arc style ship, rising amid stormy floods. The arc symbolizes the caliphate, it looks powerful, reliable, huge, well-built, not weavering amid high waters. It gives a sense of safety.
Image 4 depicts a brown-skinned doctor, a local, probably meaning he is one of their "own", a Muslim. The image focuses on a doctor's face, giving a sense of high professionality. He is to depict a high quality health care available in Islamic state territory.
Image 5 depicts an eerie landscape, a "paradise", with beautiful serene sunset. A beautiful photograph is used, with beautiful colors, where a minaret of a mosque is in the middle of the sun, as if the sun is enlightening it, mosque as a symbolic centerpiece of not only image but also the sense of life.
These images use powerful techniques of symbols (Noah arc, minaret in the middle of the sun, a doctor) and visual elements (beautiful landscape, strong boat,..) to trigger the picture superiority effect and elicit strong emotions in viewer's mind: peace, serenity, calm, hope. It gives them a "positive" vision, solution to the crisis in the form of a caliphate. The solution is to join and live in the ISIS-led caliphate, a purported paradise on Earth for Muslims.

It wouldn't work for "any" image, it of course has to have relevance to the topic, but also to give some powerful visual representations that will draw the attention of the viewer.
Finally, it is important here to mention to students that picture superiority effect matters in all environments. It is another example of automatic thinking, where the brain makes fast conclusions based on association it has when quickly grasping the picture. We saw how they also helped mobilize for ISIS.

16 Source of image 1:
https://www.daily-mail.co.uk/news/article-5123763/ISIS-threaten-terror-attack-London-propaganda-poster.html

Source of image 2:
https://www.reddit.com/r/PropagandaPosters/comments/95pl9c/isis_propaganda_poster_syria_2015/

Source of image 3:
https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/6231

Source of image 4:
idem

Source of image 5:
https://twitter.com/p_vanostaeyen/status/1340326496414691329

> ❯ If we are faced with such pictures in real life, do we process all these different cues consciously? What's the danger of picture superiority effect triggered in political or extremist communication for the viewers?

We usually do not think about all these elements. We see them in a blink of an eye, they swiftly elicit emotions; that's why the picture superiority effect is so powerful. The danger is we process the cues automatically, so we process some information without us really knowing or noticing. We are targeted by political or other communication constantly and while the brain grasps the imagery, we might not be fully aware of it.

Finally, it is important here to mention to students that picture superiority effect matters in all environments. It is another example of automatic thinking, where the brain makes fast conclusions based on association it has when quickly grasping the picture. We saw how they also helped mobilize for ISIS.

>> Worksheets

1. WARM-UP

Activity 1

Look at the following examples and select (simply put an x next to a) or b)) which version is easier to grasp: the textual explanation or the picture?

1. Structure of atom of hydrogen:

a) What is the structure of hydrogen?

The hydrogen atom has a **nucleus** consisting of a proton bearing one unit of positive electrical charge; an electron, bearing one unit of negative electrical charge.[17]

b) What is the structure of hydrogen?

The hydrogen atom has a **nucleus** consisting of a proton bearing one unit of positive electrical charge; an electron, bearing one unit of negative electrical charge .

2. Covid rules:

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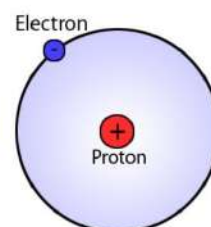
[17] Based on https://www.britannica.com/science/hydrogen

Write down the definition of picture superiority effect:

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2. PICTURE SUPERIORITY EFFECT AND CODED MESSAGING IN ADVERTISING

Activity 1

Write down in the columns below, what are characteristics of the product that is being sold and in the second column, which message and emotion is conveyed by the picture.

1.

2.

3.

	Characteristics of the product sold	Message conveyed by the picture
1.		
2.		
3.		

How do you think the picture superiority effect in the advertisement?

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3. THE PICTURE SUPERIORITY EFFECT ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND IN THE NEWS

Activity 1

Make a guess:

How much time does our brain need to understand an image?

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How much time on average does it take to read 200-250 words?

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How frequently are infographics shared on Facebook compared to the plain explanatory text?

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How much more engagement – meaning reactions, likes, shares etc.get posts with images than posts without images on Facebook?

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Why is Instagram so popular? ....

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Activity 2

Look at these two images and respond to the questions below:

Image 1

Image 2

Text in these images:
Image 1: Do you feel you're being manipulated?
Image 2: The greatest lie ever told---that vaccines are safe and effective. Autism, ADHD, Asthma, Allergies, Eczema, Seizures, Diabetes

In image 1, what does the picture suggest?

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In image 2, whom does the picture target? What message does the picture convey?

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In both cases, which element triggers a more intense response, the text or the accompanying picture?

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Activity 3

Look at the picture below.
It was taken from a real media article. What do you think the accompanying title of the article was where the picture was used?

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The real title was: ....

Once you know the real title of the article, do you think the picture appropriately depicts what the title of the article suggests?

Now take a look at these examples from the news and listen to teacher's explanation of where are they taken from:

Image 1

Image 2

Image 3

We are not now discussing the migration as such, but the use of images and the picture superiority effect.

Listen to the teacher to hear about the context of these images. What kind of emotions do these three images trigger?

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Does it matter what kind of pictures the news chose to accompany the article? How is the use of images related to automatic thinking?

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4. THE PICTURE SUPERIORITY EFFECT IN PROPAGANDA

Activity 1

Look at the following pictures:

Image 1

Image 2

Image 3

Text in these images:
Image 1: The Evening standard: 45 minutes from attack. Dossier reveals Saddam is ready to launch chemical war strike.
Image 2: Foreign Affairs: Palestine, Iraq and American Strategy.
Image 3: The Newsweek: Can ISIS take down Washington? The nation's capital is not just a top-tier target but terrorists' greatest unclaimed prize.

Political background to these images:
On 9/11/2001, an infamous terrorist attack was carried out against targets on US soil. The images of the burning "Twin Towers" in downtown Manhattan, New York, might be known to the students. These attacks were carried out by an Islamic extremist terrorist group called Al-Qaeda. As a response, the US government launched a so-called "war on terror," a big military response to the threat of international terrorism. In 2001, the US attacked Afghanistan, where members of Al-Qaeda were hiding. In 2003, both the US and British governments linked the Iraqi tyrannical leader Saddam Hussein to terrorism and claimed the Iraqi government possessed weapons of mass destruction and was ready to deploy them against Western countries. In 2003, a coalition of Western countries attacked Iraq, and the war lasted 14 years. The weapons of mass destruction, nevertheless, were not found in Iraq; more than 200,000 civilians lost their lives in the war in Iraq alone. The Islamic extremist group known as ISIS was a local offshoot of Al-Qaeda and was formed in 2004. At first, ISIS was weakened by the ongoing war, but it emerged amid the consequent destruction and impoverishment of the country and seized parts of Iraq and Syria. In these areas, ISIS claimed to have created a caliphate governed by strict Sharia law, where the members of ISIS committed atrocities against local populations, the Yazidi minority and LGBT people. The US, Kurds in Syria and armies of other countries further engaged in military operations to defeat ISIS, which lost a majority of its territory in 2017.

Look at how pictures are used to support the reason for war. Which elements are used and what do the pictures induce in the audience?

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In particular, look at the use of Image 2 accompanying the article in the influential news outlet called Foreign Affairs. The title is neutral: "Palestine, Iraq, and American Strategy." Is the image neutral? What message does the image convey?

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5. THE PICTURE SUPERIORITY EFFECT AND POPULIST OR EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS

Activity 1

In their propaganda, ISIS responds to the crisis looming over Iraqi state - the violence related to the US-led attack and following consequences, impoverishment and chaos for the country. Look at a few examples:

Image 1

Image 2

Image 3

Image 4

Image 5

Text in these images:
Image 1: We will destroy your country, as you destroyed our country
Image 2: If death is what you offer us then know, we came to die
Image 3: Dabiq, 2nd issue: The Flood. It's either the Islamic State or the flood. [Dabiq is an ISIS English language magazine]
Image 4: Healthcare in the Khilafah [caliphate, from Dabiq magazine]
Image 5: A sunset in Wilāyat al-Baraka [ISIS' administrative district in Syria at that time], October 2, 2018

In their propaganda, ISIS responds to the crisis looming over the Iraqi state - violence related to the US-led attack and the consequent impoverishment and chaos in the country.

Look at the Images 1 to 5.

How do you think the use of these pictures might trigger the picture superiority effect? Would any type of image trigger it? Which specific elements are powerful enough to trigger the bias - meaning the viewer will be drawn to and will recall the image?
Can you also define what solutions these images offer to the audience?

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If we are faced with such pictures in real life, do we process all these different cues consciously? What's the danger of the picture superiority effect being triggered in political or extremist communication for the viewers?

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Sources of the materials:

- Structure of hydrogen based on explanation in https://www.britannica.com/science/hydrogen
- Facts on social media from https://www.socialmediatoday.com/news/7-tips-for-using-visual-content-marketing/548660/
- Facebook ad rules from https://www.facebook.com/business/help/980593475366490?id=1240182842783684
- Image 1 (Britannica) : https://www.britannica.com/science/hydrogen
- Image 2 (River North Association): https://rnrachicago.org/covid-19-update-new-cdc-guidance-deciding-to-go-out/
- Image 3 (Monega Primary School): https://www.monega.boleyntrust.org/news/?pid=6&nid=8
- Image 4 (JUUL): https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/danvergano/juul-marketing-kids-cartoon-web-sites
- Image 5 (Coca-Cola): https://www.wcrf-uk.org/informed/articles/news-public-support-junk-food-advertising-restrictions
- Image 6 (Fiji Water): https://www.truthinadvertising.org/id-tap-that/
- Image 7 (AfD): https://www.blick.ch/politik/trotz-viel-spott-koeppel-verteidigt-seinen-manipulation-tweet-aufgeregte-rote-glutofen-farben-id15395110.html
- Image 8 (Vaccine Liberation Infantry and Mobile Fleet): https://www.sott.net/article/302965-Anti-vaxxers-want-to-sidestep-immunization-laws-Start-your-own-religion
- Image 9 (The Evening Standard): https://www.newsmuseum.pt/en/na-frente/iraq-body-news
- Image 10 (The Foreign affairs): https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iraq/2003-01-01/palestine-iraq-and-american-strategy
- Image 11 (The Newsweek): https://www.foliomag.com/update-least-six-staffers-let-go-newsweek/
- Image 12 (ISIS): https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5123763/ISIS-threaten-terror-attack-London-propaganda-poster.html
- Image 13 (ISIS): https://www.reddit.com/r/PropagandaPosters/comments/95pl9c/isis_propaganda_poster_syria_2015/
- Image 14 (iSIS): https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/6231
- Image 15 (ISIS): idem
- Image 16 (ISIS): https://twitter.com/p_vanostaeyen/status/1340326496414691329

Humor bias

1.

Teacher's notes

⟫ What is humour bias?

Humor bias is part of the memory biases which are characterised by the fact that they enhance or impair the memory or that they can even alter what is remembered. Humor bias is based on the assumption that a message, image, news or information is more easily remembered than non-humorous content.[1] [2] This can be explained by the distinctiveness of humor and the increased cognitive capacity it requires to understand a joke, or emotions it causes. For these reasons people remember humorous content more easily, regardless of whether it is verbal or visual - the humor bias can be activated in verbal and written content as well as in visuals like pictures or videos. Furthermore, humorous information can affect our memory physically and emotionally, for example this can be observed through a lower heart rate, more task persistence, a better mood or reduction in stress. Humor bias thus has positive impacts on our mental health (compared to other biases we have learnt about in this toolkit, such as negativity bias). Therefore humour bias is also deliberately employed as a persuasive tool since humor can create credibility and trust, as well as an overall positive evaluation.

Humorous content which activates humour bias is widely applied in education to make it more fun and effective, in advertising to make advertisements memorable and to associate them with positive emotions and also in politics in the form of satires and jokes but also TV programmes where entertainment is mixed with discussions about topical political issues.

Although there are several studies on humour bias, there is no scientific consensus on why this phenomenon occurs, the understanding of its mechanism is still limited. According to some hypotheses, uncommon or even bizarre humorous material requires us to use a greater amount of our cognitive capacity than common non-humorous material does and that's why we remember it better; jokes or general humor are thus assumed to stand out and be more easily recollected.

[1] Schmidt S. R., *Effects of Humor on Sentence Memory*, Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition 1994, 20(4), s. 953–967 in: Bouko, C., Rieger D., Carton J., Naderer B., (2021), *Cognitive biases in the radicalization process*, Massive Open Online Course, Cluster 5 Session 3.

[2] Schmidt S. R., *The Humour Effect. Differential Processing and Privileged Retrieval*, Memory 2002, 10(2), s. 127–138 in: Bouko, C., Rieger D., Carton J., Naderer B., (2021), *Cognitive biases in the radicalization process*, Massive Open Online Course, Cluster 5 Session 3.

⏩ Humour bias and extremist groups

How can this seemingly predominantly positive bias be connected to a topic such as radicalisation? This is rooted in the specifics of humor since it creates attention and increases recall, we can see a rise in humorous content in extremist propaganda. Specifically, memes are a commonly employed form of content on social media. As *Wikipedia* defines it, a meme is an idea, behaviour, or style that spreads by means of imitation from person to person within a culture and often carries symbolic meaning representing a particular phenomenon or theme. A meme acts as a unit for carrying cultural ideas, symbols, or practices, that can be transmitted from one mind to another through writing, speech, gestures, rituals, or other imitable phenomena with a mimicked theme. An Internet meme is a type of idea, behavior, or style that is spread via the Internet, often through social media platforms and especially for humorous purposes. Memes can spread from person to person via social networks, blogs, direct email, or news sources. They may relate to various existing Internet cultures or subcultures, often created or spread on various websites. Many memes utilise popular culture, especially in image macros of other media (which sometimes can lead to issues with copyright).

Humour bias in this context helps the goals of extremists[3] in two ways: firstly, it aids memory and might help to solidify the intended message. Secondly, and this is essential, due to the humourous context, even very explicit and brutal extremist messages that might otherwise be rejected by people on the early pathway to radicalisation,[4] become more acceptable because you can "laugh it off". This increases acceptance of radical views and makes them potentially more approachable.

On the other hand, humor can also be used to counter extremist propaganda and can act as a positive example and as an effective means of non-violent resistance. In using humor, people rejected the ISIS terrorist group's violence and extremism . Further, the use of humor is also referred to as an option and a strategy for countering online radicalisation . For instance, the role of political humor as a confrontational tool against the Syrian regime during the first year of a state-wide uprising has been examined. The researchers showed that political humor acts not only as a concealed voice against dominant elites but also takes a confrontational stance and challenges a regime. Humor is thus employed during demonstrations, e.g. through street theater, but is also shared on social media. Humour in counter-messaging can be useful to help strip extremist groups of glamour and mystique, namely to undermine the popularity of extremist movements, like the Ku Klux Klan in the US. Studies have shown that counter-narrative messages arouse certain emotions in the target audience.

3 Al-Rawi A., *Anti-ISIS Humor. Cultural Resistance of Radical Ideology*, Politics, Religion & Ideology 2016, 17(1), p. 52–68. in: Bouko, C., Rieger D., Carton J., Naderer B., (2021), *Cognitive biases in the radicalization process*, Massive Open Online Course, Cluster 5 Session 3.

4 Neumann P. R., *Options and Strategies for Countering Online Radicalization in the United States*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism 2013, 36(6), s. 431–459 in: Bouko, C., Rieger D., Carton J., Naderer B., (2021), *Cognitive biases in the radicalization process*, Massive Open Online Course, Cluster 5 Session 3.

Nevertheless, the use of humor-based messaging carries clear risks and should therefore be used with great caution. Humor is not universal, hence humorous content can also indirectly relate to radicalisation. For instance, humor in political issues in news messages spread by satirists could lead to radicalisation when it is not understood appropriately or not at all. These messages tend to be provocative and could promote and incite radical views, hate speech debates or propagate fake news. Especially, when humorous messages, which intend to undermine credibility or ridicule potential recruits, are directed against extremist or terrorist leaders, this can be taken as an insult and lead to backfire effects, e.g. eliciting defiance. Humor is a very complex matter that is deeply rooted in individual culture and is very dependent on context. What we find funny is very personal. And thus humorous depictions may unfortunately cause deep fractions and conflicts, or even sometimes end in violence. One example that comes to mind is the extremist attacks on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in 2015, after the publication of satirical Mohammed cartoons as well as the more recent tragic instance in Paris in 2020, where a teacher was killed by an extremist as he had discussed the Charlie Hebdo Mohammad cartoons in his lessons as an example of the freedom of speech.

◆ To find out more about cognitive biases and radicalisation, follow PRECOBIAS's free online course on *www.precobias.eu*.

2.

LESSON PLAN

Learning outcomes

At the end of this lesson, the students will be able to:

❯ Experience and under-stand humour bias.

❯ Understand how humour can be used to reinforce prejudices.

❯ Understand how humour can be used in extremist propaganda.

Structure of the lesson and instructions

Suggested duration: three classes (45 to 50 minutes each).

2.1.

🕐 45 min

WARM-UP:
EXPERIENCING HUMOUR BIAS

Activity 1

Tell your students that during this class you will talk about what makes you laugh and discuss the question of humour. First, ask them to think about online information, news, a story, a post or a meme that has made them laugh a lot recently. Then tell them to get into pairs and take about five minutes to talk with each other about what they have chosen and what makes them laugh the most about it. Once they have talked in pairs, ask several students to share what they have discussed in pairs and, if they are willing to, to present their funny stories or pieces of information to the whole class.

Activity 2

Show the students five colour photocopies of the images you will find in the Worksheet for exactly one minute (e.g. you can set the timer in your phone). You can also divide the class into smaller groups and give a set of photocopies to each group for one minute.

For your convenience they are also copied below. Three of the images are humorous memes: (a) a political one about the seeming difference between the Republicans and Democrats in the US in their position on war, (b) a meme about the difficult year 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and rather uncertain prospects for 2021 and (c) an abstract joke and a play on words about different interpretations of the expression "air support". The fourth one is an infographic about how to avoid contracting COVID-19 virus and the fifth image is an illustrated quote from the US tennis player Serena Williams. For the purpose of this activity it is important to make sure the photocopies are of good quality so that the students can see the details and captions featured in them.

(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

(e)

Then stop showing the images. Distribute the Worksheet to the students and ask them to try, for three to five minutes, to recall the images they have just seen and to write down their topics and describe graphic elements used in them in the Worksheet. When they are finished, count with the help of the students how many of them remember which images, you can use the board to note down the results and then discuss them with the students - ask them whether they can see a tendency or a pattern in the results.

The assumption which underlies this experiment is that it is easier to recall humorous content than non-humorous one. Tell the class that in the next activity you will define the cognitive bias that is behind the experiment they have just undergone.

2.2. DEFINING HUMOUR BIAS

20 min

Activity 1

In this activity you will elicit the concept (or some of its elements) of humour bias from the students by asking them guiding questions and referring to what they have experienced in the previous activity. You can ask them the following questions:

➤ Have you noticed which of the five images were easier to remember for you? Why?
➤ What do you think the connection between humour and memory is?

Building on what the students say, further clarify the concept of humour bias (see Teacher's notes) - its definition and its effects on our memory (humorous content being more easily remembered) and mental and physical health (e.g. stress reduction and better mood, a lower heart rate) as well as possible scientific explanations of this phenomenon. Then ask the students to write down the definition of humour bias in the Worksheet.

2.3. HUMOUR AND ITS EFFECT ON ACCEPTABILITY

🕐 45 min

Activity 1

In this activity you will examine with students how humour can have an impact on what is acceptable in society and how this may reinforce stereotypes and prejudices against vulnerable groups. It is vital here to make sure that the students understand this mechanism and can apply this knowledge to examine humorous content they come across in their everyday lives.

First, distribute the Worksheet and ask the students to read the text about the effects of disparaging jokes, to discuss answers to the questions below the text in groups and to write them down. Then ask several groups to present their answers. When in doubts, you and the students can refer to particular excerpts of the text which provide the answers.

Then ask the students if they can remember a joke or a funny meme that they have seen recently and that they consider to be an example of "disparagement humour". If some students volunteer and suggest some examples, examine several of them with the whole class to see whether and whom it may disparage and how it can reinforce prejudices and discrimination against the targeted group. It is highly advisable to avoid analysing jokes which are deeply disturbing or may prove offensive to some students in your class. You can ask the students the following questions:

❯ What characteristics make it an example of disparagement humour?
You can consult the definition from the article.
❯ What social group does it target?
❯ How can it reinforce prejudice and discrimination against this group in society?

To help the students with this question you can ask more detailed questions, such as:

❯ In your opinion, is the targeted group vulnerable and still widely discriminated against? What makes you say so - how do you know? Can you give any examples?

❯ In your opinion, is the targeted group still vulnerable but the attitude in society towards it is changing - prejudice and discrimination against it is increasingly seen as unjustified and unacceptable? What makes you say so - how do you know? Can you give any examples?

From the article we know that disparagement humour can most affect the social groups towards whom the attitude is shifting. That means that prejudice and discrimination against them is changing from completely justified to completely unjustified. Disparagement humour may thus push the boundaries of what is acceptable and justify prejudice and further discrimination against these groups, for some prejudiced people.

Finally, ask the students the following question:

❯ How can we defend ourselves and other people from disparaging jokes that promote prejudice and discrimination?

The suggestions and tips might include: visibly not laughing; immediately reacting to it by explaining that this type of jokes reinforces prejudice and discrimination and is thus harmful and destructive for a given social group; setting rules that do not allow disparagement humour, for example in the classroom or in sports teams; showing publicly support for people who have been targeted by a denigrating joke; not sharing and/or dencouncing disparagement humour on social media, etc. Some women recommend challenging a sexist joke by saying that they do not understand it and asking the person who has told it to explain it to them . Apparently this seemingly innocent request effectively stops people from laughing and makes them embarrassed instead.

If the students do not come up with any examples of disparagement humour themselves, you can search for one yourself before the class and use it in the classroom. We think the safest option is to choose a joke or a meme that targets people of your nationality (e.g. jokes about Belgians, Poles, Italians, Germans, Slovaks, Britons, Hungarians, Spanish or French people, etc.) because the majority of your class will probably belong to this group (no vulnerable minority will be singled out as a target of a disparaging joke) and they may feel that the joke affects them[5] personally. It is also important not to pick jokes about one nationality that have been invented by a different nationality (e.g. jokes about Poles made by Germans) because this may strengthen animosity between the two nationalities. We do not provide examples of disparagement hu-

5 See: Reneau, A., *Women shared how they make sexist men explain their nasty jokes, and it's so satisfying*, 13 November 2019, https://www.upworthy.com/women-shared-how-they-ask-sexist-men-to-explain-inappropriate-jokes-and-its-so-satisfying

mour as part of this activity because we would not like to promote it, unwittingly, in any form.

The issues discussed in this activity may be sensitive and controversial since, as was mentioned, humour is not universal and can be used as a very subtle means to disparage and to belittle a vulnerable social group. For this reason we have focused on explaining this phenomenon and providing some tools to detect it in an article instead of directly analysing specific examples of disparagement humour. The content of this activity and the choice of analysed jokes should also be adjusted to the specificity and sensitivity of each class or group.

While discussing this topic with the students you should also emphasise that what makes denigrating jokes so hurtful is that they may convey two conflicting messages at the same time: (1) an explicitly hostile or discriminatory comment and (2) a message that it is only a joke, nothing to worry about or treat seriously. It may thus be difficult to react to the toxic message presented as a joke.

2. 4.

🕐 45 min

HUMOUR AND ITS EFFECT ON ACCEPTABILITY

Activity 1

While in the previous activity you have seen how disparagement humour can reinforce prejudices and push the boundaries of what is acceptable in society, in this activity you will explore this question further. You will learn about how humour can be used by extremist groups and movements to spread their messages in a more subtle and yet effective way.

Show the students the image of Pepe the Frog below. Ask them if they have seen it previously. If it is the case, ask them what kind of memes with it they have seen.
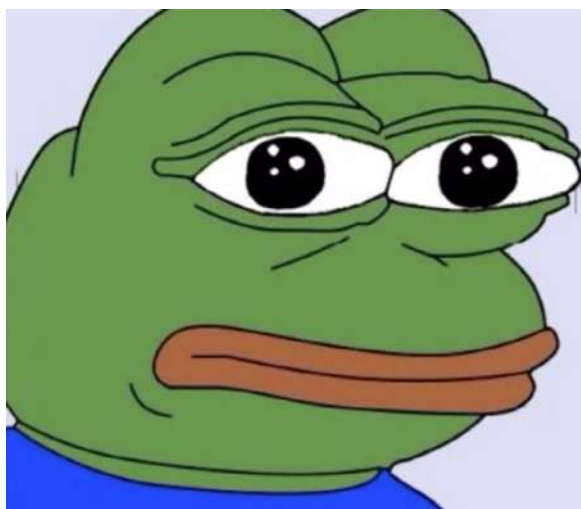
Image 1. Pepe the Frog

Tell the students that they will read a story of the Pepe the Frog meme, and see how it can be hijacked by extremist groups. Ask the students to read the text about Pepe the Frog in the Worksheet **(see Worksheet)**, individually answer the questions below the text and then discuss them in pairs:

❯ How did the image of Pepe the Frog go viral? Who and how helped popularise and spread it?
❯ Which characteristics of Pepe made it become so popular?
❯ How was the image of Pepe used by the alt-right in the US? How might humour bias be activated in that context?
❯ What was done and who did it to stop Pepe the Frog from being used in extremist content online.

After the students have had discussions about the answers to the questions above in pairs, discuss them with the whole class.

Follow-up activity or homework
If your students are interested in exploring this topic further, you can ask them to do some research at home, before the next class, and find local initiatives, websites and civil society organisations (such as for example Anti-Defamation League in the US) which seek to remove toxic, extremist content from the Internet. During the next class they can present their findings to the entire class and you can together prepare a list of helpful initiatives, contacts and websites and keep it handy in the classroom or online to consult it in the future, when needed.

>> Worksheets

1.

WARM-UP:
EXPERIENCING HUMOUR BIAS

Activity 2

Part 1

Image (a)
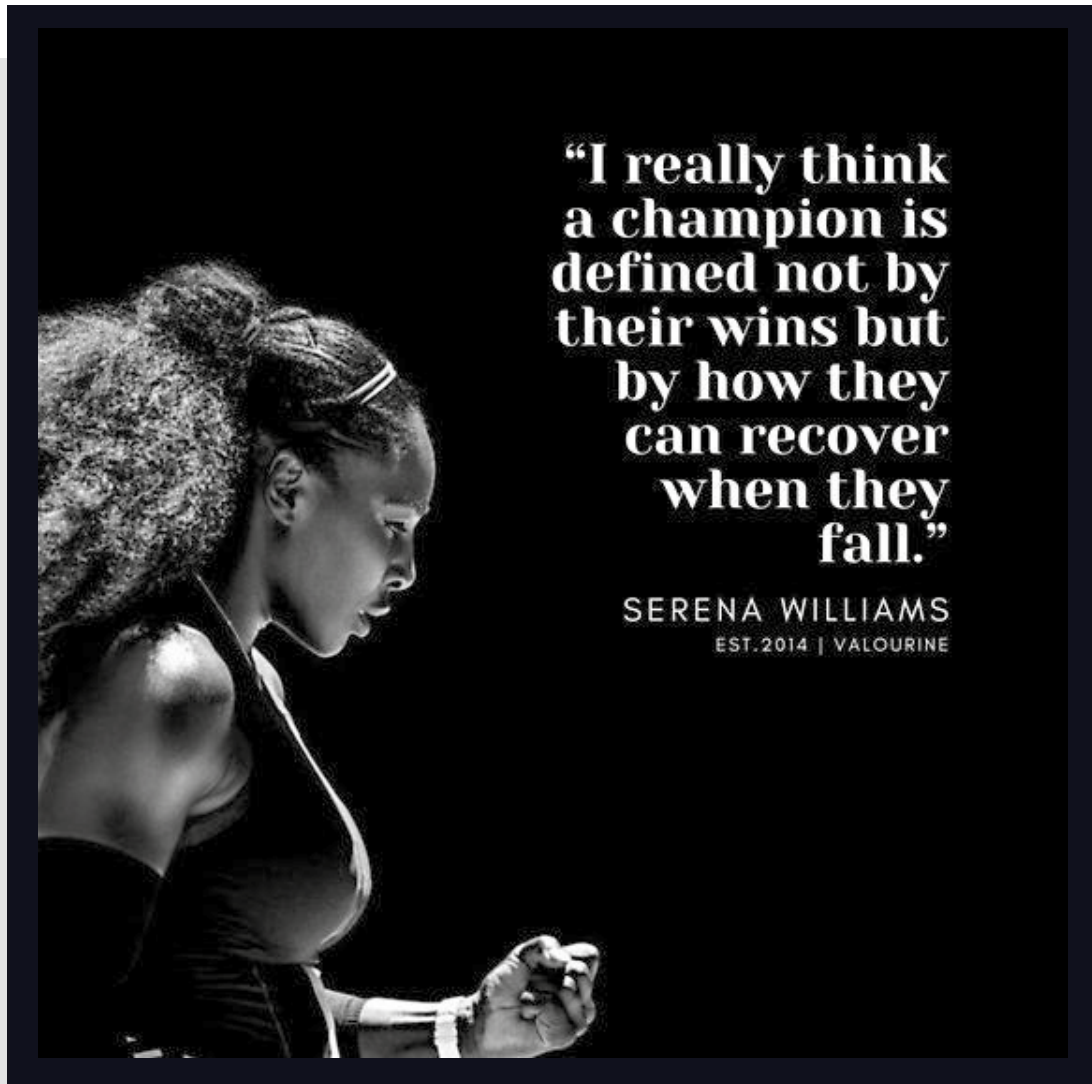
Image (b)

Image (c)
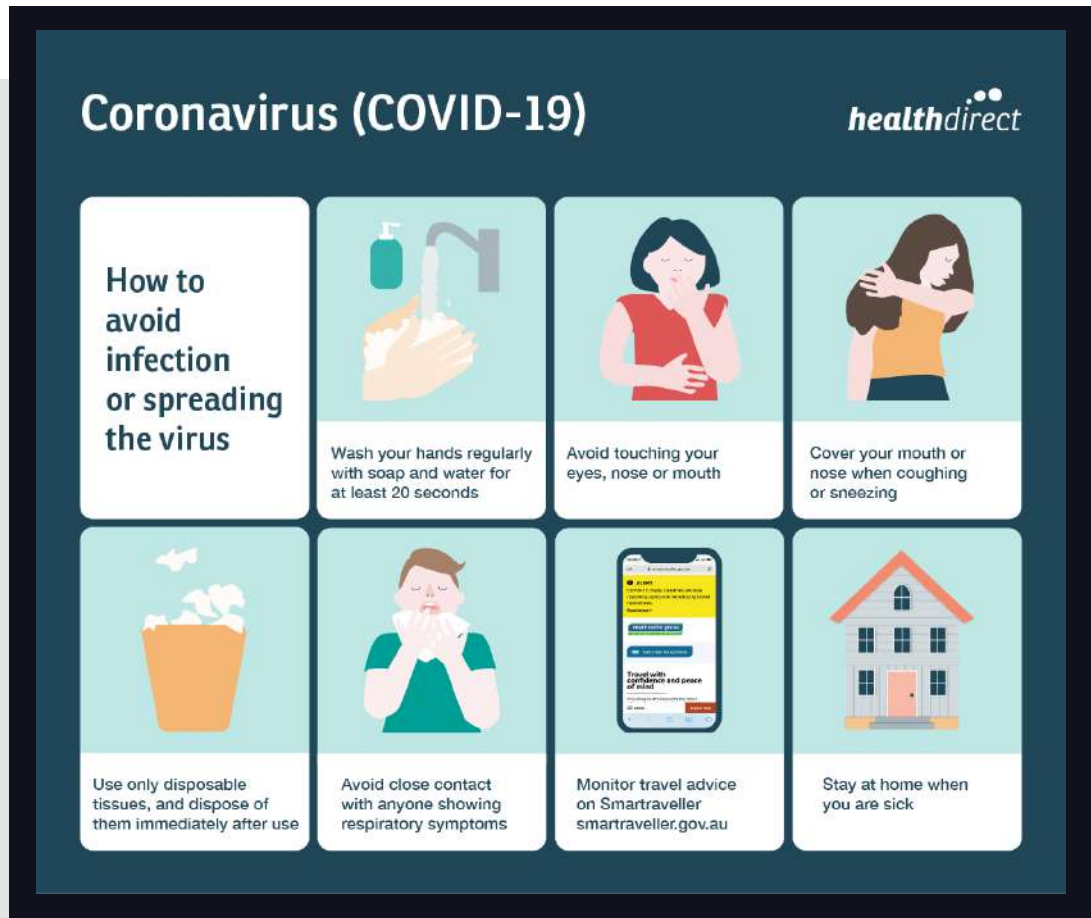
Image (d)

Image (e)

Take three to five minutes to recall the five images you have just seen. Write down their topics and describe graphic elements used in them. You do not have to describe the images in the order in which they were presented.

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Image 1

Topic: ....

Graphic elements: ....

Image 2

Topic: ....

Graphic elements: ....

Image 3

Topic: ....

Graphic elements: ....

Image 4

Topic: ....

Graphic elements: ....

Image 5

Topic: ....

Graphic elements: ....

2. DEFINING HUMOUR BIAS

Activity 2

Write down the definition of humour bias:

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....

....

3. HUMOUR AND ITS EFFECT ON ACCEPTABILITY

Activity 1

Read the article and answer the questions below the text.

Psychology behind the unfunny consequences of jokes that denigrate [6]

Disparagement humour is defined as any attempt to amuse through the denigration of a social group or its representatives. You know it as sexist or racist jokes – basically anything that makes a punchline out of a marginalized group. Disparagement humor is paradoxical: it simultaneously communicates two conflicting messages. One is an explicit hostile or prejudiced message. But it is delivered together with a second implicit message that "it doesn't count as hostility or prejudice because I didn't mean it — it's just a joke."

By disguising expressions of prejudice in a cloak of fun and frivolity, disparagement humor appears harmless and trivial. However, a large and growing body of psychology research suggests just the opposite – that disparagement humor can foster discrimination against targeted groups.

Jokes that release restraints

Most of the time prejudiced people conceal their true beliefs and attitudes because they fear others' criticism. They express prejudice only when the norms in a given context clearly make such beliefs acceptable, they need something in the immediate environment to signal that it is safe to freely express their prejudice. Disparagement humor appears to do just that by affecting the way people understand the social norms – implicit rules of acceptable conduct – in the immediate context and this finding has been confirmed by many experiments.

For instance, in studies, men higher in hostile sexism – antagonism against women – reported greater tolerance of gender harassment in the workplace when they were exposed to sexist versus neutral (nonsexist) jokes. Men higher in hostile sexism also recommended greater funding cuts to a women's organization at their university after watching sexist versus neutral comedy plays.

How did sexist humor make the sexist men in these studies feel freer to express their sexist attitudes? Imagine that the social norms about acceptable and unacceptable ways of treating women are represented by a rubber band. Everything on the inside of the rubber band is socially acceptable; everything on the outside is unacceptable. Sexist humor essentially stretched the bounds of acceptable behavior to include responses that would otherwise be considered wrong or inappropriate. So sexist men felt free to express sexcist remarks without the risk of violating social norms and facing disapproval from others. Sexist humor signaled that it's safe to express sexist attitudes.

[6] Based on: Ford T. E., Psychology behind the unfunny consequences of jokes that denigrate, The Conversation, 7 September 2016, https://theconversation.com/psychology-behind-the-unfunny-consequences-of-jokes-that-denigrate-63855

Who's the target?

In another study,[7] it was demonstrated that the prejudice-releasing effect of disparagement humor varies depending on the position in society occupied by the group which is the target of the joke. Social groups are vulnerable to different degrees depending on their overall status. For some groups, the situation is shifting and prejudice and discrimination against them is changing from completely justified to completely unjustified. But even when society as a whole is starting to accept them, many individuals still have mixed feelings.

For instance, over the past 60 years or so, the United States has seen a dramatic decline in overt and institutional racism. Public opinion polls over the same period have shown whites holding progressively less prejudiced views of minorities, particularly blacks. At the same time, however, many whites still covertly have negative associations with and feelings toward blacks – feelings they largely don't acknowledge because they conflict with their ideas about themselves being egalitarian.

Disparagement humor encourages discrimination against social groups towards whom the attitude is changing. In another study,[8] it was found that off-color jokes promoted discrimination against Muslims and gay men – which was measured in greater recommended budget cuts to a gay student organization, for instance. However, disparagement humor didn't have the same effect against two "justified prejudice" groups: terrorists and racists. Social norms are such that people didn't need to wait for jokes to justify expressions of prejudice against these groups.

In line with these findings, disparagement humor can be more or less harmful based on the social position occupied by the targeted groups. Movies, television programs or comedy clips that humorously disparage groups such as gays, Muslims or women can potentially foster discrimination and social injustice, whereas those that target groups such as racists will have little social consequence.

One might conclude that disparagement humor targeting oppressed or disadvantaged groups is destructive and thus should be censured. However, the real problem might not be with the humor itself but rather with an audience's dismissive viewpoint that "a joke is just a joke," even if disparaging. For prejudiced people, the belief that "a disparaging joke is just a joke" trivializes the mistreatment of historically oppressed social groups, such as women, gay people, racial and religious minorities and this further reinforces their prejudices.

Answer the questions:

➤ How can disparagement humor foster discrimination against the groups it targets? What is the mechanism behind this process?

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➤ What are social groups that might be the most affected by disparagement humor? How can you describe their position in society?

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7 A study conducted by Thomas E. Ford, Professor of Social Psychology at Western Carolina University, US, the author of the article on which the text is based.
8 Ibid.

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❯   How can jokes reinforce prejudices in people who are already prejudiced towards certain social groups?

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4. HUMOUR BIAS IN THE CONTEXT OF POPULIST OR EXTREMIST MOVEMENTS

Activity 1

Read the following text about Pepe the Frog and answer the questions below it. Then discuss them in a pair.

How Pepe the Frog became a hate symbol? [9]

Pepe the Frog is one of the most popular internet memes of all time. It's now considered a symbol of hate, according to the Anti-Defamation League (a US-based organisation that fights online hate and extremism), next to such symbols as the swastika and the SS Bolts. But initially, it was the main hero of a nonpolitical comic about four roommates who enjoy being lazy and playing video games. How did this change happen?
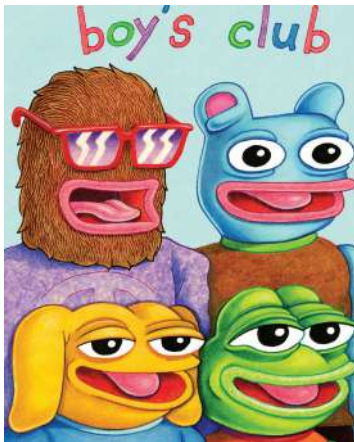
Image 1

The green frog first debuted in 2005 in the comic "Boy's Club" by Matt Furie. Then, in 2008, Pepe made his first steps to internet stardom. One of the images with Pepe from the comic was posted as a reaction image on the internet forum 4chan (an anonymous English-speaking communications channel, an imageboard, often used by the alt-right (Alternative Right).[10] And it became a trend almost instantly, more and more users began sharing Pepe on 4chan. Pepe became a versatile meme that became a template for any kind of concept one wanted to convey. It could be happy, sad or angry; it represented a range of emotions a lot of people could relate to and made people share its image on other social-media networks over the next several years. The image of Pepe in memes was also used to convey racist and extremist ideas, for example versions of the frog were created as Klan members or SS personnel. In 2015, Tumblr reported that it was the No. 1 most reblogged meme of the year.

In 2015 the US presidential candidate Donald Trump retweeted a post with an image of Pepe and this post acted as a catalyst and encouraged the alt-right to appropriate Pepe the Frog even more. In 2016 in the presidential campaign, Trump's rival candi-

[9] Based on: Echevarria G., "How this frog meme became a symbol of hope and hate", Business Insider, 8 October 2020, https://www.businessinsider.com/pepe-frog-meme-hate-symbol-hope-hong-kong-protesters-2019-10?IR=T

date Hilary Clinton referred to half of Trump supporters as deplorables and instantly a parody image featuring Pepe was created. Soon after that Clinton's campaign website denounced Pepe and called it "a symbol associated with white supremacy."

Image 2

And later in 2016, the Anti-Defamation League officially added Pepe the Frog to its database of hate symbols. In the description it wrote that "The Pepe the Frog character did not originally have racist or anti-Semitic connotations. Internet users appropriated the character and turned him into a meme, placing the frog in a variety of circumstances and saying many different things. [...] However, because so many Pepe the Frog memes are not bigoted in nature, it is important to examine use of the meme only in context. The mere fact of posting a Pepe meme does not mean that someone is racist or white supremacist. However, if the meme itself is racist or anti-Semitic in nature, or if it appears in a context containing bigoted or offensive language or symbols, then it may have been used for hateful purposes".

Image 3

Image 4

Matt Furie, the creator of Pepe, has publicly stated his dislike for Pepe's evolution towards extremism and has made efforts to take back his creation from the alt-right. In 2017, he released a one-page comic where he officially killed off the green frog. Furie has also been involved in legal disputes with two US extremists websites and this has effectively prevented them from using Pepe to promote their ideology any further.

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10 The alt-right (short for "Alternative Right") is a segment of the white supremacist movement consisting of a loose network of racists and anti-Semites who reject mainstream conservatism in favor of politics that embrace implicit or explicit racism, anti-Semitism and white supremacy. Many seek to re-inject such bigoted ideas into the conservative movement in the United States. The alt right also includes many racist users of image boards and message forums such as 4chan, 8chan and Reddit who enjoy harassing or "trolling" people who disagree with their views (source: Anti-Defamation League, https://www.adl.org/resources/glossary-terms/alt-right)

Answer the following questions:

➤ How did the image of Pepe the Frog go viral? Who and how helped popularise and spread it?

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➤ Which characteristics of Pepe made it become so popular?

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➤ How was the image of Pepe used by the alt-right in the US? How might the humour bias be activated in each of the contexts?

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➤ What was done and who did it to stop Pepe the Frog from being used in extremist content online?

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Sources of the materials:

- Images (a), (b), (c) and (e) in Activity 2. in 2.2.1: private social media.
- Image (d) in Activity 2. in 2.2.1: https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/
- Image 1 in 2.2.3.: private social media.
- Images 1, 2 in Worksheet 3: https://knowyourmeme.com/
- Image 3 Worksheet 3: Pepe the Frog meme branded a 'hate symbol, BBC, 28 September 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-37493165
- Image 4 Worksheet 3: Bramooth Yuvarajan, Pepe: The King of Memes, The Medium, 13 October 2016, https://medium.com/@bramoothyuvarajan/pepe-the-king-of-memes-8295978b7c38

Sleeper effect

1.

TEACHER'S NOTES

›› What is the sleeper effect?

This cognitive bias causes us to be able to recall, over time, the message or information we have received but to forget the source of it or the fact whether we initially deemed it reliable or not. And as we learned in the humour bias, messages that are out of the ordinary or straight out ridiculous have higher chances of sticking with us. Unreliable sources and fake news sources are likely to produce such messages because they capitalise on emotionally-charged and/or striking content, while the information of reliable, serious and factual sources might not be as exciting. This means that the efficacy of the message transported by a trustworthy source can diminish over time, whereas the efficacy of an untrustworthy source might increase.

Carl Hovland,[1] who conducted pioneering research into persuasive effects of propaganda films intended to motivate US soldiers, distinguished two main characteristics which contribute to the persuasiveness of the message received: trustworthiness and expertise of the person communicating it. Hence, if information stems from a source classified as untrustworthy, this source is believed to be potentially unfair, unqualified and biased; initially, credible communicators are more effective in their communication. The greater efficacy does not result from enhanced attention or a better understanding but from the fact that perceived credibility boosts the willingness to accept the presented arguments. However, Hovland's studies also proved that this boost diminishes over time. Thus, the source factor loses relevance over the course of time, as it is either forgotten or not as strongly connected with the message as it initially was. In consequence, we remember impactful content but we forget that we have at first considered its source as untrustworthy.

How can we counteract the sleeper effect? We should always be aware of the source of the news or story we share, in person or online, and make sure the source is trustworthy. If we cannot remember it, we can use a search engine to find it or find out if other sources confirm it. We can also get into the habit of routinely checking sources of the news on the basis of which we form our opinions, particularly if the news concerns important and controversial social and political issues.

[1] Hovland, C.I., Janis, I.L., & Kelley, H.H. (1953). Communication and Persuasion. Yale University Press.

The sleeper effect and extremism

The main danger of the sleeper effect in the context of radicalisation and extremism lies in the fact that it is quite useful for propagandists who disseminate disinformation (defined as deliberately disseminated falsehood) where sources of it can rarely be traced or are utterly unreliable. When low-credibility communicators spread their ideas and messages which, over time, gain more and more traction due to the typical implications of the sleeper effect, when propaganda messages are constantly repeated, over time recipients might forget why they have classified certain information as suspicious or untrustworthy and may instead recall the key point of the message. This is why fake news is potentially so harmful even for those who can detect it. Nowadays, especially social media can act as platforms for the propagation of disinformation or propaganda against, or in support of, certain causes of groups. Being aware of the role of the sleeper effect is thus an important step to critically assess bits of information one already "knows".[2]

Disinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories may have grave and tangible implications in real life. For instance, the attack on the Capitol in the US on 6 January 2021 was based on fake news and the resulting conspiracy theory called QAnon (for more information see Unit 2 on authority bias). Another example of how fabricated news may impact people in real life is the violence against the Muslim community of the Rohingya in Myanmar, which started in 2016 and has been relentless ever since. It was preceded by a systematic campaign of hatred on Facebook, orchestrated by the country's military. The hundreds of Myanmar military members created troll accounts, news and celebrity pages on Facebook and then flooded them with incendiary comments and posts timed for peak viewership. Those accounts had 1.3 million followers in total and they became channels for distributing violent, false photos (e.g. of corpses said to be evidence of Rohingya-perpetrated massacres), false news (e.g. a false story about the rape of a Buddhist woman by a Muslim man) and inflammatory posts, often aimed at Myanmar's Muslims. [3]

According to a recent study,[4] in which researchers analysed 26,000 Twitter stories, tweeted by 3 million users, over more than 10 years (from 2006 to 2017), false stories are much more likely to go viral than real stories. A false story reaches 1,500 people six times quicker, on average, than a true story does. And while false stories outperform the truth on every subject - including business, terrorism and war, science and technology, and entertainment - fake news about politics is regularly the most popular. Even when the researchers controlled for every difference between the accounts originating rumours, for example whether that person had more followers or was verified, falsehoods were still 70 percent more likely to get retweeted than accurate news. Importantly, the researchers found fake news is shared so eagerly by humans, not by

2 Bouko, C., Rieger D., Carton J., Naderer B.,Massive Open Online Course "Cognitive biases in the radicalization process", Cluster 5 Session 3, 2021

3 Mozur P., "A Genocide Incited on Facebook, With Posts From Myanmar's Military", New York Times, 15 October 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/15/technology/myanmar-facebook-genocide.html

4 Vosoughi S., Roy D., Aral S., "The spread of true and false news online", Science, 9 March 2018, https://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146

bots, mainly because of two reasons: firstly, it seems more "novel" than real news and secondly, fake news stirs up much more emotion than the average news story. Tweeted fake news tended to elicit words associated with surprise and disgust, while accurate news tweeted included words associated with sadness and trust. [5]

Fake news has four main characteristics: [6]

> It is developed with an intention to misinform its recipients. It can take on many forms (articles, reports, posts, tweets, videos, podcasts, memes etc.), pretending to be genuine news or even scientific content. It can be disseminated with the intention to trick people or unintentionally by people who believe it is real.
> Fake news is disseminated not only by the internet-based media but also by the traditional media (TV, radio, print press). Paradoxically, online fake news is further reinforced when it is spread by the traditional media outlets.
> Fake news is developed with the intention to harm and/or damage the reputation or image of a specific person, social group, community, institution or country etc. or to bring about political or financial benefits.
> Fake news usually uses sensationalist, provocative, exaggerated or alarming headlines in order to draw recipients' attention and to capitalise on their feelings, usually negative ones.

Fake news can be based on four types of content:

> Fabricated content (entirely false content is invented to trick recipients)
> Manipulated content (real news intentionally is distorted in order to trick recipients)
> Imposter content (false people or media outlets refer to real sources of the news or present themselves as a given media outlet)
> False context (when real news is placed in a false context).

It is also important to add that satire or parody is not fake news because it is not developed with the intention to harm people. However, it can be interpreted or disseminated by recipients as fake news.

[5] Meyer R., "The Grim Conclusions of the Largest-Ever Study of Fake News", The Atlantic, 8 March 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/03/largest-study-ever-fake-news-mit-twitter/555104/

[6] Lipiński Ł., "Krótki przewodnik po fake newsach", Press, 2018, https://www.press.pl/jak-czytac-w-erze-fake-news/artykul/55061,krotki-przewodnik-po-fake-newsach

◇ To find out more about cognitive biases and radicalisation, follow PRECOBIAS's free online course on *www.precobias.eu*.

2.

LESSON PLAN

Learning outcomes

At the end of this lesson, the students will be able to:

- Experience and understand the sleeper effect.

- Identify the main characteristics of fake news.

- Identify unreliable sources of news which may indicate fake news.

- Learn about the links between fake news and the sleeper effect.

Structure of the lesson and instructions

Suggested duration: three classes (45-50 minutes each) and another class for the final follow-up activity.

2.1.

⏱ 20 min

WARM-UP

Introduction

Over the space of two weeks, you will stage an experiment with your students in which they will experience the sleeper effect - a week after they read and discussed some news in groups, they will be asked to recall their sources (the names of the newspapers, magazines or news websites where the news was published). You will need to plan a sufficient time lapse between the two consecutive classes in order to conduct the experiment, as its success depends on the time interval.

In the Worksheet you will find two short pieces of news for this activity. One is from the UK State Broadcaster, BBC News, and the second one is from The Verge, an American technology news website operated by Vox Media, publishing news, feature stories, guidebooks, product reviews, and podcasts. One piece of news is more exciting and light-hearted, the other one more serious, devoted to an important environmental and social issue. It is assumed that both pieces of news are attractive and important enough for students to draw their attention and to encourage them to process the news (for example discuss them in a group).
Print enough copies of the two pieces of news for each of your students.

Activity

During the first class, tell your students that they will participate in an activity meant to develop their critical thinking and media literacy skills. Ask the students to read the two pieces of news, individually reflect, for five to ten minutes, on the following questions for each piece of news and note down their answers in the Worksheet:

❯ Is this piece of news interesting to you? Why, why not?
❯ Did you learn anything new from it?

Then tell the students to form groups of three people and share their answers on the questions above. Ask some of the students to impart what they have discussed with the rest of the class. Tell them you will continue working on the news in two weeks.

2.2.

⏱ 20 min

DEFINING THE SLEEPER EFFECT

Activity 1: What is the sleeper effect?

After two weeks, during the follow-up class, ask the students two questions below:

> ❯ Is this piece of news interesting to you? Why, why not?
> ❯ Did you learn anything new from it?

Ask the students to think about it for two-three minutes and write down their answers on the Worksheet. Make sure they do not look at the previous worksheet with the articles since this may scotch the experiment. Collect the worksheets and put them into two piles - those in which the students were able to recall the sources of the pieces of news (at least the source of one piece of news) and those in which students were not able to remember any sources. Count the worksheets in both groups, you can ask some students to help you with this task. Once you know how many students in the class could remember the sources of the news and for which piece of news it was easier to recall the source (the "entertaining" one or the "serious" one), present the results of the experiment to the class.

Tell the class that the experiment they took part in was intended to explore the sleeper effect. Next, write down the mixed-up key words of the definition (see Teacher's notes) of this cognitive bias on the board (or a flipchart), the key words may be as follows: FORGET / SOURCE / INFORMATION / RELIABLE SOURCE / UNRELIABLE SOURCE / REMEMBER / CONTENT / TIME. Then ask the students to develop a definition of the sleeper effect from them in groups of three and write it down on the Worksheet.

If all students remember the sources, tell them that in this experiment, some participants tend to forget the sources of the news they have read but this is only a tendency and in some groups the outcomes may be different, for example all participants can accurately recall the sources.

Activity 2: The sleeper effect in politics

Invite the students to play a guessing game - in the Worksheet they will find a multiple-choice question. Ask them to choose the answer they think is correct. The question is the following:

Three candidates stood for a presidential election, one candidate from the A party, one candidate from the B party and one candidate from the C party. During the election campaign, the candidate of the A party was the target of a media campaign based on false claims and intended to discredit her (a smear campaign), prepared by her political opponents from the party B. She was accused of accepting bribes while holding a public position in one of the local governments. How do you think this media campaign impacted the voting in the presidential election?

Choose one of the following options:

7 Kleinnijenhuis, J., van Hoof, A. M. J., & Oegema, D. (2006). Negative News and the Sleeper Effect of Distrust. Press/Politics, 11(2), 86-104 in: Bouco, C., Rieger D., Carton J., Naderer B.,Massive Open Online Course "Cognitive biases in the radicalization process", Cluster 5 Session 3, 2021

> The undecided voters initially dismissed the smear campaign as intended to discredit the candidate of the A party. Then, they voted against her for the candidate of the B party.
> The undecided voters dismissed the smear campaign as intended to discredit the candidate of the A party. Then, they voted for the attacked candidate, believing she was innocent.
> Many of the undecided voters believed the smear campaign against the candidate of the A party. They voted against this candidate for the candidate of the C party.

After they have finished, ask several of them which option they have gone for and why. After listening to a few answers from the class, distribute the second part of the worksheet with the answer and explanation to the students. The explanation is the following: There was a study done to examine negative campaigning in politics. It showed that while a political opponent was not the most trustworthy source on the other candidates' character, as they clearly have the persuasive intent of discrediting the opposite party, this kind of speech might be effective. That study revealed that negative campaigning largely affects the undecided voters, who initially dismiss the campaign as slanderous. Yet later on, due to the sleeper effect, they often retain only the memory of the message but not the source, causing them to vote against the defamed candidates. Thus, smear campaigns can pay off in some cases, particularly for undecided voters and, consequently, the sleeper effect can impact the political landscape. [7]

After the students have read the text in the second part of the worksheet, ask them whether they were correct in their predictions. The correct answer, based on the mentioned study, is (a).

Tell the students that next, you will see how the sleeper effect may be linked to disinformation on the internet.

2.3. THE SLEEPER EFFECT AND DISINFORMATION ON THE INTERNET

🕐 20 min

Activity 1: What is fake news?

Introduction
In this section, you will be exploring how the sleeper effect is linked to disinformation on the internet and how to identify fake news by

tracing and verifying their sources. Together with students, you will examine a piece of fake news and discuss the links between the sleeper effect and unreliable sources of news. You will also look into the dangers posed by fake news and develop basic tips on how to spot it.

Activity

Tell the students that during this class, they will, therefore, define what fake news is, try to identify its traits in practice and discuss its potential dangers.

Ask the students to individually think for three-four minutes what fake news is, how to define it, and note down their ideas on the Worksheet. Then tell them to form groups of three, pool their ideas and write down their joint definition of fake news in Part 1 of the Worksheet. When they are finished, ask each group to present their ideas to the whole class; write the key elements down on the board.

Then hand out printouts with Part 2 of the Worksheet with the definition of fake news. Ask the students to compare it with their definitions, see which points they have included and which points were missing. Ask them to see whether they need any points in the definition to be clarified, discuss them with the whole class. Indicate that you will use it in the next activity.

Activity 2: Fake news - unreliable sources of information

Introduction

Recall the definition of fake news with the students. You can ask them before the start of class to bring the Worksheets with the definition with them, display it in a PowerPoint presentation or in a poster or a flipchart. Tell the students that based on the definition, they will examine a real-life example of fake news and see what clues help them to detect it. You will also reflect on how this news can activate the sleeper effect.

Activity

Distribute a copy of the Worksheet with a piece of fake news to each student, emphasising that this is fake news, not real news. Ask them to read it and write down their answers to the following questions on the Worksheet, while they consult the above-mentioned definition of fake news and the definition of the sleeper effect:

❯ What is the source of this news? Where was it published?
❯ Which characteristics of fake news from the definition can you find in this fake news? Can you give specific examples of the elements in the text?

❯ What type of content is this piece of fake news based on, according to the four types mentioned in the definition?

❯ What words are used to describe the immigrants and their actions? Can you underline them?

❯ What feelings do these words stir up in you? How do they portray immigrants?

❯ Fake news is developed with the intention to harm certain people. Who and how do you think this piece of fake news may have harmed?

❯ How might this piece of fake news trigger the sleeper effect?

Then ask them to get into pairs and discuss their answers. After they have finished, elicit the answers to the questions from the class. When you are in doubt about certain elements of the article, refer to the definitions of fake news and the sleeper effect. The following ideas might be helpful for you while you discuss the answers with the students:

While we may not be sure if it was developed with the intention to misinform readers, it has the following characteristics of fake news: it is based on entirely fabricated original content, it is disseminated online and it uses a sensationalist and exaggerated headline. The sleeper effect, which might be activated with this story over time, may manifest itself in the following way: many people exposed to this fake news, published by several right-wing media, might still remember the contents of the news although they initially dismissed its source as unreliable or false. The anti-immigrant content of the news, including the pejorative terms used to describe immigrants (e.g. savages, pathology), may, in turn, influence their position on the question of immigration.

Wrap up the discussion, underlining that it is vital to verify and remember the sources of the news and messages we share and rely on, especially if they refer to important or controversial social and political topics. Underline that the main danger of the sleeper effect is that it is quite useful for propagandists who disseminate disinformation and that sources of it cannot often be traced or are utterly unreliable. However, over time, low-credibility communicators may gain advantages because people tend to forget the sources of the message, focusing instead on its content. Being aware of the sources of the news or messages that we come across and making sure they are trustworthy is the most effective way to prevent the sleeper effect.

Finally, prepare with your class a list of the steps you can take in order to check whether a source of a piece of news is trustworthy. You can write down the suggestions on a large sheet of paper and make a poster of it and post it in the classroom for future reference.

Below you will find some ideas on how to check the reliability of a source of information: **8**

❯ Check if the website, newspaper etc. which published the news is respectable and known for quality reporting.

❯ Do a quick search on the author of a message or piece of news or experts referred to in it. Are they credible, with a track record that you can trust? Are they even real?

❯ If possible, you can also try to contact the people or institutions mentioned in the text or message to confirm it.

❯ Check the date of the publication as sometimes old news may be reposted, in a different, new context.

❯ Rely on solid primary sources, positively evaluated studies and scientific research and opinions of experts.

❯ Much like Wikipedia, sources such as individuals' blogs, online forums (e.g. gaming forums) and chat rooms can be used to boost further research, but shouldn't be relied upon as sources of dependable information.

❯ Check whether it is not a satire or a joke. Research the website where it is published and the author to be sure.

❯ If you are still not sure about the credibility of the source of information, you may try to verify its authenticity and legitimacy using other reliable websites or sources of information. If you find another credible site that contradicts your original source, further research may be required.

Important tips and conclusions

As in this lesson plan, we are discussing the sleeper effect, while wrapping up the discussion, emphasise the unreliability of the source of this piece of fake news - the article refers to a Facebook post and an individual account which cannot be confirmed by any other source and was, in fact, denied by the Italian police who would have witnessed it, had it ever happened. Furthermore, when it comes to the author of the article based on this false Facebook story, only his initials are given.

It is also essential to underline that the discussion that students are having is not focused on immigration itself but on techniques used in fake news to manipulate readers and influence their opinions. You can also remind them of the three techniques used in propaganda: the identity construct, the crisis construct and the solution construct and point to the identity construct in the text (we Poles) and the crisis construct (immigrants seen as a violent, physical threat to Europeans). Finally, it is also important to emphasise that the language used in the article depicts immigrants as violent, frightening and uncivilised (the word "savages" and "pathology") and this divisive language which tends to dehumanise a social group or community is dangerous since it may promote polarisation in society around certain controversial or challenging topics (such as immigration) and lead from verbal violence to phys-

ical violence.

If some students express comments which humiliate immigrants or condone violence against them, address these comments immediately in front of the whole class. You can, for example, indicate that the comments show disrespect towards immigrants and go against their dignity, and dignity is one of the basic human rights, according to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Article 1) - All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.[9] These comments are based on prejudices which are defined as "a preconceived judgement, opinion or attitude directed toward certain people based on their membership in a particular group. It is a set of attitudes, which supports, causes, or justifies discrimination. Prejudice is a tendency to over-categorise[10]". Simply put, prejudices are based on overgeneralisations, where a particular trait (usually negative) is assigned to all members of a given group, regardless of their individual personalities and the heterogeneous character of the group. You can also show how a prejudice could function with regard to the group they belong to (e.g. "All students in your class are poor at maths'' or "All inhabitants of our country are [insert a negative trait here]") and ask the students the following questions: (1) How do you feel about this prejudice? (2) Does it apply to you individually as a member of this group? If you would like to work with this issue further, you can define together with your class a set of values that are important to you as a group and refer to them wherever such remarks come up. Such values might include fairness, equality, mutual respect and any other values which your students may have in mind.[11]

If some students argue that social media and online platforms, e.g. TikTok or Twitch, can be a source of information, ask them several probing questions to explore this issue further and to make them critically reflect on it, for example:

❯ How exactly can you tell that a given piece of information posted there is reliable?
❯ How, with what tools, can you verify it?

Then invite the students to work in groups of three and prepare a list of their combined tips on how to detect fake news. Each of the tips should be written down legibly on a separate post-it note or a piece of paper. Place a large sheet of paper on a wall or the board and ask each of the groups to stick their tips on it, they can use post-its, pieces of paper with magnets, painter's tape or any other material to fix it. Then ask several volunteers to group similar tips together and try to develop a common list for the entire class. Help them read aloud the categories of tips and discuss the final versions of them with the whole group. Finally, you can ask several students to prepare a poster with the tips for the next class. The poster will then be placed in a visible place in the classroom for future reference.

9 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), United Nations: https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights

10 Rouse L., Booker K., Stermer S.P. (2011) Prejudice. In: Goldstein S., Naglieri J.A. (eds) Encyclopedia of Child Behavior and Development. Springer, Boston, MA. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-79061-9_2217

11 Based on: "How to deal with young people making racist remarks in front of a group" (2020), CHAMPIONs, https://www.firstlinepractitioners.com/how-to-deal-with-young-people-making-racist-remarks-in-front-of-a-group/

Here is a helpful list of tips to detect fake news:

❯ Check the source of the news, see if it is respectable and known for quality reporting. If possible, you can also try to contact the people or institutions who/which are directly affected by the disinformation in order to clarify or rectify it.

❯ Do a quick search on the author of a message or piece of news. Are they credible, with a track record that you can trust? Are they even real?

❯ Check the date of the publication as sometimes the old news may be reposted in a different, new context.

❯ Rely on solid primary sources, positively evaluated studies and scientific research and opinions of experts. [12]

❯ Much like Wikipedia, sources such as individuals' blogs, online forums and chat rooms can be used to boost further research, but shouldn't be relied upon as sources of dependable information.

❯ As you find information, try to verify its authenticity and legitimacy using other reliable websites or sources of information. If you find another credible site that contradicts your original source, further research may be required.

❯ Check whether it is not a satire or a joke. Research the website where it is published and the author to be sure.

❯ Consider if your own beliefs could skew your judgement. Try to find the same story but posted by a different media outlet, with a different angle.

Conclusion

Emphasise that it may be challenging to fact-check all the pieces of news and information that we come across as there are so many of them. However, we can try to fact-check news and messages that stir up strong emotions, are provocative or sensationalist and concern important social and political issues.

Ideas for a follow-up activity or homework

Ask the students to bring their examples of news which they suspect are fake news. These can be posts or media articles they have come across recently and have doubts about. Tell them that you will try to fact-check the news together, using the definition and the poster with the tips you have collected during the previous class.

You can also establish a list of fact-checking websites in your country that are worth using with your students.

Worksheets

1.

WARM-UP: EXPERIENCING THE SLEEPER EFFECT

Activity 1

Read the two pieces of news your teacher has given you. Individually reflect (for two-three minutes) on the questions below the texts for each piece of news and note down your answers.

News 1: "Then and now: Rising temperatures threaten corals"

Emphasise that it may be challenging to fact-check all the pieces of news and information that we come across as there are so many of them. However, we can try to fact-check news and messages that stir up strong emotions, are provocative or sensationalist and concern important social and political issues.

By Mark Kinver, BBC News
2 April 2021

Coral bleaching, South Pacific
Images: The Ocean Agency

Yet they too face an uncertain future as a result of a warming world. Scientists list climate change as the main cause of damage to the world's reefs. Corals can't tolerate very high temperatures, so as ocean water warms, they effectively become "sick". Thermal stress of this kind can lead to the coral becoming bleached, meaning they lose their striking colours and turn white or very pale. Coral can survive bleaching events, but in this state they are also more likely to die [...].

Delicate partnership
Coral is an umbrella term for several species of marine invertebrates (animals without backbones). They have a hard outer layer (exoskeleton) made from calcium carbonate - the same stuff shells are made out of. They are found all over the globe, from tropical waters to the freezing polar regions. However, corals only form reefs in the warm, shallow seas of the tropics. The most famous of these is the 2,300km-long Great Barrier Reef, located off the north-eastern shores of Australia.
Healthy coral forms a symbiotic relationship with microscopic algae, known as zoosthellae. In return for being allowed to live in the corals' hard, calcium carbonate exoskeleton, the algae help produce food for their hosts. Zoosthellae also provide the vibrant colours we associate with healthy coral reefs. However, as waters warm, and the delicate marine ecosystem becomes sick, or stressed, the mutually beneficial relationship breaks down. The algae "jump ship", leaving the coral without its main food source. The result is that the coral turns white or very pale and becomes more vulnerable to pathogens. Coral bleaching is thus a visible and dramatic signal of a reef under severe

pressure. The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (Noaa) says that the temperature increase in the oceans as a result of climate change is the main cause of bleaching. According to London's Natural History Museum, coral reefs have an estimated global value of £6tn each year.

This is partially a result of their contribution to the fishing and tourism industries. In addition, the ridges in reefs act as barriers and can reduce wave energy by up to 97%, providing coastal areas with crucial protection against threats such as tsunamis. They help protect areas such as mangrove forests and seagrass beds that act as nurseries for marine animals, as well as human coastal populations.

Barrier reef under threat

In 2019, an Australian government report downgraded the outlook of The Great Barrier Reef from "poor" to "very poor" as a result of climate change. It said rising sea temperatures - thanks to greenhouse gas emissions from human activity - remained the biggest threat to the reef. The reef was designated a World Heritage site in 1981 for its "enormous scientific and intrinsic importance", but in recent years it has been increasingly damaged by warmer seas, which have killed off coral and affected its long-term health. Noaa researchers say that, if the bleaching is not severe, it is possible for the coral to recover. However, scientists are concerned that we are pushing the delicate marine ecosystems beyond their ability to cope. This means that natural wonders sometimes described as the "rainforests of the seas" could be reaching their breaking point.

News 2: "Prairie voles console their stressed out friends, scientists find"

By James Temple, The Verge
21 January 2016

Prairie voles take pains to comfort their stressed out pals and relatives, perhaps offering a rare example of empathy in the animal kingdom, according to a new study in Science. Empathy is well documented in humans, but scientists haven't had nearly as much luck confirming its existence among animals. It's only been reported among a few species, including elephants, dogs, and dolphins, though not all researchers agree on what qualifies.

Researchers at Emory University looked for evidence of the behavior in the prairie vole because it's a particularly social species. It's one of the rare rodents that generally mate for life, and it also shares parenting responsibilities, collaborates on building nests, and regularly grooms other voles with licks.

For the study released on Thursday, the researchers separated acquainted voles and subsequently gave one of the pair a mild shock. When they were reunited, the other vole licked their jolted friend or family member sooner and more often than during control experiments that skipped the shocks.

The underlying mechanism for the consoling behavior appears to be oxytocin, a hormone also implicated in vole monogamy and social bonding among humans. When the scientists blocked the neurotransmitter in prairie voles, the comforting licks stopped too, though self-grooming didn't.

"I think it's a very nice piece of work that looks at physiological responses to specific

environmental and social stimuli," said Adele Seelke, a researcher in the psychology department at UC Davis who studies prairie voles. But she cautioned that it's difficult to actually know what's really happening inside the animal's brain. "I personally wouldn't call it empathy," she said — empathy is a human concept, which we can certify in our fellow humans by asking how they feel about what happens to others. But we don't have that luxury with species that can't talk. She added, "We don't know if what we experience as empathy is the same thing that the prairie voles experience as empathy."

Individually reflect on the following questions for each piece of news and note down your answers:

❯ Is this piece of news interesting to you? Why, why not?

....

....

❯ Did you learn anything new from it?

....

....

Form groups of three and share your thoughts and reflections on the questions above.

Group reflections and conclusions

....

....

2.

DEFINING THE SLEEPER EFFECT

Activity 1: What is the sleeper effect?

Answer the following questions:

➤ Do you remember what the two pieces of news were about?

....

....

➤ Do you remember the source of the news?

....

....

Note down:

How many students in the class remembered the sources? ....

How many students in the class forgot the sources? ....

The definition of the sleeper effect:

....

....

....

Activity 2: The sleeper effect in politics

Part 1
Read the description of the situation and choose the correct answer.

Three candidates stood for presidential election, one candidate from the A party, one candidate from the B party and one candidate from the C party. During the election campaign, the candidate of the A party was the target of a media campaign based on false claims and intended to discredit her (a smear campaign), prepared by her political opponents from the party B. She was accused of accepting bribes while holding a public position in one of the local governments. How do you think this media campaign impacted the voting in the presidential election? Choose one of the following options:

➤ The undecided voters initially dismissed the smear campaign as intended to discredit the candidate of the A party. Then, they voted against her for the candidate of the B party.
➤ The undecided voters dismissed the smear campaign as intended to discredit the candidate of the A party. Then, they voted for the attacked candidate, believing she was innocent.
➤ Many of the undecided voters believed the smear campaign against the candidate of the A party. They voted against this candidate for the candidate of the C party.

Part 2
Read the explanation of how the sleeper effect might be activated during election campaigns. See if your predictions regarding the correct answer were right.

There was a study done to examine negative campaigning in politics. It showed that while a political opponent was not the most trustworthy source on the other candidates' character, as they clearly have the persuasive intent of discrediting the opposite party, this kind of speech might be effective. That study revealed that negative campaigning largely affects the undecided voters, who initially dismiss the campaign as slanderous. Yet later on, due to the sleeper effect, they often retain only the memory of the message but not the source, prompting them to vote against the defamed candidates. Thus, smear campaigns can pay off in some cases particularly for undecided voters and consequently the sleeper effect can impact the political landscape.[13]

13 Based on: Echevarria G., "How this frog meme became a symbol of hope and hate", Business Insider, 8 October 2020, https://www.businessinsider.com/pepe-frog-meme-hate-symbol-hope-hong-kong-protesters-2019-10?IR=T

3. The sleeper effect and disinformation on the internet

Activity 1: What is fake news?

Part 1

Think individually for two-three minutes about characteristics of fake news. Then write them down below:

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Form groups of three, pool your ideas and try to develop your definition of fake news. Then write it down below:

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Part 2

Definition of fake news
Fake news has four main characteristics :

❯ It is developed with the intention to misinform its recipients. It can take on many forms (articles, reports, posts, tweets, videos, podcasts, memes etc.), pretending to be genuine news or even scientific content. It can be disseminated with the intention to trick people or unintentionally by people who believe it is real.

❯ Fake news is disseminated not only by the internet-based media but also by the traditional media (TV, radio, print press). Paradoxically, online fake news is further reinforced when it is spread by the traditional media outlets.

❯ Fake news is developed with the intention to harm and/or damage the reputation or image of a specific person, social group, community, institution or country etc. or to bring about political or financial benefits.

❯ Fake news usually uses sensationalist, provocative, exaggerated or alarming headlines in order to draw recipients' attention and to capitalise on their feelings, usually negative ones.

Fake news has four main characteristics:[14]

❯ Fabricated content (entirely false content is invented to trick recipients)
❯ Manipulated content (real news intentionally is distorted in order to trick recipients)
❯ Imposter content (false people or media outlets refer to real sources of the news or present themselves as a given media outlet)
❯ False context (when real news is placed in a false context).

It is also important to add that satire or parody is not fake news because it is not developed with the intention to harm people. However, it can be interpreted or disseminated by recipients as fake news. aFake news has four main characteristics :

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14 Lipiński Ł., "Krótki przewodnik po fake newsach", *Press*, 2018, https://www.press.pl/jak-czytac-w-erze-fake-news/artykul/55061,krotki-przewodnik-po-fake-newsach

Activity 2: Fake news - unreliable sources of information

Read about an example of fake news and write answers to the questions below the text on the Worksheet. The text of the actual article is in italics.

Fake news: "The Austrian border: one Pole's shocking story from a coach which was attacked by immigrants"

Source of the news:

wg, "Granica z Austrią: wstrząsająca relacja Polaka z autokaru napadniętego przez imigrantów" (in English: "The Austrian border: one Pole's shocking story from a coach which was attacked by immigrants"), Niezalezna.pl, 5 September 2015,
https://niezalezna.pl/70607-granica-z-austria-wstrzasajaca-relacja-polaka-z-autokaru-napadnietego-przez-imigrantow

Introduction

The article Niezalezna.pl published (see below) was based on a Facebook post from a Polish travel blogger. This blog post led to the publication of several other articles at that time by right-wing media outlets (e.g. in Fronda). Later the post was dismissed as purely fabricated; the Italian local police denied there were ever any similar incidents at that time. Many mainstream Polish media published information that this was fake news.

It is also worth noticing that in 2015, Europe was faced with the so-called immigrant crisis, with thousands of refugees and immigrants coming to Europe and this fake post and many similar fabricated or distorted stories were used in the political dispute, highly publicised in the media and social media, between those in favour of letting refugees and immigrants in, on certain conditions, and those opposed to it.

The news:

The Austrian border: one Pole's shocking story from a coach which was attacked by immigrants[15]

"They tried to rock the coach which I was travelling on with a group of people. We were thrown s*** at, they banged on the doors for the driver to open them, they spat on the windows" - wrote on his Facebook profile Kamil Bulonis, an author of a traveler's blog.

The author of this post, who runs the blog "World citizen", can hardly be accused of right-wing, Catholic or nationalistic "craziness". Kamil Bulonis openly writes about himself on Instagram in this way "journalist, globetrotter, gay" and he has posted a picture of himself in the colours of the rainbow on his Facebook profile.

Last night, Kamil Bulonis posted an account of his journey by coach from Italy to Austria. This story is so moving that we are publishing it in its entirety. It is even more so that we cannot expect that the mainstream media will break away from the narrative frame which talks about "bad Hungarian nationalists" and "poor immigrants".

Here is Kamil Bulonis' account:

An hour and a half ago, at the Italian-Austrian border I could see with my own eyes huge legions of immigrants... With all my solidarity with the people who are in a difficult situation in their lives I must say that what I saw inspires dread...

This enormous mass of people, I'm sorry I'll write this, are absolute savages... Vulgar words, throwing bottles, loud screams "We want to get to Germany" - is Germany some sort of a paradise now? I saw how they surrounded a car of some elderly Italian woman, they pulled her out of it by the hair and wanted to drive away in it. They tried to rock the coach I was on. They threw shit at us, they banged on the doors for the driver to open them, they spat at the windows... I'm asking - what for? How are these savages going to assimilate in Germany? For a moment I felt like I was in a war zone ...

I really feel sorry for these people but if they got to Poland, I don't think they would be understood any way... We stayed at the border for three hours, and eventually we didn't cross it. The whole group was escorted by the police back to Italy. The coach is a total wreck, smeared with faeces, scored, with smashed windscreens. And this is the idea on how to address demographics? These huge hoards of savages? There were practically no women among them, no children - these were in majority young, aggressive men...

Only yesterday, while reading the news on all news websites, I couldn't help but feel sorry for them, worried about their fate, and today, after what I have seen, I'm simply afraid and I'm also happy that they do not choose our fatherland as their destination. We, Poles, are simply not ready to take these people in, not in terms of culture or finance. I'm not sure anyone is ready for it. Pathology we have never ever seen is heading towards the EU. And please forgive me if I have offended anybody with this post...

I'll also add that cars with humanitarian aid came, above all with food and water, and they just overturned these cars... Austrians used megaphones to communicate that there was permission for them to cross the border. They wanted to register them and let them go, but they

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15 Own translation.

didn't understand these messages. They didn't understand anything. And this was the biggest horror of it all... Out of several thousand people nobody could speak Italian, English, German, Russian or Spanish... The law of the fist prevailed... They fought for the permission to cross the border and they were granted this permission but they didn't understand they had it! On the coach of the French group they opened overhead luggage lockers and everything that was inside them was stolen away in a brief moment, with some of the belongings lying on the floor.... I have never ever seen similar scenes in my short life and I have a feeling that this is only the beginning. Finally, I will add that it is worth helping but not at all cost".

Questions:

❯   What is the source of this news? Where was it published?

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❯   Which characteristics of fake news can you find in this fake news? Can you give specific examples of the elements in the text?

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❯   What type of content is this piece of fake news based on?

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❯   What words are used to describe the immigrants and their actions? Can you underline them?

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❯   What feelings do these words stir up in you? How do they portray the immigrants?

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❯ Fake news is developed with the intention to harm certain people or damage their reputation. Who and how do you think this piece of fake news may have harmed?

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Now get into pairs and discuss your answers.

Activity 3: How to detect fake news and unreliable sources of information

Source of the news:

Pawela, M., "Dokument ONZ zapowiada „Nowy Porządek Świata"? To fake news" (in English: "A UN document annonce "New World Order''? It's fake news"), Fakenews.pl, 15 February 2021, https://fakenews.pl/polityka/dokument-onz-zapowiada-nowy-porzadek-swiata-to-fake-news/

Introduction

This story started with a post published on Facebook by a certain Vernon Adkison from the US, on 10 May 2020. The post was as follows:
"THIS IS NOT A CONSPIRACY THEORY.
If you don't believe it, a simple google search will take you to the UN website where you can access the document and read it for yourself. It is amazing (not) how well the Covid 19 pandemic ties in with Agenda 21/2030."
and was accompanied by a photograph of an alleged UN document with the UN logo (UN Agenda 21/2030 Mission Goals) and the list of the alleged goals to be achieved by 2030, among them: one world government, one world cashless currency, the end of national sovereignty, the end of all privately owned property, the end of the family unit etc. (see the printscreen of the post below). It was also said that the UN planned to create a one-world government presiding over a populace of civilians microchipped for tracking purposes.[16]

The post was shared 18,000 times on Facebook and commented on by 596 viewers. Some of the comments were supporting the post (e.g. "Time to get the guns ready and ammo!! F*** that!", "They want you to think it's not going to happen and that is scary as hell"). However, at least in several of them the link to the real UN document was posted and those commenting said that there were no such goals, as described in the post, mentioned there. Variations of the post have been circulating social media globally for months, particularly in the US and New Zealand.

[16] Australian Associated Press FactCheck, "Fake UN document used to spread false 'new world order' goals", Australian Associated Press (AAP), 18 September 2020, https://www.aap.com.au/fake-un-document-used-to-spread-false-new-world-order-goals/

The printscreen of the original post published on Facebook.

Later the post was reviewed by Facebook and marked as fake news. It was also analysed by several media outlets in the US, Australia (e.g. Australian Associated Press FactCheck, an accredited member of the International Fact-Checking Network) and Poland and proven to be false. In an email to AAP FactCheck, a UN spokeswoman said the document included in the Facebook post was "not a genuine UN document".
In the article below you will see how one of the fact-checking websites in Poland analysed it and confirmed it as fake news.

A UN document announces "New World Order"? It's fake news.[17]

Since 2020 the translation of an allegedly secret UN document meant to introduce a "New World Order" has been circulating on social media in Poland. Over the recent days this fake news has gained huge popularity thanks to thousands of shares on Facebook. Having received many messages from our readers, we have decided to tackle this fake news. At the end of January Demagog [a similar fact-checking website] also verified it.

The whole story is simply fabricated. It came to Poland from the US, it has also appeared in many other countries, such as New Zealand.

The image of the original facebook post including the false UN mission goals. Source in English: BuzzFeed News: https://www.buzzfeed.com/joeydurso/coronavirus-agenda-21-5g

17 Pawela, M., "Dokument ONZ zapowiada „Nowy Porządek Świata"? To fake news", *Fakenews.pl*, 15 February 2021, https://fakenews.pl/polityka/dokument-onz-zapowiada-nowy-porzadek-swiata-to-fake-news/ (own translation)

Despite the fact that many of the posts which shared the false news about Agenda 21 encourages readers to check the document's content themselves, we will not find any of the controversial statements from the above image. The full text of the [real] UN document in English can be found here.

The UN Agenda 21 is a document which groups together the agreements from the United Nations Conference on Environment & Development Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 3 to 14 June 1992 and addresses such issues as the elimination of poverty and other social questions. Nowhere does it mention any issues linked to the military, the establishment of a world government or the end of the sovereignty of states. The UN Agenda 21 has been used for many years, together with its other documents, to spread a conspiracy theory assuming an approaching New World Order.

Certain of the points shared on Facebook as the New World Order only loosely refer to the real Agenda 21, they are based on the terminology used in the UN document but completely distort its meaning and change the message conveyed. The authors of this fake news have assumed that the majority of internet users will not consult the source document.
The popular images and graphs also suggest these changes have been planned for 2021-2030, and quote the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. However, this document refers to the well-known Sustainable Development Goals which provide a framework for eradicating poverty and hunger and for ensuring access to education and healthcare. Nowhere do they point to any world governments, 5G technology, ending sovereignty of states or any other rumours from Facebook posts. All the Sustainable Development Goals can be found in the graph below:

This news has been fabricated and has no links with the Agenda 21 or 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The New World Order is an old conspiracy theory which is recalled from time to time in order to announce that soon a world government will appear and humanity will be enslaved. When these prophecies do not come true, after some time new predictions follow, based on current events. Despite many announcements, since the development of the Agenda 21 the New World Order has remained a theory.

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