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Protecting democracy by fighting disinformation: European lessons



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DESCRIPTION: “Post-truth,” “fake news,” “misinformation,” - these are all the “words of the year” chosen by top dictionaries in recent years as the amount of false information on the Web increases. Disinformation [causes](#) political [polarisation](#) which creates bitter division into "us" versus "them" camps. It damages the prospects for reconciliation and has grown into a burning issue for liberal societies. The free world is at risk as people are especially vulnerable to falsehood in the digital age, and foreign manipulators interfere in the Western democratic processes, trying to prevent voters from making an informed choice.

The European Union has long been on the front line fighting fake news to minimize its impact on the functioning of the rule of law, democracy and fundamental rights in the bloc and its members.

TIME REQUIREMENTS: 75 minutes. For a 60 minute session, the second section, *Transformation of Media in the Digital Era*, can be skipped as this subject is partially covered by other lesson blocks. As an alternative, the first section, *Understanding Europe*, may be optional for teachers that have already introduced the EU to the students.

CLASS OBJECTIVES:

This lesson applies a multifaceted approach to help students to learn more about the EU. It offers a look through the lens of values integral to the European way of life and, via application of some of the best European media literacy practices and learning basic journalistic techniques, improve critical thinking skills essential to safely navigate the sea of information.

- **Raise awareness about** the idea of united Europe based on common values of rights, freedoms, and democracy
- **Provide a basis for comparison** on democracy as a way of life on both sides of the Atlantic and, based on the European experience to date, show how the liberal societies resist the attempts to weaken them through disinformation, considered a major challenge for the West
- **Illustrate how** the European Union puts into practice its broad set of actions to fight fake news and ensure the protection of European values and democracy
- **Introduce** key concepts and definitions and psychological factors that make people vulnerable to information manipulation
- **Explain**, by making a brief excursion into the history of media, how the traditional press has given up its gatekeeping role to Facebook, Twitter etc. that now control media consumption
- **Try a hand** at fact-checking to get “vaccinated” against fakes

Note: Given the very nature of the topic, the plan is built around a curated collection of visual aids designed to powerfully convey the message in the narrative form so that it can be better understood by students and more comfortably handled by educators. The following guidelines are here to help use the material in this lesson plan. They allow flexibility in choosing materials and adapting techniques to manage class time more effectively. This lesson will require access to the Internet/computer lab.

MATERIALS:

- Teacher’s Guide (below).
- Teachers’s Attachments: Attachment A: A brief history of the EU; Attachment B: The Globe and Mail Op-Ed publication; Attachment C: Historica Canada publication.
- *The Backgrounder*, a news-paperized supporting leaflet (can be distributed in print or electronically) and EU disinformation action plan sheet.

Teacher's Guide

The following guidelines are here to assist in delivering the material in this lesson plan. They are meant to have a certain amount of flexibility, to account for the amount of time available in the class, offer the option of one or two more classes or of more classroom or homework-based work.

SCENARIO

1. Understanding Europe (15-minute block)

Please note that relevant teaching material is already available on the EU Learning website (<https://carleton.ca/ces/eulearning/>) under thematic sections.

Begin with giving out *The Backgrounder*, an explanatory leaflet which is aimed at conveying the spirit of the bygone age of the clear dominance of print journalism. It will help students to briefly immerse into the changing media landscape, as well as get familiar with the central concepts and definitions of the lesson. Give them a few minutes to browse the pamphlet, including the “Values of the EU” story on the front page of *The Backgrounder*.

Take the class on a brief excursion into the past of the bloc: “The History of the European Union in Three Minutes.” <https://www.britannica.com/video/191091/overview-history-European-Union> .

Open a discussion between students to explore each other's views on basic aspects of the alliance:

- *Why and how the EU was created?*
- *What are the main European values and goals?*

If some of the students had travelled to Europe, they could be invited to share their impressions, bringing these experiences to the discussion.

Teacher's Attachment A on the brief history of the EU might be of help in the lesson preparations.

Move the conversation “across the pond” to highlight the mutuality of interests of Western democracies. The following video clip (playing back the first 0.50 minutes would be sufficient to convey the idea) will give students an opportunity to reflect on the principles and challenges that unite Western nations:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlC1odS4vIk> .

Encourage a brief debate after viewing the clip:

- *What do the EU and Canada have in common when it comes to values?*
- *What mutual problems do these societies share?*
- *Some time ago, The Globe and Mail as well as some leading European newspapers debated the scenario of Canada's joining the EU (see **Teacher's Attachment B**). Is this scenario possible?*
- *What Canada would bring to the table? How could the country benefit from such membership?*

2. Transformation of Media in the Digital Era (15-minute block)

Since the freedom of the press is a pillar of the European democracy, from the discussion of democratic values move on to the next lesson block about the role of the media today. A quick survey of student news consumption habits might be a good idea. Question them, how do they follow current events? Are they “morning show people” or - which is most likely - prefer social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram?

This brief conversation will allow an instructor to put the subject in a broader context, tracing how the old media have abandoned their functions as gatekeepers to digital aggregators, paving the way for disinformation to spread rapidly and widely. The short history of the media is provided in *The Backgrounder* on page 2. It will give students a brief overview of how technological progress changed the traditional method of information consumption in both good and bad ways, playing into the hands of the enemies of the liberal order and other malicious actors thanks to social digital platforms.

Depict how the radical shift in media landscape due to an explosion in technology has exposed some vulnerabilities of a free society, with malignant actors taking advantage of free speech in the West.

Play back this enlightening piece created by Zach Weissmueller, senior producer for *The Reason*, a reputable publication that was twice included in the list of 50 best magazines compiled by *The Chicago Tribune*. The video called “**The 2010s: When the Media Lost Their Gatekeepers**” is available at the magazine website <https://reason.com/video/the-2010s-when-the-media-lost-their-gatekeepers/> and in the web archive <https://web.archive.org/save/https://reason.com/video/the-2010s-when-the-media-lost-their-gatekeepers/>.

The video offers a comprehensive, engaging and explanatory narrative which will help students to better understand the historical, political, and technological environment that has made possible the tectonic shifts in information consumption. It also sets the stage for a brief class debate to the point. It can be played back in full if time allows or used for setting the scene for an in-class debate by presenting the beginning of the clip (the first 2 min 5 secs) which brings up and illustrates graphically the discussion questions.

- *How did the digital revolution change the way people consume information?*
- *What are the advantages and downsides of the changes in the global media landscape caused by the arrival of the internet and social digital platforms?*

3. Disinformation War in Europe (15-minute block)

Move forward and put this issue in a European context. One of the basic values of the EU is the freedom of speech which allows open debate between citizens, politicians and the press. This freedom is recognized both in the [Treaty of the European Union](#) and in the constitutions of the member states. Moreover, in 1976, the [European Court of Human Rights](#) decided that democratic society protects pluralism and tolerance, which applies not only to information or ideas that are favourably received but also to those that “offend, shock or disturb.” However, disseminators of disinformation and fake news take unfair advantage of that freedom, thereby posing a threat to [healthy public debate](#), that is, a non-confrontational approach to diverging viewpoints.

The front page of *The Backgrounder* delineates the Russian-sponsored disinformation campaign as the most vivid example that had prompted the EU to come up with a comprehensive solution for dealing with the disinformation in the digital era. Give students a few minutes to examine the summary of the EU’s Action Plan against Disinformation on the front page and the student handout factsheet.

Choose what would look most relevant from a selection of videos produced by *EU vs. Disinfo*, the flagship project of the East StratCom Task Force of the European External Action Service, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/EUvsDisinfo/168615817248685/>. The task force was established to better respond to the Russian Federation’s ongoing disinformation campaigns affecting the European Union and countries in the shared neighbourhood. For instance, here is a 1-minute video on what pro-Kremlin media say about Germany: “Angela Merkel is Adolph Hitler's daughter and other fakes”: <https://www.facebook.com/EUvsDisinfo/videos/1549869811725991/> (web-archive: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200523192814/https://www.facebook.com/EUvsDisinfo/videos/1549869811725991/>).

Optional, if time permits: The case of misinformation around the COVID-19 pandemic could also be well used for illustration purposes, although this angle is also partly covered in the other sections of the lesson plan. The multimedia report under the headline “Secret labs and George Soros: COVID-19 disinformation in the EU Eastern Partnership countries,” prepared by EU vs Disinfo, is available at the project’s website: <https://euvdisinfo.eu/secret-labs-and-george-soros-covid-19-disinformation-in-the-eu-eastern-partnership-countries/>

After that, play the next 5-minute video explaining the EU’s approach: <https://europa.eu/!pT48wv> .

The video called “**How serious is the threat of disinformation on our democracy?**” is available at the EU website and is free for downloading in HD quality in English and with English subtitles so can be played back offline, if require for class. The copy of the file is available here: <https://1drv.ms/v/s!Ao3KSwmF0A5jhfMR7Fl5pRdKQDJvhQ> .

After the video, engage the class in a talk by asking the questions:

- *What threats does disinformation represent to democracy?*
- *What does the EU do to solve this problem?*
- *What lessons can Canada draw from this experience of its European counterparts?*

4. Lessons from Psychology: How Fake News Preys on Our Emotions? (25-minute block)

Refer to *The Backgrounder* to introduce the key concepts and definitions as well as experts’ opinions on the psychological factors making people prone to falsehoods. Give students a few minutes to examine the topic content on page 3. Put this into practice. Even for pros, at times it’s hard to separate facts from fiction. Still, why don’t try it? Invite students to take this quiz: <https://euvdisinfo.eu/quizzes/euvdisinfo/> .

For streamlining the process, lead the in-class attempt to take collectively the quiz, which may take up 10-15 minutes. It is designed to explain any of the multiple-choice questions, no matter right or wrong ones. It will give students some basic idea of how tricky fact-checkers’ task might be.

Additionally, *The Backgrounder* offers a description (page 4) of a couple of engaging educational games, widely used in the EU schools’ curricula to help students to better understand how one can play a role in spreading false information, even unwittingly. Since the leaflet provides links and explanations, students can practice it outside class.

After the quiz is completed, consider asking students:

- *Based on the quiz, what would they do if the information encountered online or shared by someone raises doubts?*

5. Protecting Democracy Together (5-minute wrap-up talk)

Canada is one of the EU's key allies and trade partners, sharing common values. Based on the knowledge gained in class, consider wrapping the talk by discussing the subject.

- *What important lessons can be learned from European expertise?*
- *Is the issue of disinformation and fake news equally central to the health of Canadian democracy?*

The supporting material for this part, placing the issue in the Canadian context, is available in **Teacher's Attachment C**.