MODULE 1.
SOCIOLOGICAL FACTORS BEHIND FAKE NEWS

CC BY SA

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the National Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union

Module 1: Sociological factors behind fake news

Understanding the psychology behind the spread of rumors and fake news offers insight into the sociological dynamics at play, particularly concerning marginalized communities. While rumors and false information may be disseminated for various reasons, such as financial gain or ideological beliefs, it is essential to delve into the underlying sociological factors driving this phenomenon.

1.1 Activity 1:

- Brief overview of the module objectives and presentation of key terms and concepts related to sociological factors.
- Brainstorming session to identify possible aims of spreading fake news.

Duration: 20 minutes

Learning outcomes: Participants will explore the sociocultural factors that drive the spread of fake news about marginalized groups and how this impacts their integration and social cohesion.

Materials/resources: Participants will only need some notebooks and pens.

Theoretical background/ key concepts:

The spread of fake news targeting marginalized groups like immigrants and LGBTQ+ individuals is driven by various sociocultural factors. Psychological tendencies, such as seeking simple explanations and a sense of security, make people susceptible to believing and sharing misinformation. Additionally, distrust in traditional sources and the desire for belonging contribute to the spread of rumors and conspiracy theories. In the digital age, the internet and social media platforms amplify these dynamics, leading to the rapid dissemination of fake news. Understanding these factors is crucial for combating misinformation and promoting media literacy and critical thinking.

Communication and Social Dynamics: Communication plays a fundamental role in shaping individual and collective beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors within communities (WACC, 2019). The exchange of information and ideas among individuals forms the basis for social interaction and the construction of shared realities. In this context, fake news and intentionally misleading information have been employed throughout history as tools to manipulate public perceptions and exacerbate social conflicts (CITS, 2017). By disseminating false stories and untrue information, individuals and groups seek to influence public opinion, often with the aim of achieving specific ideological, political, or financial objectives.

Sociocultural Factors and Fake News: Understanding the sociocultural factors that contribute to the spread of fake news is essential for addressing the phenomenon effectively. Recent years have witnessed a proliferation of disinformation campaigns targeting marginalized groups, including migrants, refugees, and minority communities (EPC, 2020). Such campaigns often rely on manipulation tactics that exploit existing societal prejudices, fears, and anxieties, leading to increased racism, xenophobia, and social division (Neidhardt and Butcher, 2022).

Manipulation Tactics and Belief Formation: People's susceptibility to fake news is influenced by a variety of psychological and sociological factors. Individuals may unknowingly spread rumors and misinformation due to a lack of awareness regarding the accuracy of the information (Greifeneder, 2021). Moreover, during times of crisis or social upheaval, trust in traditional information sources may diminish, making individuals more susceptible to believing rumors and conspiracy theories (DiFonzo, Sebastian, 2020). Additionally, conspiracy theories and fake news

often provide simplistic explanations for complex events, offering individuals a sense of security and control in uncertain times (Douglas et al., 2017).

•Identity Formation and Emotional Impact: Rumors and fake news not only influence individual beliefs but also contribute to the formation of collective identities within society. As rumors spread, individuals may align themselves with particular narratives, leading to the formation of distinct social groups based on shared beliefs or perceptions (Zheltukhina et al., 2016). The emotional impact of fake news cannot be understated, as individuals may experience heightened anxiety, fear, or anger in response to false information (Bhattacharjee, 2017). Moreover, the repetition and discussion of rumors without verification can lead individuals to internalize false beliefs, further shaping their opinions and emotions on a particular issue.

Debrief:
Insights: Encourage participants to share their insights and reflections on the brainstorming session. What were some of the key factors identified as driving the spread of fake news about marginalized groups? Were there any surprises or new perspectives gained?

Possible Alterations:
The facilitator could engage participants in a group discussion or debate to delve deeper into specific sociocultural factors identified during the brainstorming session. Incorporate case studies or real-life examples of fake news targeting marginalized groups to provide concrete illustrations of the concepts discussed.

Relevant sources:

•Bhattacharjee, Jyots. (2017). Effects of Rumour. (The Sentinel). https://www.sentinelassam.com/editorialeditorial/effects-of-rumour/.

•Butcher, Paul. (2019). Disinformation and democracy: The home front in the information war. https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Disinformation-and-democracy-The-home-front-in-theinformation-war~21c294.

•Zheltukhina R., Marina et al. (2016). Role of Media Rumors in the Modern Society. (International Journal of Environmental & Science Education Vol. 11). https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1120193.pdf.

•Douglas et al. (2017). The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5724570/

•Greifeneder, Rainer et al. (2021). The Psychology of Fake News: Accepting, Sharing, and Correcting Misinformation. (Taylor & Francis Group). https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/id/ed611675-458b-458c-ab02-368579ffff86/9781000179033.pdf

1.2 Activity 2: Icebreaker Activity: Two Truths and a Lie

Duration: 15-20 minutes

Learning Objectives: To encourage participants to reflect on their own perspectives and biases related to marginalized groups, setting the stage for discussions on sociocultural reasons for spreading fake news. This icebreaker activity using "Two Truths and a Lie" encourages participants to engage in lighthearted yet meaningful reflections on their own perspectives and biases related to marginalized groups. It serves as an engaging introduction to the sociocultural themes explored in Module 1, Activity 1, setting a foundation for deeper discussions on the spread of fake news.

Materials Needed:

- ✓ Index cards or sticky notes
- ✓ Markers

Preparation:
Before the session, the facilitator will prepare a set of index cards or sticky notes, each containing two truths and one lie related to sociocultural perspectives on marginalized groups such as immigrants and LGBTQ+ individuals.
Examples of statements:
"I have never witnessed discrimination against immigrants in my community."
"I believe that LGBTQ+ individuals face the same opportunities as everyone else."
"I have never encountered stereotypes about immigrants in media."
The facilitator must ensure there are enough cards for each participant, and then mix them up.
The facilitator will gather the participants in a circle or designated area for the activity. Then he/she will explain that the activity is called "Two Truths and a Lie" and it's designed to explore personal reflections on sociocultural perspectives and biases related to marginalized groups.

Distribution of Cards:
The facilitator will:

- distribute one index card or sticky note to each participant, ensuring that everyone has at least one.
- instruct participants not to reveal the content of their cards to others just yet.
- explain the rules of the game: each participant will take turns sharing their three statements (two truths and one lie) with the group.
- emphasize that the goal is to try to guess which statement is the lie.
- begin the round of introductions, allowing each participant to share their three statements with the group.
- encourage participants to be creative and thoughtful with their statements, considering their own experiences and perspectives.
- after each participant shares, the facilitator will invite others to guess which statement they think is the lie.
- allow the participant to reveal the lie and provide some context or explanation for each statement if desired.

Group Discussion: The facilitator will guide a group discussion following each participant's opportunity to share, focusing on the themes and topics that surfaced during the activity. They will encourage participants to reflect on both the similarities and differences in their perspectives and experiences concerning marginalized groups. Additionally, the facilitator will prompt discussions exploring how these individual perspectives and biases contribute to the dissemination of fake news. Through this guided conversation, participants will gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of fake news propagation and its impact on society.

Debrief: In the debrief, the facilitator will summarize the key insights and takeaways from the activity, highlighting the diverse perspectives and biases revealed during the "Two Truths and a Lie" game. Emphasize the importance of recognizing and challenging biases in media consumption and sharing. Possible alterations could include incorporating a reflection period at the end of the activity, where participants can individually jot down their thoughts on the activity and any personal realizations they had about their own perspectives and biases. Additionally, the facilitator could encourage participants to share any strategies they plan to implement to mitigate the influence of biases in their media consumption and interactions.

Possible alterations: Instead of solely focusing on personal reflections and biases, the alteration could involve incorporating a segment where participants examine historical and contemporary examples of fake news targeting marginalized groups. This could include case studies or examples of how misinformation has been used to perpetuate stereotypes, discrimination, and prejudice against these groups. By contextualizing the spread of fake news within broader sociocultural dynamics, participants can gain a deeper understanding of the systemic issues at play.