Lesson 3.

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Conspiracy theories and their key features

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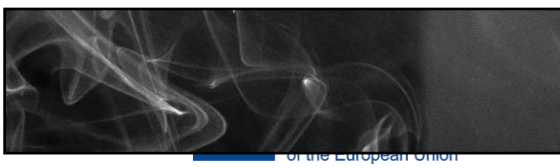

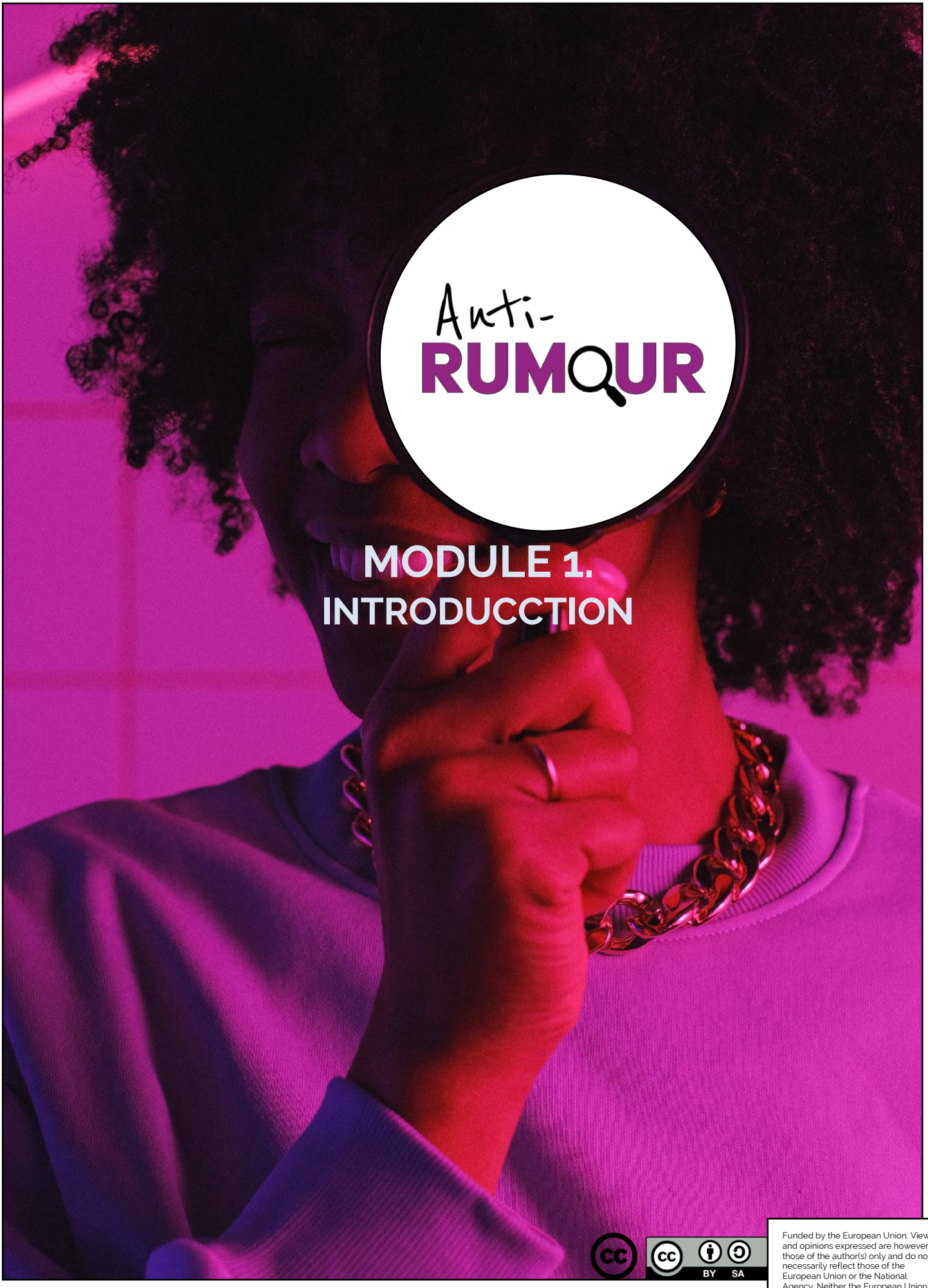

Anti-
RUMQUR

MODULE 1.
INTRODUCCTION

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Module 1. Introduction

1.1 Activity 1. Theoretical input. Explaining the 'Us' vs 'Them' dynamics

Duration: 20 minutes

Learning Outcomes: Introduce participants the explanatory elements surrounding the Us vs Them narrative, and to understand the importance of this narrative in supporting conspiracy theories.

Materials/Resources Needed: This activity is lecture-based, in which the facilitator introduces participants the key elements of Conspiracy theories and how the narrative US vs them is relevant in explaining it:

Conspiracy theories are omnipresent among members of modern and traditional societies. However, they do not represent a new element. It has always been present in societies. For example, during medieval times, witches and jews were usually the target for blaming when natural disasters or economic downturns hit a region or a town. Later, a lot of conspirative narratives have been attributed to the masonic lodge.
However, with the appearance of social media, conspiracy theories have not only been widespread, increasing its reachability, but also, they have diversified, englobing numerous narratives and arguments.
One of the key elements of conspiracy theories is the narrative of 'Us vs Them' – Depicting a framework in which there is an artificial/abstract construction of 'them', an external group or outsiders, which have intrinsic negative traits-. On the other hand, the representation of 'us', is often very much positive, acquiring a strong morals and responsibility.
The Us vs Them narrative is very effective and has been applied in many contexts. It is a usual argumentative instrument for example in conflict, depicting 'them' as the enemy to which their elimination assures the survival of 'us'. However, in this context is different, because in conspiracy theories, the 'them' is always plural, it is a group and not an individual or some sort of lone wolf, while in a conflict, it is usual to identify the enemy as 'my enemy' – you vs me -.
The US vs Them narrative fits quite well with conspiracy theories due to the self-nature of the latter. Conspiracy theories have 5 main characteristics, all of them are suitable for the instalment of the Us vs Them argument.

a) Pattern perception. Identifying patternsn is an adaptative human ability for associative learning. Understanding cause-effect situations allows for the identification of threats and opportunities, which help the human being to survive. The human mind is equipped to look for existing patterns. Introducing the Us vs Them narrative is therefore easy: There is a pattern that is consistently repeated, in which 'them' are identified as the one to blame, as the responsible of this pattern.

b) Agency detection. Similarly to patterns, humans have the capacity to recognize the motives and intentions behind others' actions. When there is an anthropomorphic action, there is a motive, a reason behind. The motive can be over-generalized to two main concepts: good or bad, or in other words, moral or evil. If the motive is moral, the action is justified, if the motive is evil, the action cannot be justified. Therefore, within the narrative, 'Them' will have evil motives, not moral and unjustifiable, while 'us' act based upon reasons ethically legitimised.

c) Threat management: Conspiracy theories are based on the human trait of identifying threats. They can be two: disease-avoidance and self-protection. The latter is the one upon the

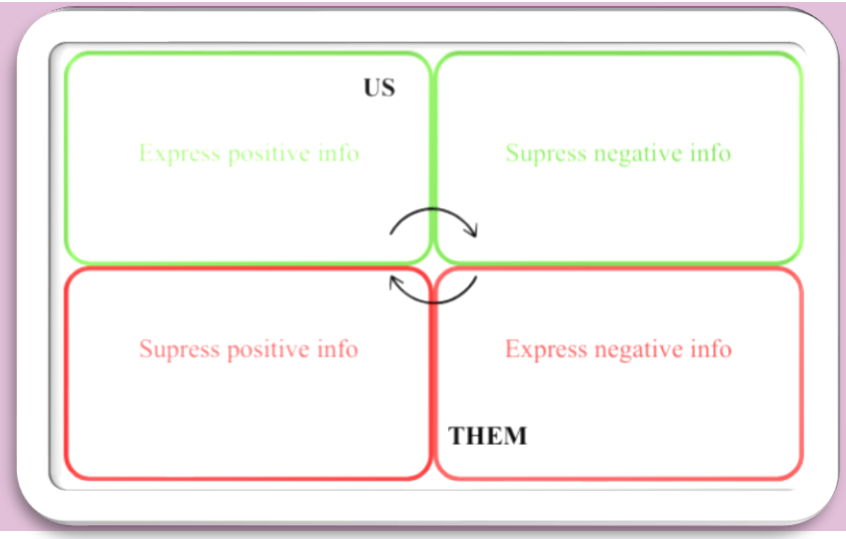
psychology behind conspiracist is based. Recognising hostile human groups and coalitions alert the human being for danger, forcing it to be vigilant. In this case, the threat is represented by 'Their' actions, thus 'Them' are the threat itself.

d) Alliance detection: Humans have the capacity to recognize friendly alliances, but also hostile. People automatically detect cooperative coalitions (party preferences, race…) This rather enhances the vision of 'us' -our (good) coalition – and them – their (bad) coalition -.

e) Secrecy. This is one the most distinctive element of conspiracy theories, and it is precisely what gives meaning to the term 'conspiracy theories'. Basing an argument on a theory and lacking empirical evidence, carries out an element of secrecy (which is paradoxically what renders it attractive to believe). Conspiracy theories that turn out to be true (Watergate, Iran-Contra scandal) are no longer conspirative, nor theories, because it is not a secret anymore. The reason as to why Us vs them fits in this category is rooted on merging the above-mentioned elements: Constipations detect a *pattern* of events, attributing the blame and responsibility to an *alliance*, which have an evil *motive*, representing a threat for 'us', and that is the reason as to why 'they' keep it a *secret*.

The mechanism to combat 'Them' are usually build upon information, suppressing or expressing depending on the subject, in order to construct a narrative.

Responsibility is also one of the key elements. In building an 'Us' vs 'Them' narrative, not only the blame is put under the shoulders of 'them', but also the responsibility to fix it. This also happens in conspiracy theories, because normally the target is to point out powerful groups such as societal leaders, governmental institutions, influential branches of industry (oil companies, pharmaceutical industry) …, which are also attributed with the capacity to take measures so to change people's lives.



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Estimated number of participants: No estimated number of participants

Participant instructions: Listen carefully and take notes if necessary.

Possible alterations. This activity is lecture-type, therefore, depends on the facilitator/trainer to implement it the most suited way for their participants. The information described above shall be transmitted in accordance with the participant's knowledge and background. For that reason, the facilitator may adapt the content, to make it more relevant depending on its national context or target audience. The way of presenting it can be done through PPT or simple lecture. It may include external information as well, but it is recommended to read in advance the resources listed in the Background reading section.

Debrief: What are the most important insights you take? Have you identified the Us vs Them narrative in your national context? Do you think you fall into these narratives? How do you think you can combat them?

Background reading/external resources:

van Prooijen J.W & van Vugt M (2018) *Conspiracy Theories: Evolved functions and psychological mechanisms*, Perspectives on Psychological Science, vol.13 (6)
Zhao X. (2021), *Understanding the 'Us vs Them' division through the notion of responsibility*, E-International relations.
Wondolleck M, Gray B, Bryan T, (2003), Us versus Them: How identities and characterizations influence conflict, National Association of Environmental Professionals
The Anti-Rumour Guidebook: Fake news, Conspiracy theories and how to spot them. https://anti-rumour.eu/

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1.2 Activity 2. Creating a narrative.

Duration: 30 minutes

Learning Outcomes/Key Messages. To understand how the Us vs Them narratives are constructed and build**.**

Materials/Resources needed. Flipchart, sticky notes, pens.

Estimated number of participants. 15-10

Participant Instructions. The facilitator writes down in a flipchart 3 words: Community, Institutions and Professions. Then tell participants to write down the names of groups that exists in at least two of the categories in their sticky notes. One name for each sticky note.

For example, 'Muslims 'or 'LGTBQ' for community, 'the government' or 'the Church' for Institutions, 'Bartenders' or 'Actors' for professions. After, tell them to put it in the flipchart. These categories represent a typology of a relevant actors that are associated to the conspirative narratives. In this activity however, there is flexibility given in order to allow participants more options. The important aspect of this activity is to know what a narrative consists of, rather to engage in discussions of target and victims groups of this narratives. Therefore, there is a degree of flexibility given: the actor chosen does not necessarily need to be a current victim of false narratives, it can be anything. For that reason it is important to let them write the actors first, with some input examples, and the explain what the activity consists on. Here is an example:

- Muslims or LGTBQ could be valid for community, but also pensionist, or cinemagoers. 'The government' or 'the Church' could stand for Institutions, but also the IMF, or the English Oxford Academy. The 'professions' field is quite open, but you could provide some examples such as politicians or farmers, but also footballers, journalists, scientists…

Once all the three fields are filled with names, each participant should choose 3 actors, one for each field (one from community, one from institution and one from profession). They cannot choose any of the actors they wrote, they must be different

Each actor shall be chosen individually and cannot be shared by two or more participants. In that way everyone would have assigned one different actor.

Once every participant has chosen, they must create a short conspirative narrative, involving the three actors that the participant has choosen. One of them should represent 'Them' and the others should represent an ally and a victim ('Us'). They will have 15 minutes to frame a false narrative in which the actor they chose as 'Them' is represented with the characteristics described in Activity 1, while the actors they chose as 'Allies' should be described in a more friendly way. The idea is that this conspiracy narrative says how 'Them' are trying to hurt 'Us', involving a group of 'Allies' as well. For example:

Them: Chemistry Scientist (professions)

Allies: The City Council (institution)

Us: Rural residents (community)

Conspiracy narrative:

'If the crops and harvest have a bad year and they go bad, it is because the chemistry scientists are creating and distributing specific fertilizers to make our food go bad, not leaving us to produce vegetables, fruit and natural food in general. This will reduce the natural food in the market, which will

be replaced by ultra-processed food created by chemistry scientist, increasing their sells. The government is also involved, allowing relaxation in phytosanitary checking policies so these fertilizers can be distributed in the market. Moreover, the ultimate effect will be farmers moving to the city looking for a new job or profession, since they cannot continue cultivating. Therefore, the population of the city will increase, so will do taxes and revenues for the City Council'.

Every participant will present their conspiracy narrative and they will vote for the best one.

Possible Alterations: make sure to explain well the concepts, and to leave clear instructions. If a name is mentioned twice in the collum, its ok, as long as there is not two participants choosing it at the same time. As facilitator, try your best for them to mix groups and actors, so the variety of inputs generate creative conspiracy theories.

Debrief: In what context do you think these conspiracy theories can be more spread? Was it difficult for you to identify potential conflict between actors and groups? In what ways do people who are part of a group sometimes mistreat people who are not part of that group?

Background reading /external resources
https://www.teachingwithtestimony.com/sites/default/files/resources/TeachingwithTestimony-MS_Activity1_1.pdf