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Baseline study

Joint summary report

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Intro

In Intellectual Output 1 of the SMILES project, researchers from Belgium (Flanders), Netherlands and Spain conducted desk research to describe the current developments for each country around disinformation, particularly those related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In part 2 of the research, they identified training initiatives, courses and media literacy training tools for each country that are specifically focused on the combat against or promotion of resistance to existing disinformation. Each identified activity or tool was characterised by a fixed set of characteristics (appendix 1). In the second stage of this research, some experts for each country were interviewed. Among other things, they were asked for recommendations and tips for interventions that will be developed in Intellectual Output 2 of the SMILES project. All research results were reported in separate country reports. This joint report lists the highlights of the separate country reports. It will end with recommendations for the interventions to be developed in Intellectual Output 2.

Part 1: Disinformation in Belgium (Flanders), Netherlands and Spain

1.1 Disinformation in each country before January 2020

Researchers in Belgium and the Netherlands reported that until the start of 2020 the spread of disinformation in their countries was limited and that public trust in the media was rather high, particularly when compared to other countries such as the US and France. Nevertheless, the Dutch and Flemish governments were still concerned about threats from disinformation due to:

- high use of the internet and digital services and resulting vulnerability to digital deception among their citizenry;
- the preference of younger citizens for online and free news and tendency to read it using smartphones.

According to an educational expert cited in the Belgian report, young people commonly do not search for news but encounter it in their social media timelines. This entails the danger of 'filter bubbles' which makes them vulnerable to disinformation. If young people discuss the accuracy of news messages, they turn first to their parents rather than for instance to their teachers (Belgian country report). Parents in turn tend to emphasise the promotion of a critical attitude rather than providing correct factual information to their children.

The situation in Spain is, according to Spanish researchers, much worse. They portray Spain as a nation with a high vulnerability to disinformation, due to its tradition of political polarisation, the lack of credibility of public institutions and the media among citizens and a rather high number of journalism avoidant internet users.

1.2 Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the spread of disinformation

From the very beginning, the COVID-19 pandemic generated an "overabundance of information – some accurate and some not" (WHO, cited in the Spanish report). The Spanish researchers refer to a variety of reports indicating that, specifically in their

country, citizens admit that they have received false or questionable news about the pandemic on social media and messaging apps.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has also heightened concerns about disinformation in the Netherlands, especially concerns about information that disrupts society. It also seems that false information has become much more politically motivated, while before it was mostly characterised as 'clickbait', pulp news used to induce people to click on advertisements. Nowadays, according to the Dutch country report, a significant part of the population in the Netherlands, including an overrepresentation of younger people, believe in conspiracy theories related to COVID-19.

The Belgian report also highlights that young people are much more susceptible to fake COVID-19 news, which is partly explained by their use of media. Disinformation in Spain refers to health information (detecting and preventing the spread of the virus and the drugs that can or cannot be taken), and politicised information of the kind described above for the Netherlands and Belgium. The Spanish researchers also remarked that health-related hoaxes tend to have an international character while for political, they tend to have a more national character. According to surveys in Spain, the vulnerability of less educated individuals to disinformation on social media is higher than that of well-educated people who rely more on mainstream media.

As some experts in the Dutch study say, although the problem of disinformation seems to be somewhat overhyped at the moment because of the COVID-19 crisis, we have to take into account that the problem will increase in the future due to the rise of deepfakes that make it increasingly difficult to distinguish real from fabricated information.

1.3   Combating disinformation in each country

For all countries, educational programmes and citizen training are the primary strategies used to combat fake news. Fact-checking collaborations at universities and schools are in second place, while deleting messages and prohibiting access are not preferred due to considerations related to freedom of speech.
Most educational initiatives in the Netherlands collaborate on the network platform Mediawijzer.net. The Dutch government delegates responsibility for countering disinformation to independent actors such as media organisations, online platforms, scientists and educators. It only sees a role for itself when security and/or social stability is at stake. Supporting non-governmental initiatives to combat COVID-19 related disinformation is also the strategy used by the Belgian and Flemish governments.

One of these non-governmental organisations in the Netherlands, the Rathenau Institute, calls explicitly for the promotion of 'technological citizenship', making citizens aware of how technology works. On the other hand, technological citizenship is not

the only or most important thing citizens need in order to be resilient to disinformation. In addition to understanding the influence, including opportunities and risks, of technology, emphasis is placed on the importance of properly understanding: the context of information, rhetoric, the way in which fake news creators try to play on emotions, how news is produced and good information seeking skills (Dutch report).

The Spanish report points out that the way governments themselves have communicated about the pandemic (with a tendency toward controlling and nationalistic messages) paves the way for citizen distrust in the government and mainstream media and for politically-motivated disinformation. Dutch experts confirm that the problem of misinformation is also related to general mistrust of the news media by society.

Conclusions for part 1

Disinformation on social media and the internet has increased in all three countries since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Much of it is positioned against government policies in the context of COVID-19, for instance the promotion of vaccinations. The growing number of people who get their information through social media is partly to blame for the increase in disinformation.
The combat against disinformation is supported by national governments but mostly waged by independent organisations in the fields of research, education and work with youth. In Belgium and the Netherlands, national networking organisations on media literacy play an important role. In Spain, fact-checking platforms are playing an important, but insufficient role in combating disinformation and the fundamental role that teachers and librarians should play in the media education of citizens has been highlighted.

Part 2: Existing educational interventions

2.1 Intervention organisations, formats and contexts

The Dutch researchers observe that among organisations that offer interventions to combat disinformation, non-profit organisations are overrepresented. The Belgian

report mentions explicitly the Flemish public broadcasting organisation VRT, which develops and provides "pedagogically well-defined and supported … learning materials" in cooperation with higher education and research institutes.

In Spain, aside from videos on disinformation, which are present online in large numbers, the common format for targeting young people is a training course or workshop conducted in schools or libraries. The Spanish researchers also identified more innovative formats such as a digital escape room, a graphic adventure for the classroom and a fact checker community made up of high school students. The Belgian researchers remarked that a large part of the interventions they found combined a variety of formats, for instance workshops with interactive videos and online guides. Workshops, as the name indicates, use active learning principles.

The context for these interventions is mostly school in the Netherlands. Most interventions involve lesson packages or workshops, both online and offline or in combination. The challenge, according to library professionals in a Dutch focus group, is to give the topic of media literacy and more specifically disinformation a fully-fledged place within the secondary education curriculum, not as a standalone subject but as an integral part of school subjects like citizenship, philosophy of life, mathematics or information science.
Existing interventions are fragmented and local, and the quality and commitment often depend on the school or teacher. Experience has also shown that teachers have little time to delve into this subject and are often reluctant to get started. Although many teachers believe they should be addressing these topics, they do not know how and believe they lack the necessary knowledge and skills.

In Belgium, schools were also the most common environment for intervention efforts in addition to public libraries, but independent learning activities for home use were also identified. It is worth noting that only nine of the 39 intervention campaigns identified in Belgium had clear learning outcomes that were related to the learning objectives of national secondary education curriculums. Those nine interventions may therefore be considered 'formal' approaches.

2.2 Target groups

The researchers in Spain found a large number of initiatives aimed at teachers dealing with media and digital literacy, disinformation and the development of critical thinking among students. Besides workshops for teachers and remote training courses, some didactic guides were also found, though remarkably, comparable initiatives for librarians were lacking.

Spanish researchers mention a third target group for media literacy intervention in addition to children and teachers/librarians: the parents and families of young people. They emphasise the need for more awareness of parental responsibility in countering disinformation and promoting media literacy among children.

In Belgium, one third of the identified intervention initiatives were aimed at informing or training adults (teachers, librarians, youth workers and parents). The other two thirds were targeted directly at adolescents. Even in cases where adults were the original target audience, the final target users for these intervention efforts were still young people.

Intervention campaigns in the Netherlands were almost all targeted at secondary school pupils, though some can also be used by parents/caretakers or teachers. In the interviews, both library professionals and digital literacy experts emphasise the importance of offering training and support to high school teachers.

Opinion exchanges in the IO1 project group meetings led to the conclusion that parental involvement is one of the points that should be explicitly recommended for the intervention initiatives that will be designed in stage IO2 of the SMILES project.

2.3 Topics

The teach-the-teacher activities assessed in Spain were merely training courses/workshops and didactic guides. Training courses are aimed at methods and strategies for developing critical thinking and analytical skills among students, but also feature introductory meetings focused on defining and explaining different techniques that are related to disinformation. Didactic guides and toolkits for teachers are sometimes national initiatives but the Spanish researchers also found international initiatives resulting from, for instance, UNESCO and European collaborations. Training courses and workshops offered by Spanish organisations to secondary education institutes targeted at young people focus on analysis of case studies. In the Netherlands, all interventions were aimed at helping the students to recognise the difference between disinformation and reliable information. Some of those interventions were also aimed at fostering critical thinking and included reflection exercises.
Most of the themes that were found in Dutch interventions were related to underlying technologies (algorithms, deepfakes and hoaxes) or understanding the intentions of disinformation creators (conspiracy theories, polarisation, satire).

Researchers from the Belgian team reported explicitly that 13 of the 39 interventions that they found were targeted at disinformation or fake news related to COVID-19.

When library professionals in the Netherlands were asked what they would advise in terms of theme and scope, they mainly emphasised keeping the message from being too big or abstract and to keep it as closely linked as possible to the personal life of children and their interests. They also emphasised that a subject should not be discussed until there has been a negative experience at school (e.g. with a nude photo or online bullying). Interventions should address children positively and inspire long-term curiosity. Their advice: "Don't condemn what children do (like posting videos on

TikTok/snap chat/Instagram, etc.), but try to join in. Expose them to media forms that enrich their lives (e.g. editing a nice piece of music under a video) while teaching them a substantive lesson."

Experts in the field of media and digital literacy point to the importance of teaching kids to ask critical questions about all sorts of information that they come across, how to distinguish facts from opinions and use their own judgement. It is noted that an intervention should leave room for discussing different perspectives, because young people should be able to explore them and form their own opinions. This requires a classroom atmosphere in which all different points of view are allowed to exist and can be discussed without judgement.

2.4 Educational principles

The older interventions found by the Dutch research team used the principle of 'debunking' (proving that something is less true than it seems), while more recent interventions often used 'prebunking'. The latter principle is often combined with the principle of active learning, or learning by creating your own (fake) news. At the moment that this research was carried out (May and June 2021), interventions based mainly on the principle of prebunking were in the majority in Belgium.

Because of the large gap between the world of young people and that of adults, the Spanish research team recommended investigating whether a community or network with young opinion leaders can be facilitated where members discuss disinformation issues.

As mentioned before, Dutch experts emphasise the importance of preventing resistance and complete distrust. Research shows that interventions can be effective in stimulating critical thinking among young people, but can also lead to cynicism and distrust of all media. To prevent this from happening, any intervention should approach the problem of disinformation through open discussion and interactive formats (see also section 2.3).

2.5 Evidence of intervention impacts

The Belgian researchers remark in their country report that some interventions are firmly grounded in pedagogical theories, but that evaluations of their impact are lacking. The absence of evidence-based education programmes related to disinformation is confirmed by an academic expert cited in the Dutch report. As reported in part 1 of this joint summary, in Belgium as well as in the Netherlands, there are nationwide network organisations that play a pivotal role in the promotion and professionalisation of (news) media literacy education (Mediawijs in Belgium and Netwerk Mediawijzer in the Netherlands).

Conclusions for part 2

The following conclusions can be drawn from the inventory of existing intervention efforts and interviews with media/digital literacy experts and library professionals, as well as from team meetings held by the IO1 project group almost every two weeks:

- In any intervention, it is important to include a training and knowledge part to teach concepts and techniques, and a challenge part where what has been learned can be put into practice (Spanish report). Most recent interventions with such 'challenges' use the principle of prebunking.
  The knowledge part should include how news is produced and framed by journalists. If consumers are better able to recognise what news is in a journalistic sense, they will also be better at recognising misinformation that does not meet those conditions. The Dutch report advises not addressing the issue of disinformation too narrowly, but also to take into account contextual factors and emotions.
- Using different settings (blended learning) and active learning seem to be prerequisites for a successful intervention (Dutch report).
- The goals of intervention initiatives to be designed should not be restricted to knowledge and skills but should include participant attitudes to disinformation. However, the impact of these interventions on participant attitudes can be hard or even impossible to measure after one-stop intervention campaigns that are proposed as part of the SMILES project. Therefore, the Belgian report suggests that the learning outcomes of the planned interventions should also include the impact and possible damage caused by disinformation. This increases the possibility that participants will be willing to combat disinformation in the long run and that their attitudes toward disinformation will be influenced in a positive way.

Recommendations for IO2

- Don't make the topic too broad. Our suggestion is to focus on disinformation and not on the broader topic of 'media literacy'. An alternative term to focus on could be 'news media literacy', which is also considered a facet of the broader construct of media literacy.
- Train-the-teacher workshops are crucial to succeed. Teachers must be confident in their own skills and convinced of the importance of being news media literate. For this, we recommend collaborating with teacher training institutes.
- The fight against disinformation implies that children should learn to think critically. This requires an open learning environment in which different points of view are allowed to exist. How to create such a class environment should also be one of the themes of train-the-teacher workshops.
- We recommend creating intervention(s) that can be easily incorporated into existing curriculums. Resilience to disinformation can be developed as a key skill in many other secondary school subjects, for instance history, social studies, mathematics, science, and language and literature.
- Whether interventions should be offline, online or a blend of both is still under discussion but we tend to recommend blended forms with take home assignments in which parents can be involved. Research in Spain and Belgium shows that interventions that involve parents and caretakers are much more effective than those that do not.
- The length and size of the intervention is still being discussed. We tend to prefer standalone, one-stop interventions that are small in scale and relatively easy to implement. However, we are also aware that many experts point to the importance of repetition and embedding the topic of disinformation (as part of digital literacy) in the larger school picture.
- Formulate concrete learning outcomes for secondary school workshops as well as train-the-trainer workshops. In terms of uptake, the most successful best practices that were identified in Belgium all have well-defined learning outcomes that correspond with the national curriculum.
- For workshops with adolescents between the ages of 12–15, try to connect with 'learning objectives' or 'eindtermen' in secondary school curriculums.
- Don't emphasise negative experiences with media but address children's daily behaviour positively and inspire long-term curiosity.
- Learning outcomes should also focus on knowledge and understanding of the real effects and damage caused by fake news. This increases the possibility that participants will be willing to combat disinformation in the long run and that their attitudes toward disinformation will be influenced in a positive way. The basic measurement instrument that is drafted in IO1 uses five items for knowledge and understanding of media effects.
- The 'skills part' of interventions ('challenges' in the Spanish report) should not be restricted to consumptive evaluation or analysis but should include skills related to 'creating' content.
- Stimulate the development of new information seeking habits in train-the-teacher workshops as well as secondary school workshops to break the bubbles in which participants live.
- Each country report listed at least one short intervention that can be regarded a 'best practice'. They were as follows:
  - Belgium: Edubox Nepnieuws Speciale Editie Corona

o Netherlands: DROG bad news game
o Spain: Learn to Check workshops in schools.

Appendix 1: Criteria that we used to describe interventions

- Type of organisation (for instance: governmental organisation, NGO, library, networking organisation)
- Theme(s) (for instance: digital literacy, media literacy, disinformation)
- Type of intervention(s) (for instance: workshop, game, single lesson, lesson package, checklist)
- Target group(s) (for instance: 12-15-year-olds, adults, parents, teachers, library staff)
- Learning environment (for instance: school, home, library)
- Duration (number of hours, number of sessions)
- Medium (online, offline, blended)
- Learning context and approach (formal, non-formal, informal context, active learning)
- Methodology (debunking, prebunking, triangulation)
- Evidence.