

# **Recognising Extremism and Conspiracy Theories**

Handbook for teachers



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## Consortium



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## 1. Introducing the REACT-handbook

What is the difference between a conspiracy theory and a real conspiracy? Why do people believe in conspiracy theories? How easy or difficult is it to create your own conspiracy narrative? How is digital media connected to the spread of conspiracy theories? And how do democratic societies actually function? These and other questions are the focus of the REACT-handbook.

The Erasmus+ project *Recognising Extremism and Conspiracy Theories* (REACT) was created to support teachers in recognizing and dealing with conspiracy theories and extremist beliefs. To address this challenge a consortium consisting of one research partner and one school partner from four European countries, Austria, Bulgaria, Denmark and Germany, was created. The project has two central objectives: 1. The development of a survey to identify the presence of extremist beliefs and conspiracy theories<sup>1</sup>, and 2. the development of a curriculum and teaching/learning materials. This handbook presents the second of the project objectives and serves to support teachers in various fields of study.

Based on the result of the REACT-survey as well as the discussion within the project consortium four modules with teaching and learning activities were developed by the project partners. All lessons were tested by two partners in two countries and revised – the handbook presents the final versions:

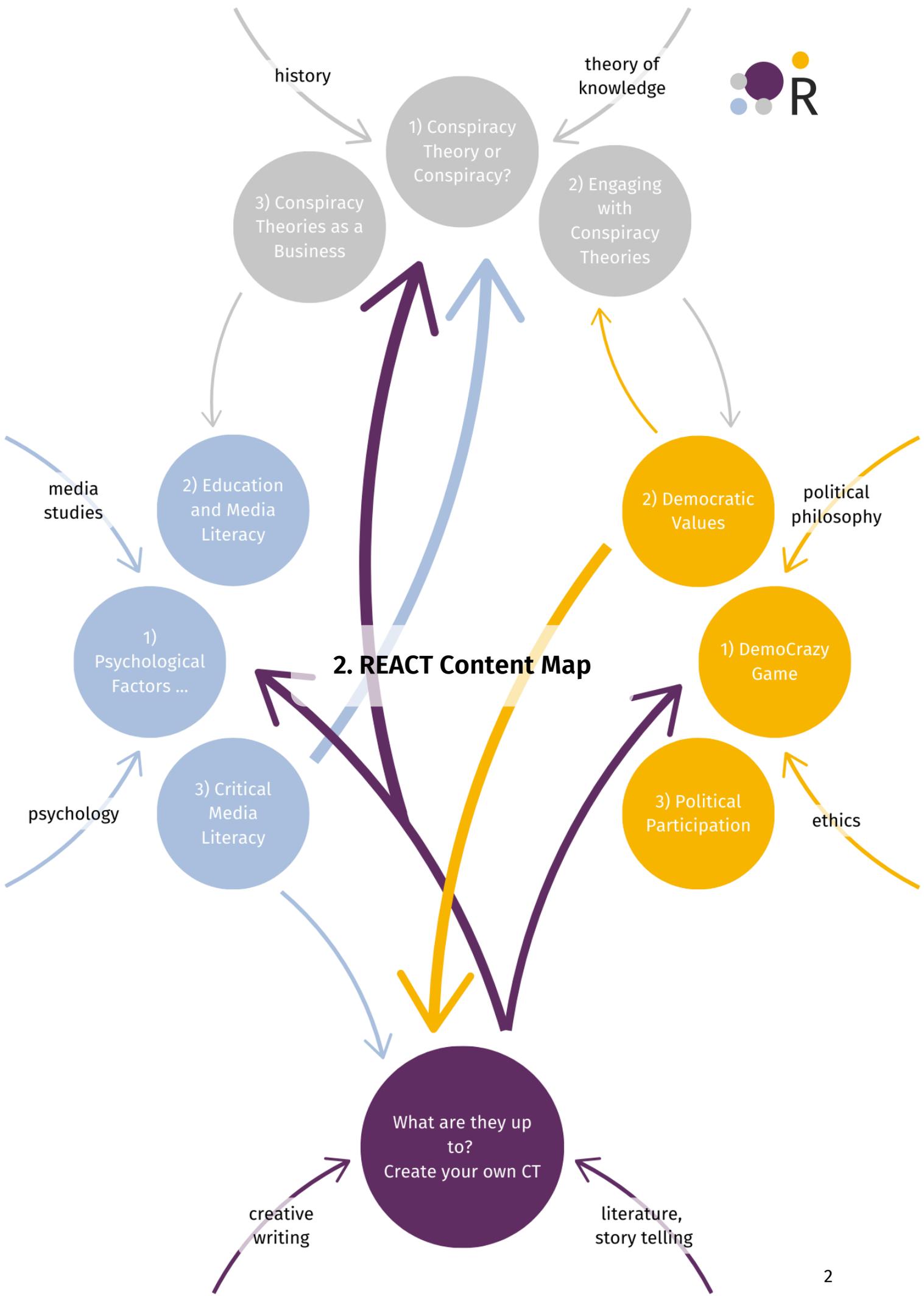
- 1) The **crash course “Cui bono?”** aims to give an introduction into the topic by focusing on three central aspects: The difference between conspiracies and conspiracy theories, why people might believe in the latter and how they can be monetized. The crash course was developed by the team at the *Institute of Didactics of Democracy*.
- 2) **“What are they up to?”** allows students to create their own conspiracy theory and to critically reflect upon the process as well as the appeal of conspiracy narratives. The simulation was created by the team at *Dansk Kommunikation*.
- 3) **Media literacy** has become central to identifying false or misleading information and thus preventing a belief in conspiracy theories. The lessons were developed by the team at *Ethnotolerance*.
- 4) An understanding of democratic societies, values and processes can help to prevent extremist beliefs. The **DemoCrazy Game** and further lessons on **civic education** were designed by the team at *Demokratiezentrum Wien*.

The **REACT content map** on page 2 tries to link the modules to each other. The map also attempts to highlight how the topic of conspiracy theories can be addressed not just in civic education, but in various subjects from ethics to media literacy, history, creative writing or philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup> REACT-Consortium (2024). REACT-survey on conspiracy theories and extremist belief. Manual for teachers. [https://www.idd.uni-hannover.de/fileadmin/idd/Projekte/REACT/IO1/Manuals/Manual-REACT-IO1\\_EN.pdf](https://www.idd.uni-hannover.de/fileadmin/idd/Projekte/REACT/IO1/Manuals/Manual-REACT-IO1_EN.pdf)





### 3. Teaching and Learning Activities

#### 3.1 Crash Course “Cui bono?”

The aim of the crash course is to provide an introduction into the topic of conspiracy theories by highlighting three central aspects:

- Module 1 asks “Real or Fake?” and enables students to differentiate between the characteristics of an actual conspiracy and a conspiracy theory.
- Module 2 addresses the question of what makes a belief in conspiracy theories attractive in two ways: By discussion a story of (de)radicalisation and ways to engage with persons who perpetuate conspiracy narratives.
- Module 3 highlights how conspiracy theories can be monetized.

#### Module 1 “Real or Fake? Differentiating between conspiracy theories and actual conspiracies”

There is the common misconception that conspiracy theories might just be theories about conspiracies that are not proven yet. This false belief is the idea behind the first module of the crash course. Module 1 aims to provide students with characteristics to clearly differentiate between a conspiracy theory and what might be actual historic and current conspiracies. This also provides a definition of the term conspiracy theory.

Conspiracy theories can be defined as “attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots”.<sup>2</sup> For believers nothing happens without reason and instead there is a supposedly secret elite coordinating world events. If students are able to critically analyse these and other characteristic which are typical of the narrative structure of conspiracy theories, they are less likely to adopt them.

The first lesson provides the students with characteristics in order to be able to differentiate between a historic example of a conspiracy and a conspiracy theory. In the second lesson students are asked to apply this differentiation to other examples of their own choosing.

#### Lesson 1 “Conspiracy theory or conspiracy?” Part 1

Age group	14-18 years
Aims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The students are able to differentiate between the characteristics of a conspiracy and a conspiracy theory.</li> <li>• The students define the term ‘conspiracy theory’.</li> </ul>

<sup>2</sup> Douglas, K. M., Uscinski, J. E., Sutton, R. M., Cichoka, A., Nefes, T., Ang, C.S. & Deravi, V. (2019). Understanding Conspiracy Theories. *Advances in Political Psychology*, 40(1), 3-35.

<b>Overall time</b>	45 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	No preparation for the lesson itself is needed.
<b>List of materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>M1: Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories - Differences</li> </ul>

## Overview of phases

Phase	Aim	Time (min.)
<b>Introduction</b>	Students' concepts of what a conspiracy theory is are activated. This serves as a basis for the entire module and is connected to later phases	15'
<b>Work phase</b>	Students are able to identify the characteristics of conspiracy theories and what differentiates them from actual conspiracies.	20'
<b>Conclusion</b>	Students reflect upon the lesson and are able to define what a conspiracy theory is.	10'

## Detailed description of steps

### Introduction (15'):

- The teacher announces the topic of the lesson (conspiracy theories) or the question of the lesson and asks students: "What do you think about when you hear the term "conspiracy theory"? What conspiracy theories have you heard about? Where have you heard about them?"
- The answers are collected in a mind map either collectively or as an individual work phase. The results can be used as a starting point for further discussion in class, e.g. if a topic (e.g. COVID-19) or a medium (e.g. TikTok) is particularly present.
- Transition: Statements (or the absence of statements) about what conspiracy theories actually are, are suitable as a transition to the next phase. Teachers can raise the question "Is there a difference between an actual conspiracy or a conspiracy theory?" This topic is dealt with in the text.

Alternative introduction: As an alternative to the mind map, it was proposed during testing to use the question "Is there a difference between an actual conspiracy or a conspiracy theory?" or "Are conspiracy theories just conspiracies that are not proven yet?" as a problem to start (now a part of the transition).

### Work phase (20'):

- The teacher hands out M1. Task 1) ("Characterise the terms conspiracies and conspiracy theories in a table") should be completed by everyone, while task 2) ("Use the table to analyse the plausibility of a conspiracy or conspiracy theory you know")

can be started by those students who have already finished the first task. As an option to ease the work process a draft of the table with the headlines at the top and the categories in a column at the side can be given to the students.

- **Optional task:** Students are asked to add the examples from the text for the characteristics of either a conspiracy or a conspiracy theory.
- Students individually work on the text.
- As soon as all students have completed task 1), the results are compared. The solution(s) can be visualised by the pupils or the teacher, depending on the technical equipment:

	<b>conspiracy</b>	<b>conspiracy theory</b>
<b>goal</b>	defined goal	No clear goal
<b>time frame</b>	Short time frame	Long or indeterminate timeframe
<b>number of people</b>	Small number of people involved	Many or indeterminate number of people
<b>role of chance</b>	Influenced by chance	Chance does not matter

#### **Conclusion (10'):**

- The teacher asks whether some of the information or arguments were particularly surprising.
- Students reflect on the information provided in the text M1.
- The teacher asks students to try and define what a conspiracy theory is in one sentence.
- Students create a definition based on the characteristics defined in the work phase. This can additionally be compared to other definitions of the term.

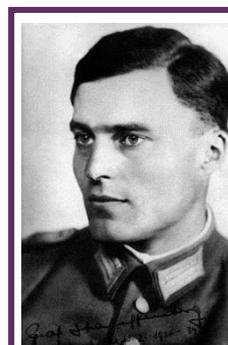
## Material 1

### Conspiracies and Conspiracy Theories – Differences

The word conspiracy theory is currently on everyone's lips. But what exactly are conspiracy theories? And how do they relate to real conspiracies? Let's start with 5 conspiracies first. Conspiracies describe actions in which several people join forces to achieve a common goal that often harms other people.

Conspiracies do not have to be on a large 10 scale and have occurred many times in history. The assassination of Julius Caesar by a group of Roman senators or the failed overthrow of National Socialist rule in Germany by an assassination attempt on 15 Adolf Hitler on 20 July 1944 are classic examples of a group joining forces to the detriment of others.

Conspiracy theories refer to the assumption that important social events 20 are caused or have been caused by the conspiracy of a group of powerful people. At first glance, it looks as if conspiracy theories are simply conspiracies that have not yet been proven. However, cultural 25 scientist Michael Butter disagrees and points out four key differences between real conspiracies and conspiracy theories: The first two differences concern (1) the goal and (2) the time frame of the events. 30 Real conspiracies are events over a limited time frame and have a clear goal. Whether it is an assassination, such as the



**Claus Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg** was the central figure in a military conspiracy that attempted to end National Socialist rule in Germany by assassinating Adolf Hitler on 20 June 1944.

murder of Julius Caesar, or a coup d'état, such as the attempted overthrow of 35 National Socialist rule in Germany, the number of people involved and conspirators is manageable and the goal is clearly defined. Conspiracy theories, on the other hand, have a more extensive 40 time frame and no precise goal. For example, it is not possible to say exactly what "world domination" is and when it will be achieved. The conspirators in conspiracy theories have also been 45 working on their plan for decades or even centuries.

This is also linked to the third distinction: The (3) number of people involved. Until now, only a small number of people have 50 been involved in real conspiracies. This is important for a successful conspiracy, as more confidants increase the likelihood that someone will share the secret with the public or make a mistake and the plan 55 will be exposed. Conspiracy theories, on the other hand, create scenarios in which significantly more people must be

## Material 1

involved. A falsification of the moon landing, which was watched live on television by millions of people, would require tens of thousands of helpers and accomplices.

The physicist Robert Grimes has developed a formula based on known real



conspiracies to estimate the maximum time it would probably take for a conspiracy to be uncovered with a certain number of confidants. While it can take up to 25 years for 500 people, it is a maximum of 5 years for 2500 people.

This is also the final difference between conspiracies and conspiracy theories: The (4) coincidence. Real conspiracies often go wrong or are uncovered by chance events. In the assassination attempt on Adolf Hitler in 1944, for example, an explosive device did not work properly and the surveillance of American citizens

by the secret service NSA was uncovered by Edward Snowden because he had access to documents that he should not have had. In conspiracy theories, however, this coincidence does not exist; everything is planned and interconnected. Every important social event is prepared and an important step that brings the conspirators one step closer to their goal. So even if it seems at first glance that real



conspiracies and fictional conspiracy theories are very similar, on closer inspection they are not. Real conspiracies only work on a small scale and with clear objectives, and even then, something can always go wrong by chance. With conspiracy theories, nothing is left to chance, the number of actors is unlimited and the goals cannot be clearly determined.

### Tasks:

- 1) **Compare** the terms conspiracies and conspiracy theories in a table. Take into account aspects such as the number of people involved.
- 2) **Analyse** the plausibility of a conspiracy or conspiracy theory you know by using the table created in task 1).

## Lesson 2 “Conspiracy theory or conspiracy?” Part 2

<b>Age group</b>	14-18 years
<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The students can analyse current or historical events to decide whether they are more likely to be a conspiracy or a conspiracy theory.</li> <li>The students consolidate their knowledge of conspiracy theories and conspiracies while applying it actively.</li> </ul>
<b>Overall time</b>	45 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	No preparation for the lesson itself is needed. However, this lesson cannot be performed if lesson 1 has not been carried out as the lessons build up on each other.
<b>List of materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mind maps from lesson 1</li> </ul> <p>Additional materials:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Digital devices for research</li> </ul>

### Overview of phases

Phase	Aim	Time (min.)
<b>Warm up/Recap</b>	Students recall the topics of the previous lesson and choose a topic to investigate during the research phase.	5'
<b>Research</b>	Students are able to conduct their own research. They can apply the characteristics developed in lesson 1 to an example of their own choosing.	20'
<b>Comparison and conclusion</b>	Students compare their results and can identify similarities or differences between several conspiracy theories or conspiracies.	20'

### Detailed description of steps

#### Warm up/Recap (5'):

- The teacher shows the mind map created in lesson 1 and asks students to form groups of 3-5 students.
- The groups are asked to either pick a conspiracy theory (or an event that might be a conspiracy) which they would like to investigate.
- Students recall topics discussed in the previous lesson. In groups, they pick a topic they would like to investigate.

### Research (20’):

- In groups, students apply the criteria developed in the previous lesson to examples they are familiar with. Depending on the ability of the groups, the table can be applied to one or two examples. Depending on their technical equipment, the pupils can use digital devices for further research. The results should also be visualised in the form of a table similar to the table in lesson 1.
- At best, different examples are used by different groups. Depending on the students' prior knowledge and political interest, the following topics can be addressed with regard to real conspiracies, for example:
  - political assassinations (environmental activists, e.g. Berta Cáceres),
  - economic conspiracies (for example, the alliance of various cigarette manufacturers to cover up the harmful effects of smoking).

With regard to conspiracy theories, the following examples can be suggested:

- flat earth,
- climate change conspiracy theories,
- or satirical conspiracy theories (e.g. Birds Aren't Real).

### Comparison and conclusion (20’):

- Some or all groups present their work.
- If necessary, the teacher comments on the results or brings them back into the room for discussion. At the end, all students should have created the table from Task 1) of Material 1 and the table created in the in-depth study with an example.
- For further reflection, students can be asked to discuss their research process, the quality of the sources they found or what they think might makes a belief in their chosen example of a conspiracy theory attractive to people (the later question would create a link to the next module).

## Module 2 “Engaging with conspiracy theories”

“Why do some people actually believe in conspiracy theories?” was one of the most frequent question raised by students during the testing of module 1. Many young people nowadays encounter some version of a conspiracy theory in their daily digital media consumption. Sometimes conspiratorial content, if so identified, is consumed as a form of entertainment and the ideas presented are regarded as outlandish or even crazy. It can leave one wondering how anyone might believe in a conspiracy theory. And also, how you could respond to a person whose view of the world seems very different.

In this module students can engage with both of these questions. Lesson 1 provides a story of a man who radicalised as a teenager and ended up holding extreme conspiratorial views. The article allows students to engage with the question “What makes a belief in conspiracy theories attractive?” to some people and furthermore, indicates factors that favoured a path to deradicalization. In lesson 2 students can examine strategies in how to talk with a person perpetuating conspiracy narratives. These strategies are drawn from advice given by counselling centres on conspiracy thinking.

### Lesson 1 “What makes a belief in conspiracy theories attractive?”

<b>Age group</b>	14-18 years
<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The students can identify the aspects which might make it attractive for a person to believe in a conspiracy theory.</li> </ul>
<b>Overall time</b>	45 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	No preparation for the lesson itself is needed.
<b>List of materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>M1: Article</li> <li>M2: Functions of Conspiracy Theories</li> </ul>

### Overview of phases

Phase	Aim	Time (min.)
<b>Introduction</b>	Students brainstorm first ideas or contribute their existing knowledge regarding the main question “what might make a conspiracy theory attractive to believe in.”	5’
<b>Exploration</b>	Students read the article in depth.	20’
<b>Analysis</b>	Students identify key functions and characteristics of conspiracy narratives in the example given.	15’
<b>Conclusion</b>	Students reflect on the main question in the face of the new information.	5’

## Detailed description of steps

### Introduction (5’):

- The teacher introduces the topic of the lesson and asks the students to brainstorm what might make conspiracy theories attractive to believe in. The answers are collected in plenary.
- Note: If module 1 was completed, an example of a conspiracy theory can be picked from that module. Otherwise, a more “common” conspiracy theory such as Flat Earth can be used as an example

### Exploration (20’):

- The teacher introduces M1 as one example of a person who came to believe in conspiracy theory and does not anymore – a story of radicalization and also deradicalization.
- Students read M1 individually. They look at the content carefully and write down subheadings for different parts of the article. In small groups or in pairs, students compare their results.
- Students present their subheadings to the class.  
Note: During testing, usually 4-5 subheadings were chosen.

### Analysis (15’):

- The teacher introduces M2 which summarizes key functions and characteristics of conspiracy theories.
- Students read M2 and reread M1 in order to identify some functions and characteristics in Gerald’s story.

### Conclusion (5’):

- In order to reflect on what might make a belief in conspiracy theories attractive to some people the results of the previous explanatory phase and the warm-up are discussed together:
  - Which features that make conspiracy theories attractive apply to Gerald?
  - Which initial thought during the introduction do you find more or less plausible now?
  - Which questions are left unanswered in your opinion?
- Students consider the notes from the introduction as well as their analysis and contribute to the classroom discussion.

## Lesson 2 “How could you respond to conspiracy theories”

<b>Age group</b>	14-18 years
<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The students are able to examine strategies in how to talk with a person perpetuating conspiracy narratives.</li> <li>The students can reflect on the challenges of talking to a person who believes in conspiracy theories.</li> </ul>
<b>Overall time</b>	45 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	No preparation for the lesson is needed.
<b>List of materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>M3: Dialogue strategies</li> <li>M4: Role cards</li> </ul> <p><u>Note:</u> To reduce the number of pages or files, M3 and M4 can be given out together.</p>

### Overview of phases

Phase	Aim	Time (min.)
<b>Introduction</b>	This phase creates a transition between the two lessons and integrates students’ experiences talking to someone believing in a conspiracy theory.	10’
<b>Exploration</b>	Students learn about strategies for conversations with a person believing in conspiracy theories.	10’
<b>Simulated discussion</b>	Students try out dialogue strategies in a small simulation.	20’
<b>Conclusion</b>	Students reflect on the simulated discussions.	5’

### Detailed description of steps

#### Introduction (10’):

- The teacher introduces the topic of the lesson and its link to the previous lesson: “After exploring why it might be attractive to believe in conspiracy narratives, we will now find out about strategies in order to respond to such statements.”
- The teacher asks students to discuss their experiences of talking to someone making conspiratorial statements (or if that does not apply, Gerald’s story from M1 can be used as an example) and think about what was difficult or what was helpful.
- In pairs, students discuss their experiences and share their main points with the class.

### Exploration (10’):

- The teacher introduces M3 and goes through the advice given step by step.
- Students read M3 and connect the steps to what they discussed in the introduction.

### Simulated discussion (20’):

- The teacher separates students into smaller groups and hands out corresponding role cards (M4):
  - “Conspiracy theorists”: Students who are volunteering to take the perspective of a conspiracy theorist using M4. They can use the scenario provided or a different conspiracy theory.
  - “Counter-arguers”: Students willing to argue against a conspiracy theory based on the advice in M3. There can be several smaller groups of counter-arguers.
- Students choose a role. All groups prepare notes (10’).
- The teacher separates students into groups of 3-4 students depending on the group size and number of volunteers for the different roles. Each group should consist of the following roles: 1 conspiracy theorist, 1-2 counter-arguers, 1-2 observers (observers can be students from either previous group, more likely additional counter-arguers).
- Students take part in a simulate discussion as conspiracy theorists, counter-argues or observers.

### Conclusion (5’):

- The teacher asks students to reflect on the group discussion:
  - What were challenges during the simulation?
  - What dialogue strategies were helpful?
  - How did your role make you feel?
- Students share their thoughts and feelings about the group discussion.

## Conspiracy myths and aluminium hats – A dropout comes clean

An Article from Frankfurter Rundschau by Paul Gäbler; Status: 25/02/2022;<sup>3</sup>

*Gerald believes: The earth is hollow. The ISS space station isn't real. But then an antidote takes effect.*

Frankfurt – The message [...] hangs on the neighbours' garden fence: '5G kills! Protect our children!' No, says Gerald [...] He hasn't yet had the opportunity to get 5 to know the people next door. The banner put him off. Nevertheless, he wanted to annoy them a little and named his WLAN '5G healing frequency'. Perhaps a brief exchange would be interesting after all, 10 he says, but it would probably be of little use. After all, it was not very different for him in the past. And you are not responsible for every person in the world. [...]

15 It is not the first time that people from the press sat at his table. Gerald wants to tell his story, hoping to make amends. Because Gerald was a supporter of conspiracy theories. At some point, he 20 believed everything. The earth would shrink, would be hollow. And filled with hydrogen. He also suspected a secret world government that controlled the destiny of mankind. All politicians, all 25 company directors – just puppets of the powerful. Gerald saw the whole world as a huge problem, until he wondered whether he himself might not be the problem. 'I thought I was super smart, but in the end, 30 I was just very stupid,' says Gerald today. [...]

Gerald does not like to talk about his time at school. He did not get on with the other young people and they did not get on with

35 him. Sometimes his classmates asked him for the solutions before physics exams, and he always got an A without studying, he says. He had few friends – and not necessarily the best ones either. One day, 40 one of them gave him a book. That is where it all began.

'Time for the Truth' by Klaus Ewert became Gerald's gateway drug. When he picked it up for the first time, all the knowledge he 45 previously had about the world was pulverised: Humanity had only existed for 1000 years after the previous civilisation had been destroyed by a planetary collision. Einstein's theory of relativity? 50 Disproved by apparent logic. Gerald's world was turned upside down. And he became addicted. For more and more, for ever more extreme knowledge. Gerald stopped voting and at some point, even 55 stopped going to the doctor. It was all a big lie anyway. [...]

It is the typical career of a conspiracy theorist, as described in the book 'Fake Facts' by economist Katharina Nocun and 60 psychologist Pia Lamberty: 'For people who want to feel special and unique and consciously "swim against the tide", such ideas are particularly attractive.'

If you ask Gerald today why he believed all 65 these things back then, he says that he wanted to be someone special. And now

<sup>3</sup> Source: <https://www.fr.de/politik/verschwoerungstheorien-mythen-alu-huete-aussteiger-gegen-mittel-91360678.html> [Last accessed on 03/06/2024] – reprinted with permission from the Frankfurter Rundschau and translated by the REACT-consortium.

## Material 1

he knew a lot of things that others did not know.

Gerald has never seen the inside of a university, nor has he completed his A-levels. In his early 20s, when he was already fully immersed in the world of conspiracy stories, he got a job in an IT company through contacts, as a system administrator. He taught himself the necessary skills. [...]

It was a work colleague who finally got the ball rolling for him. After Gerald had expressed his own theory on the formation of the solar system, he asked dryly: 'Why do you believe that?' He then had to think about it for a long time.

Thomas, the husband of Gerald's eldest sister, also confirms that it was terrible with him. Discussions with him were agonising. Whatever argument was put forward, Gerald knew better. At family celebrations, people hoped fervently that he would keep quiet. [...]

Once, they got into a fight over a simple logical error. Gerald had claimed that the International Space Station (ISS) could not be real because it could not withstand the external pressure. But Thomas persisted: there are natural laws. But sometimes even he was fed up. 'Gerald didn't want to argue, he wanted to be right. Today, he's the brother-in-law you always wanted.'

Gerald cannot say exactly when it happened, it was a chain of events. He was in his late 20s when he cut off contact with some of his few friends. 'The only thing that kept us together was our belief in the big conspiracy.' [...]

Today, he says that breaking off contact was a good decision. He is grateful for many things, for his family, who never gave up on him and never shied away from a discussion with him. For his girlfriend, whom he met at a party shortly after leaving the world of conspiracies. [...] 'I'm glad I managed to quit before the pandemic. I don't think my family would have stood by me then.'

Gerald does not want to give his surname or where he lives because he is worried about 'some idiots from the internet' who might stalk him. Because Gerald is looking for publicity. Under the name 'Ascendancer', he takes part in the discussion on YouTube and picks apart the arguments of Covid-19 deniers in short videos. [...]

In the meantime, however, the flood of messages has decreased significantly. This is also due to the fact that the platform is blocking more and more channels from Covid-19 deniers. Most of them are now migrating to other platforms where they only have to compete with other conspiracy theorists. As a result, most of them become radicalised even faster. Gerald says that this development worries him. [...]

He hopes that his example will set a precedent as a lesson in how to deal with conspiracy believers like him. 'The most important thing is to respect people despite their views. Don't go ballistic, persevere and insist on the facts.' Even if that is exhausting. And always keep in touch. [...] Perhaps he should have a chat with his neighbours.

## Functions and Characteristics of Conspiracy Theories

The narratives of conspiracy theories can serve several functions for people who believe in them:

### Emotions

... such as power, control and self-efficacy replace fear and helplessness.

### Explanations

... are offered for crises and uncertainties.

### Group Membership & Acknowledgement

Groups of “good” and “bad” are formed, which lend a sense of power. While conspiracy theorists assume that they have recognized the truth and have secret knowledge, the outsiders are like puppets who are manipulated by the conspirators.

### Scapegoating

Culprits are identified for social grievances.

### Coherence

The own belief is confirmed by using suitable evidence

Further characteristics of conspiracy theories are:

Planning	Secrecy	Interconnectedness
Nothing happens by accident. Coincidences are reinterpreted	Nothing is as it seems.	Everything is connected.



## Dialogue Strategies

Statements containing or referencing a conspiracy theory can be unsettling. Before a conversation, it is important to decide for yourself **what your intentions and goals are**:

What kind of relationship do I have with the person and how do I want it to be in the future? How confident do I feel in dealing with conspiracy theories? How firm am I in my own views? What time and emotional capacities can I devote at the moment?

This is a list is based on the advice given by counselling centres on conspiracy theories:

- 1) **Expand your knowledge:** If you understand how conspiracy theories are structured and why people believe in them, you can empathise better and feel more confident in the conversation.
- 2) **Do not isolate yourself:** Staying calm, showing empathy but also being able to distance yourself appropriately are important aspects if you want to stay in the conversation in the long term.
- 3) **Have a personal conversation:** You should take your time and show a willingness to listen to the other person. Accusations should be avoided. I-messages can help with the answers so that you can contribute your own views and values.
- 4) **Stay critical:** It is important to remain critical yourself. Critical questions should help to better understand the other person and show understanding. At the same time, asking questions can help to recognise the contradictions in the conspiracy narratives.
- 5) **Address emotions:** Facts remain important as counter-arguments. At the same time, you should ask about the reasons for believing in conspiracy theories.
- 6) **Demonstrate complexity:** Conspiracy theories try to confirm their world view by not accepting coincidence and only allowing information that confirms their beliefs. Contradictions should therefore be pointed out and it should be made clear that reality is much more complex, that coincidences exist and that (political) action can also have unplanned consequences.
- 7) **Draw boundaries:** If openly discriminatory remarks are made during the conversation or the conversation causes discomfort, it is always okay to point out a boundary. If a personal boundary has been crossed, it is also possible to end the conversation and prioritise your own needs.
- 8) **Get help:** There are now various counselling centres on conspiracy theories. You can refer others to them or get support yourself.



## Role Cards

### Scenario: The computer simulation theory

“Humanity lives in a computer simulation and every moment of our lives is controlled by a higher power. The simulation is designed to test and analyse human behaviour in order to gain insights into human nature. It is also intended to gain insights into people, their environment and changes. So-called ‘miracles’ are also possible – events that are too perfect to have occurred purely by chance.”

### Conspiracy Theorists

- Pretend to be knowledgeable and enlightened. Make an effort to convince other people.
- Express any suspicions and spread rumours, which you then present as truth.
- Use whatever you can think of as supposed proof for your theory. Repeat your arguments many times and remain stubborn.
- Meet critical questions with counter-questions. Simply turn counter-arguments around until they seem to support your theory.
- Refer to dubious sources (e.g. alleged ‘secret statistics from the secret services’).
- Back up your arguments with strange claims and create strange correlations (e.g. ‘attributable to artificial intelligence’ or ‘emitting mysterious electromagnetic radiation’).
- Refer to ‘dark forces’ and uses buzzwords such as ‘influential’, ‘powerful’, ‘manipulated’, ‘in secret’, ‘conspiracy’, ‘string-pullers’ etc. No claim, no matter how crude, is too far-fetched, no speculation, no matter how daring, is too outlandish.

### Counter-Arguers

Read the strategies for a dialogue (M3) with conspiracy theorists. In preparing to argue against the proponents of conspiracy theories pay particularly careful attention to points 3 to 7. Prepare some questions and arguments to engage with the conspiracy theorists.

### Observers

You observe both parties: conspiracy theorists and the people who argue against them.

- Concentrate not only on the content, but also on how the statements are ‘packaged’. What rhetorical tricks and argumentation strategies were used?
- Which arguments did you find convincing and why?

## Module 3 “Conspiracy theories as a business”

This module focuses on the monetization of conspiracy theories. There are various companies, platforms, or individuals that instrumentalize conspiracy theories to gain attention and thereby advertise and sell their products and services. Social media and digital platforms play a crucial role in amplifying these messages, using algorithms to target vulnerable audiences and maximize profits. For young people, it is especially relevant to be able to detect these manipulative marketing strategies as they start entering the consumer market and are regularly exposed to targeted advertising and sponsored content. Understanding how emotional manipulation through the usage of conspiracy theories is used to drive sales is essential.

This module engages with the case of Alex Jones and his company, Infowars. This example illustrates how conspiracy theories have been commercialized for profit. Jones, described by Zoe Sherman, a lecturer at Merrimack College, as an “ideological entrepreneur,” built a large following through his radio show and website attracting millions of visitors monthly during his peak popularity in 2017-2018.<sup>4</sup> He has used these platforms not only to propagate far-right conspiracy theories but also to sell a variety of products. For every fear or threat that he stokes, there is a corresponding product solution available for purchase on Infowars.

In the first lesson, “Making Money with Fear and Anger,” students can familiarize themselves with Alex Jones and Infowars, examining how he leverages conspiracy theories to increase his business sales. In lesson 2 students apply their knowledge to create their own product in connection to the conspiratorial business model and discuss ways they can protect themselves and others from falling victim to manipulative marketing strategies.

### Lesson 1 “Making money with fear and anger”

<b>Age group</b>	15-18 years
<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students analyse selected products and articles from Infowars regarding conspiratorial elements and emotions that are being evoked.</li> <li>• Students explain how conspiracy theories can be used to increase business sales using the example of Alex Jones and Infowars.</li> <li>• Students discuss if conspiracy theory-based marketing strategies can be considered dangerous as they may have broader societal consequences.</li> </ul>
<b>Overall time</b>	45 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	No preparation for the lesson itself is needed.

<sup>4</sup> Harper, J. (2021): How to make money with fake news. <https://www.dw.com/en/the-conspiracy-business-how-to-make-money-with-fake-news/a-56660466> [09.10.2024]

	If the teacher is unacquainted with Alex Jones, it may be beneficial to gain a cursory understanding of him and Infowars.
<b>List of materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• M1: Infowars materials</li> <li>• M2: Alex Jones and Infowars</li> <li>• M3: If Infowars was a house</li> </ul>

## Overview of phases

Phase	Aim	Time (min.)
<b>Warm-up</b>	The students get introduced to products from Infowars to raise their interest and to make them start thinking about Infowars' potential customers and their motives.	5'
<b>Work phase 1</b>	The students familiarize themselves with Alex Jones and Infowars.	10'
<b>Transition</b>	It gets ensured that every student knows who Alex Jones and Infowars are and questions can be clarified.	5'
<b>Work phase 2</b>	Students analyse products from Infowars in detail to investigate how conspiracy theories are a part the business model.	15'
<b>Evaluation</b>	<p>The students share and compare their results and explain how the Infowars business model works.</p> <p>Moreover, the students discuss if conspiracy theory-based marketing strategies can be considered dangerous as they may have broader societal consequences, such as fostering distrust in institutions and deepening social divides.</p>	10'

## Detailed description of steps

### Warm-up (5'):

- The teacher presents three pictures (M1) to the students and asks them to describe what they see, who they think would buy these products and why people would buy these products (think-pair-share).
- Students describe the pictures and answer the questions.
- The teacher leads over to work phase I: "In the following, you will investigate how people sell these products by analysing their marketing strategies."

### Work phase 1 (10’):

- The teacher hands out materials M2 and M3 and informs the students about their task: “Please read M2 and fill out the first two key points on M3 1) who is the owner and 2) which products are offered?”
- Students work individually.

### Transition (5’):

- The students share their results. Questions can be clarified.
- The teacher leads over to work phase II: “Now you know who A. Jones is and what Infowars is. In the following, you will investigate Alex Jones’ business model further and find out more about his sales strategies.”

### Work phase 2 (15’):

- The teacher presents the task to the students: “Please complete exercise 2 from M3. (Use the questions as a guideline to analyse the materials (M1)). Use your results to answer the question ‘What are the pillars of Infowars?’ and fill out the pillars. You do not have to analyse all materials. Select those which interest you most. You will do this in groups.”
- The teacher divides the class into groups of four students.
- In groups, students analyse the materials (M1) with the help of M3 and complete M3 by filling out the pillars.

### Evaluation (10’):

- The teacher moderates the evaluation of the analysis. The teacher shows M3 again and asks the students to please share their results and ideas. The teacher notes down the students’ results.
- Suggested solution for M3:
  - 1) The owner: Alex Jones
  - 2) Which products are offered?
    - News (right-hand side): online news platform, articles, videos, politically right-wing
    - Products (left-hand side): online shop for supplement, survival gears, prepper products
  - 3) What are the pillars of Infowars?
    - A) Emotions: fear, hate, anxiety, suspicion
    - B) Sales Strategy: for every threat there is a “solution” for sale (e.g. survival gear for the breakdown of society/order)
    - C) Conspiratorial Elements: “us” against “them”, secret plots, “hidden truths”, new world order, globalists

- The teacher briefly summarizes how Alex Jones commercializes conspiracy theories to increase business sales.
- The teacher asks the students to discuss whether these marketing strategies can be considered dangerous as they may have broader societal consequences, such as fostering distrust in institutions and deepening social divides.

## Lesson 2 “Better be prepared!”

<b>Age group</b>	15-18 years
<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The students can apply the marketing strategies of Alex Jones to other contexts.</li> <li>• The students develop suggestions on how they can protect themselves and others from falling for manipulative marketing strategies related to conspiracy theories.</li> <li>• The students comment on whether it matters if people who profit in the broader sense from spreading conspiracy theories actually believe in them.</li> </ul>
<b>Overall time</b>	45 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	<p>No preparation for the lesson itself is needed if the previous lesson was performed. If it was not, the students can either read a short info text about Alex Jones and his methods (M2) or the teacher informs the students. Additionally, the teacher can show M3 to the students.</p> <p>However, if the teacher has not heard of Alex Jones before it may be useful to familiarize oneself with him briefly.</p> <p>Moreover, if the teacher does not know what conspiracy theories are, their characteristics and functions, it will be helpful to do some research on conspiracy theories as the concept is not explained in this lesson.</p>
<b>List of materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• M1: Infowars materials (see lesson 1 of this module)</li> <li>• M4: Create your own “Prepper-product”</li> </ul> <p>Additional materials:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Posters and Pencils</li> </ul>

## Overview of phases

Phase	Aim	Time (min.)
Warm-up	The students revise Alex Jones' sales strategies in a playful manner.	5'
Work phase	The students have to apply their knowledge of conspiracy theory-related business models to develop an ad for their own product in the style of Alex Jones.	15'
Evaluation	The students evaluate each other's products and reflect on their process of development.	15'
Transfer	The students develop suggestions on how they can protect themselves and others from falling for manipulative marketing strategies related to conspiracy theories.	10'

## Detailed description of steps

### Warm-up (5'):

- The Teacher shows pictures of products that are sold in the Infowars shop (M1).
- Students work in pairs. One of them takes on the role of the salesperson and the other takes on the role of a potential customer. The salesperson chooses a product from the selection (M1) and has got two minutes to try to sell the product to the customer. After two minutes, the students swap roles.
- Afterwards, the teacher asks the students about their experiences and which strategies they used as a salesperson. Then, the teacher briefly recapitulates how Alex Jones uses conspiracy theories to sell his products on Infowars.
- The teacher leads over to the work phase: "After you have already learned a lot about Alex Jones' methods, you will use your knowledge to create your own prepper product today."

### Work phase (15'):

- The teacher explains the task to the students: The aim is to create an ad or a poster for your own product in the style of Alex Jones. These questions can serve as guidelines:
  - Who is the product made for? (target group)
  - Which emotions, insecurities and conspiracy theories are you addressing?
  - What is your product a "solution" for?
- In groups, the students develop a product and a marketing strategy for their product. The students should create a poster/an ad. On the poster has to be the product's name, a drawing (sketch) and a short text that informs the potential customers about



the product and its advantages. The students can use their notes from the previous lesson (M2) for support.

#### **Evaluation (15'):**

- The groups of students display their posters all around the classroom.
- The teacher explains the procedure: “Now you have got five minutes to walk around and to take a look at the others’ products. Think about which product you would buy.”
- The students do a gallery walk around the classroom and look at the others’ products.
- Teacher asks the students:
  - Which product would you buy and why?
  - Which strategies did you use to market your product and why?
  - Where are similarities to A.J. strategies?
- The students evaluate each other’s products and reflect on their process of development.

#### **Transfer (10'):**

- The teacher asks the students:
  - How can you protect yourselves and others from falling victim to manipulative marketing strategies? What tips would you give others so that they don't fall for it?
  - What are specific features of conspiracy theory-based marketing strategies?
- The students discuss or comment on the questions.



## Infowars Material Selection



### SURVIVAL SHIELD X-2 - NASCENT IODINE

The globalists want you to be run down and unhealthy so they can dominate your life. Fight back with one of nature's greatest essentials.

[Check out the all new Survival Shield X-2 Nascent Iodine Spray here!](#)

Leading the way into the next generation of super high -quality nascent iodine, Infowars Life Survival Shield X-2 is back!

\$39.95

★★★★★ 5.0

[143 Reviews](#)

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### ONE TIME \$25 SPONSORSHIP

Unlike the Main Stream Media and other big tyrannical organizations, we aren't sponsored by the globalists. We're sponsored directly by you!

Your sponsorship will go directly to supporting the Infowars Crew doing what they do best - fighting against tyranny and revealing the truth while paving the way for Alternative Media around the world.

\$25.00

★★★★★ 5.0

[72 Reviews](#)

[Add Your Review](#) 6

<sup>5</sup> Screenshot from Infowars, <https://www.infowarsstore.com/health-and-wellness/infowars-life/survival-shield-x-2-nascent-iodine>, accessed: 2024, March 14.

<sup>6</sup> Screenshot from Infowars, <https://www.infowarsstore.com/25-sponsorship>, accessed: 2024, March 14.



## INFOWARS LIFE SELECT: 1 YEAR

3408 servings of healthy, delicious storable food, drinks and snacks for 365 days for up to 2,000+ calories a day.

\$2,587.00

Be the first to review this product

7

<sup>7</sup> Screenshot from Infowars, <https://www.infowarsstore.com/preparedness/emergency-survival-foods/infowars-life-select-1-year>, accessed: 2024, February 14.

## Who is Alex Jones and What is Infowars?

Alex Jones is the controversial figure behind Infowars. Infowars serves as a digital channel for Mr. Jones to disseminate conspiracy theories, stoke fears, and market the health-enhancement and survivalist products he is selling on Infowars. For every threat he raises, there is a solution for sale. "Preppers"<sup>8</sup> are an important target group of Infowars. Besides, Mr. Jones also hosts a radio show.



Jones, raised in a conservative household in Texas, developed a conspiratorial nature early on. Inspired by works like "None Dare Call It Conspiracy," he began his media career by landing a show on Austin community access cable, promoting outlandish theories about events like 9/11 and the supposed "new world order." As Jones's audience grew, so did his propensity for spreading false claims. He monetized fears and worries, particularly among his largely white, male audience, by promoting conspiracy theories about government oppression and impending apocalypses.

However, in recent years, Jones's problems have mounted. He faced lawsuits for spreading the false claim that the Sandy Hook shooting<sup>9</sup> was a hoax, resulting in significant legal repercussions. Courts in Connecticut and Texas have ruled that Jones intentionally defamed them and have ordered Jones to pay \$1.5 billion in damages. Mr. Jones filed for personal bankruptcy after the ruling became public. Furthermore, workplace discrimination complaints, a fraud case, and a custody battle with his ex-wife added to his troubles. Mr. Jones insists that his troubles are proof that a globalist, leftist cabal aims to silence him. In August 2018, Jones suffered a significant blow when he was banned from major social media platforms, including Facebook, YouTube, Apple, Spotify, Twitter and Pinterest. In 2023, Elon Musk brought Alex Jones back to X.

**Task:** Read the text and use the information to fill out the first two key points on M3 (Who is the owner of Infowars? Which products are offered?).

<sup>8</sup> "Preppers" are individuals who actively prepare for potential emergencies or disasters, often by stockpiling supplies, developing survival skills, and creating contingency plans to ensure their readiness for various scenarios, such as natural disasters, economic collapse, or societal unrest.

<sup>9</sup> The **Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting** was a mass shooting that occurred on December 14, 2012, in Newtown, Connecticut, United States, when 20-year-old Adam Lanza shot and killed 26 people. It was one of the deadliest school shootings in U.S. history.

**Sources:**

Brown, N. (2023, November 28). Sandy Hook families who won \$1 billion in damages from Alex Jones offer to settle for at least \$85 million. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/11/28/us/sandy-hook-families-settlement-alex-jones/index.html>

Williamson, E. and E. Steel (2018, September 7). Conspiracy Theories Made Alex Jones Very Rich. They May Bring Him Down. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/07/us/politics/alex-jones-business-Infowars-conspiracy.html>

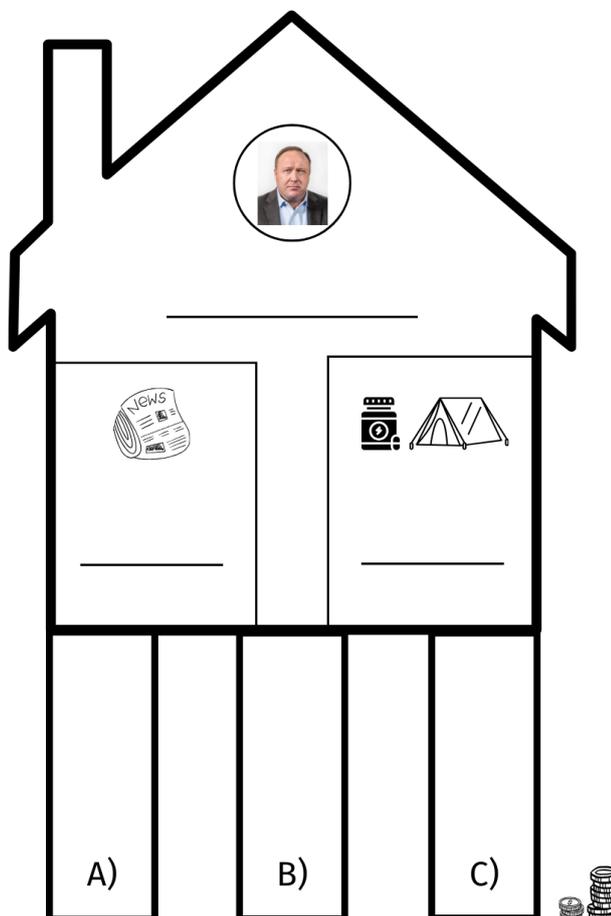
Picture of Alex Jones, Originator: Zimmermann, Michael, [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alex\\_Jones\\_\(Radiomoderator\)#/media/Datei:Alex\\_Jones\\_Portrait\\_\(cropped\).jpg](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alex_Jones_(Radiomoderator)#/media/Datei:Alex_Jones_Portrait_(cropped).jpg)

### If Infowars was a house

1. The owner<sup>10</sup>

2. Which products are offered?

3. What are the pillars of Infowars?



A) Emotions:	B) Sales strategy:	C) Conspiratorial elements:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you feel when you look at the products?</li> <li>• What emotions are being worked with?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In which situations might the products be useful?</li> <li>• What kind of improvement do the products promise?</li> <li>• Who are the products made for?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What elements of a conspiracy do you recognize?</li> </ul>

<sup>10</sup> Source: Picture of Alex Jones, Originator: Zimmermann, Michael, [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alex\\_Jones\\_\(Radiomoderator\)#/media/Datei:Alex\\_Jones\\_Portrait\\_\(cropped\).jpg](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alex_Jones_(Radiomoderator)#/media/Datei:Alex_Jones_Portrait_(cropped).jpg)

## Create your own “prepper-product”

### Task:

You work in the marketing department at Infowars. Your colleagues from “Research & Development” have developed two new products.

**Product 1:** The “Super-Survival-Backpack” is a backpack that contains important gear to survive in the wilderness for two to three weeks.

**Product 2:** The “Survival Boost: Crisis Resilience Formula” is a supplement that contains all important vitamins and gives you extra strength and endurance in times of crisis.

**Product 3:** Come up with your own product.

Choose one product and develop an ad to market the product. Consider these questions while developing the ad:

- In which situation is the product useful?
- What kind of improvement does the product promise?
- Who is the product aimed at?

# NEW PRODUCT

*check what's new*

### 3.2 What are they up to? Create your own conspiracy theory

In recent years, conspiracy theories have become a hot topic. It has also become an important topic for young people to learn to distinguish between substantiated knowledge and more questionable information.

‘What are they up to’ aims to teach students how to recognise a conspiracy theory and make them aware of the risks that conspiratorial thinking poses to society and to themselves. UNESCO has defined conspiracy theory as ‘The belief that events are being secretly manipulated by powerful forces with negative intent.’

The course is designed for students from 8th grade and up. It can involve 6-30 students. It lasts 4 lessons, possibly more. The lessons can be a week apart, but it is an advantage if the first two lessons are held consecutively.

<b>Age group</b>	14-18 years
<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are able to construct a fictional conspiracy theory by applying common elements and rhetorical strategies used in real-world conspiracy theories.</li> <li>• Students reflect an understanding of how conspiracy theories can impact society and individuals who believe in them.</li> </ul>
<b>Overall time</b>	180 minutes (each lesson 45 minutes)
<b>Preparation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Print the material “Group Mission Cards” and the “Commos brief” for each group</li> <li>• For a substantive preparation on the topic of conspiracy theories, see suggestions listed below</li> </ul>
<b>List of materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instruction for the students “Group Mission Cards”</li> <li>• Work material for the students “Commos brief”</li> <li>• Material for students’ presentations, e.g. flipcharts</li> </ul>

#### Detailed description of lessons

##### Guidance for teachers

The course begins with a role-play where students are tasked with coming up with a conspiracy theory. The setting is the fictional city of Commos. Students are divided into groups of max. 4 students each. The groups are given information about the city and have to familiarise themselves with the mindset of a specific group of citizens. It could be workers at one of the slaughterhouses in Pigs city who fear for their jobs, pensioners in a pub who feel that a part of the city is gradually being taken over by newcomers from the fictional place ‘Pajanes’, or residents who are bothered by night noise.



Students devise and present their theories to the class. The class then reviews the typical characteristics of conspiracy theories and reflects on what conspiracy theories do to society and those who believe in them.

**Quick preparation:** Get inspiration for a thought-provoking discussion by prompting the three questions to ChatGPT or similar. Add that it will be used for teaching and mention the grade level. Ask for suggestions for follow-up questions on what you particularly want to draw students' attention to.

**Thorough preparation:** Read the UNESCO report 'Addressing conspiracy theories. What teachers need to know.'<sup>11</sup> or an article on important and less important conspiracy theories, available from the independent, non-profit organisation ISD.<sup>12</sup>

### Lesson 1:

- In preparation, print the "Group Mission Cards" and the "Commos brief," so that each group gets a copy.
- Introduce the programme and divide the class into groups of max. 4.
- Distribute the group mission cards and the Commos Brief material.
- Allow five minutes for students to read their mission cards and look at the material.
- Ask students to do Exercise 1 and 2 (to empathise with "their" civic group.)
- After 10 minutes: Ask students to move on to exercise 2 on their group mission card.
- Help the groups by asking questions like:
  - Who benefits from the bad things your 'citizen group' experiences?
  - Does anyone have an interest in helping the perpetrators?
  - In short, what is the purpose of the conspiracy?

### Lesson 2:

- Bring the materials to be used for the students' presentations.
- Ask students to prepare their presentation. For example, you can use the "spider model" on the front of the teacher's guide.
- Help the groups to focus on:
  - The purpose of the conspiracy.
  - Which of the Commos celebrities are the key players and who is helping them?

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<sup>11</sup> See: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381958/PDF/381958eng.pdf.multi>

<sup>12</sup> See: [https://www.isdglobal.org/digital\\_dispatches/conspiracy-theories-matter-but-not-all-are-meaningful-a-guide-for-analysing-risks-to-audiences/#](https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/conspiracy-theories-matter-but-not-all-are-meaningful-a-guide-for-analysing-risks-to-audiences/#)





- Can the groups fit more people into their theory without making it too implausible?
- The presentation should be ready for the next lesson and should last no more than 5 minutes.

### Lesson 3:

- Let the groups take turns to present. Start with the pub groups. Continue with the butchery groups. End with the resident groups.
- When the first two have presented, ask the class to consider the similarities and differences between the two theories. Continue in the same way with the following ones.
- Ask students to discuss with their partner what the similarities are between the conspiracy theories presented by the groups.
- Collect in class: Is it understandable that some people are convinced by their own delusions?
- Ask students to consider for the next lesson whether conspiracy theories do any good for their proponents.

### Lesson 4:

- Ask students to discuss with their partner what characterises a conspiracy theory.
- Discuss their views in class.
- Then discuss the following three questions:
  - 1) What is special about the way conspiracy theories are presented by their proponents?
  - 2) Are conspiracy theories just entertaining or can they have an impact on society?
  - 3) Do conspiracy theories do any good for their proponents?

### Follow-up options:

- If the class has more time, students can come up with examples they have encountered themselves. Some may have their origins in the Covid-19 pandemic, cf. “QAnon Conspiracy Theory Lands On European Shores”:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbNXMx\\_xqs4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nbNXMx_xqs4)
- They can also discuss whether certain people often become followers, see “I believed in conspiracy theories, until this one pushed me over the edge”:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdPbmYAuMs0>
- A third option is to use the course as a prelude to courses on media (“fake news”) or source criticism. You start with the question: What is the difference between a





conspiracy theory and a journalistic/scholarly hypothesis that a certain group of people are making secret plans that will harm others





# GROUP MISSION CARD 1:



You work at the United Bones **MEAT FACTORY** in Pigs City and meet your colleagues for lunch in the canteen.

You wonder why people in the city speak badly of the factories in the abattoir area. After all, they provide jobs and good money for the whole city, not least the football club FC Commos, who everyone hopes will return to the Mega League.

In recent months there have been three shitstorms against Pigs City. People complain about bad odours, noise and everything else. Some of you may have noticed that Samuel E., a PR manager for a construction company, has been involved in all three shitstorms. The leader of the rockers Leon K. and Lukas B. from the Vegetarian Party in the city council have been involved in the incitement against the slaughterhouses.

It can't be a coincidence! But who is behind it? What are they up to? And what are their intentions?

**Your tasks are:**

1. Give yourselves names that match who you want to be. Learn each other's names. Give each other a high five as you call out your names in turn.
2. Try to imagine what the canteen looks like: Make a quick drawing of it.
3. Theorise what the critics of Pigs City are up to. Who in Commos is behind it? What is their secret plan? Is someone secretly helping them?



# GROUP MISSION CARD 2:



You've been renting at **1 PEACEFUL ROAD** for many years and meet as neighbours in the courtyard.

You feel that the neighbourhood has become more unsafe recently. At night there are loud noises from the abattoirs across the street, the clanging of metal falling onto the tarmac, and loud animal squeals and screams. The other night a resident saw a van labelled 'Animals live' or 'Live animals' over there. The stench has also gotten worse. Your property is also no longer being maintained.

It can't all be coincidence. But the owner of the property, David C., doesn't seem to care. It's almost as if someone is deliberately bothering you residents.

**Your tasks are:**

1. Give yourselves names that fit who you want to be. Learn each other's names. Give each other a high five as you call out your names in turn.
2. Try to imagine what your courtyard looks like: Make a quick drawing of it.
3. Find an explanation for the following questions that makes sense to the group: Could there be a secret plan behind all the changes you're seeing? What are they up to? Are they trying to scare you into moving? Or antagonise you against Pigs City? Who in the Commos is behind the plan? What's in it for them?



# GROUP MISSION CARD 3:



You are a group of retirees who meet at **THE HOLE PUB** for a beer.

You find it annoying that more and more people are moving from Pajanes to the city to work in the slaughterhouses. A few years ago there were only 40-50 people living in two or three small flats down by Blok City. Now there are several hundred! They've bought several properties right down by Pigs City and practically rule the area down there. They look crazy with their brightly coloured clothes and use strong perfume that gives others headaches. They throw wild parties with loud electronic music. No one else can bear to live there.

The municipality should tear down all the old shitty houses and get decent people in there! At the same time, the municipality should close large parts of Pigs City because the stench and noise from the meat factories is unbearable.

But of course the factory owners are against that. But I'm sure someone is helping them behind the scenes.

**Your tasks are:**

1. Give yourselves names that fit who you want to be. Learn each other's names. Give each other a high five as you call out your names in turn.
2. Try to imagine what the pub looks like inside. Make a quick drawing of it.
3. Find an explanation for the following questions that makes sense to the group: Who is holding the hand of Pigs City in Commos? Why are they doing it - what can they achieve? Is there a hidden plan to be carried out without ordinary citizens realising?



# GROUP MISSION CARD 1B:



You work at **THE HAPPY SAUSAGE MEAT FACTORY** in Pigs City and meet your colleagues for lunch in the canteen.

You wonder why people in the city speak badly of the factories in the abattoir area. After all, they provide jobs and good money for the whole city, not least the football club FC Commos, who everyone hopes will return to the Mega League.

In recent months there have been three shitstorms against Pigs City. People complain about bad odours, noise and everything else. Some of you may have noticed that Samuel E., a PR manager for a construction company, has been involved in all three shitstorms. The leader of the rockers Leon K. and Lukas B. from the Vegetarian Party in the city council have been involved in the incitement against the slaughterhouses.

It can't be a coincidence! But who is behind it? What are they up to? And what are their intentions?

**Your tasks are::**

1. Give yourselves names that match who you want to be. Learn each other's names. Give each other a high five as you call out your names in turn.
2. Try to imagine what the canteen looks like: Make a quick drawing of it.
3. Theorise what the critics of Pigs City are up to. Who in Commos is behind it? What is their secret plan? Is someone secretly helping them?



# GROUP MISSION CARD 2B:



You've been renting at **3 PEACEFUL ROAD** for many years and meet as neighbours in the courtyard.

You feel that the neighbourhood has become more unsafe recently. At night there are loud noises from the abattoirs across the street, the clanging of metal falling onto the tarmac, and loud animal squeals and screams. The other night a resident saw a van labelled 'Animals live' or 'Live animals' over there. The stench has also gotten worse. Your property is also no longer being maintained.

It can't all be coincidence. But the owner of the property, David C., doesn't seem to care. It's almost as if someone is deliberately bothering you residents.

**Your tasks are:**

1. Give yourselves names that fit who you want to be. Learn each other's names. Give each other a high five as you call out your names in turn.
2. Try to imagine what your courtyard looks like: Make a quick drawing of it.
3. Find an explanation for the following questions that makes sense to the group: Could there be a secret plan behind all the changes you're seeing? What are they up to? Are they trying to scare you into moving? Or antagonise you against Pigs City? Who in the Commos is behind the plan? What's in it for them?



# GROUP MISSION CARD 3B:



You are a group of pensioners who meet at **THE RABBIT PUB** for a beer.

You find it annoying that more and more people are moving from Pajanes to the city to work in the slaughterhouses. A few years ago there were only 40-50 people living in two or three small flats down by Blok City. Now there are several hundred! They've bought several properties right down by Pigs City and practically rule the area down there. They look crazy with their brightly coloured clothes and use strong perfume that gives others headaches. They throw wild parties with loud electronic music. No one else can bear to live there.

The municipality should tear down all the old shitty houses and get decent people in there! At the same time, the municipality should close large parts of Pigs City because the stench and noise from the meat factories is unbearable.

But of course the factory owners are against that. But I'm sure someone is helping them behind the scenes.

**Your tasks are:**

1. Give yourselves names that fit who you want to be. Learn each other's names. Give each other a high five as you call out your names in turn.
2. Try to imagine what the pub looks like inside. Make a quick drawing of it.
3. Find an explanation for the following questions that makes sense to the group: Who is holding the hand of Pigs City in Commos? Why are they doing it - what can they achieve? Is there a hidden plan to be carried out without ordinary citizens realising?



# COMMOS BRIEF

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## Sponsorship for the first football team

When Commos' first team of football plays to get into the premier league, it will be with the Happy Sausage logo on the T-shirts.

The factory has provided a sponsorship "at the very expensive end", the team's captain Uvili told the newspaper. "With that support, we're eradicating Easternball," Uvili enthuses.

---

## Mystery of sale in Piggy Hills Hills

**Residents are in turmoil, they fear having their leases terminated**

Residents of 17 Piggy Hills are angry that the property's owner, David C, still refuses to disclose who he sold the property to. I will reveal this in "a few months", says the well-known property owner. He adds that this is a completely normal trade on commercial terms.

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Some people in the city of Commos have banded together. But who? And what is their secret plan? Find the hidden hidden patterns and uncover the conspiracy.

Make Pigs city  
a **green** oasis

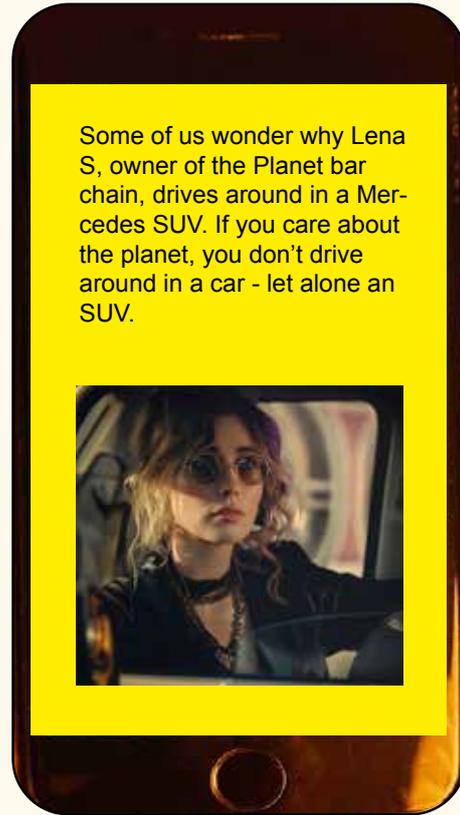


The Vegetarian Party

## Volunteers are painting the Stadium

All 77 employees at the Bones United meat factory are showing up

If Commos' Stadium is to survive, more tickets must be sold for home games. Benjamin I, owner of the Bones United factory, told Local NEWS. Together with his staff, he has taken the initiative to freshen up buildings and benches in the stadium.



(Posts in the group "Us from Commos")

## WARNING - reward

My dog Bepoh died last Wednesday after eating a sausage he found on the sidewalk in front of the Blok Road 3. SO BE CAREFUL not to pick anything up/eat anything you find.

There is a reward if anyone can help find the KILLER.

Elias H. Blok Road 1

(Lookup in the stairwell in properties on Blok Road)

## Urban Garden lacks space

The municipality has to buy more plots of land, says spokesperson

"If the city council is to keep its promise of free allotments for everyone in Commos who wants to grow organic vegetables, it will be necessary to buy up large areas of land." So says Laura R, chairperson of Urban Garden. She says that the

association has to disappoint many citizens who want a garden. Lena S, owner of vegetarian restaurant Planet Bar, says she wants to buy organic vegetables grown locally in the allotments.

*The mayor again seen wandering around Pigs City with the owner of Build One*

Now our mayor Daniel A has once again been out walking in the slaughterhouse area with the contractor, who would rather see the whole of Commos razed to the ground so that he can build his ugly concrete blocks and earn the cash. Are they just good friends on a nice walk and talk? Hardly! Who chooses the stinky meat town for a stroll. What are they up to?

Advertisements in Local NEWS

**THEME OF THE WEEK:**

## Vegetarian food from Pajanes

**Planet Bar offers wonderful, green dishes, made with original Pajanes vegetables.**

**3 courses:  
20 euro.**



## Pajanes attack on Maria F.

“I will clean up everything that stinks in Commos and makes people feel unsafe”. These were the words when Deputy Mayor Maria F. was asked what she meant by her election slogan “Clean Commos”. ‘It’s empty talk,’ says Uvili, spokesperson for the Paians in Commos. “I want to know if it’s me, for example me she’s talking about,’ he says.

## Possible racist assault on Piggy Hills

*On Friday night, a brawl took place when members of Bristles broke into a party*

The police had to move out when the biker group Bristles attacked three slaughterhouse workers of Pajanes descent on the night of Saturday. According to an eyewitness, six Bristles members interrupted a party in a basement in Piggy Hills.

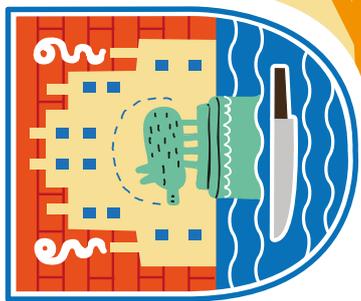
Bristles had iron rods in their hands. The eyewitness wishes to remain anonymous, but Local NEWS knows the identity of the person.

(Posting in the closed group Peaceful Road)

Last night I sat on the balcony smoking a cigarette, when a truck stopped: Two men with hats and scarves over their mouths unloaded some huge boxes and drove them on wagons into Pigs City. It was dark, but I could see that there were air holes in the boxes. That’s when the horrible noise started, as you also heard. As if a whole lot of pigs and chickens were being chased around, screaming for their lives.

# COMIMOS

- sausages and much more



**1**

**The Rabbit**  
- A city bar

**2**

**Build 2**  
- building with profit

**3**

**The Hole**  
- your local bar

**3**

**Blok City**

**3**

**Blok City**

**8**

**Pig City**

**7**

**Build 1**  
- build big now

**6**

**Build 1**  
- build big now

**5**

**Centro Parque**  
- Small ducks paradise

**6**

**Commos Industry**

**4**

**Local Bank**  
- local money

**5**

**Commos Hills**

**7**

**Stadium**

**7**

**Planet Bar**  
- organic food

**8**

**The happy Sausage**  
- local meat art

# CELEBRITIES IN COMMOS



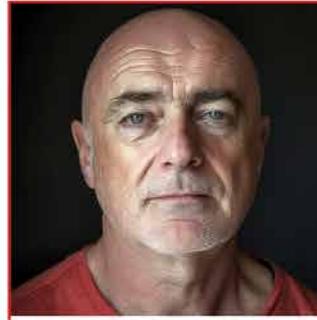
**Alexander D.:**

Spokesperson,  
Animals Liberation Front.  
Motto: "Let's slaughter Pigs City".  
Lives with Laura R.



**Anna P:**

Journalist, The Commos News,  
often seen in restaurants with the  
pajanesse spokesman Uvili.



**Benjamin I:**

Owens the Factory Bones United:  
Motto: "If the bones are OK - never  
mind the skin".



**Daniel A:**

Commos Mayor, The business Party,  
Chairman for the Stadion.  
Motto: "Soccer is better than sex".



**David C:**

Big time Real Estate owner, i.e.  
Peaceful Road 1-3.  
Motto: "Money doesn't smell".  
Lives with Lena S.



**Laura R:**

Chairperson for "Urban Gardening."  
Lives with Alexander D.  
Motto: "Do garden work - not war".



**Lukas B:**

M.O City Council, The Vegetarian list:  
Motto: "Green Commos".



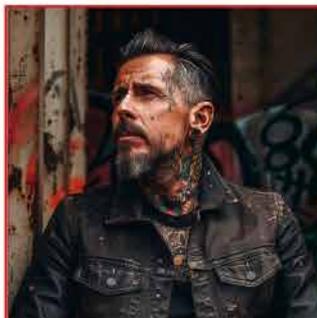
**Julian G:**

Owens the building company Build  
ONE. Motto: "Buy, Build and get  
rich". Former spokesperson for the  
rockerclub "Bristles".



**Lena S:**

Owens vegetarian restaurant chain  
"Planet bar". Motto: "I love cheap  
ecology".  
Lives with David C.



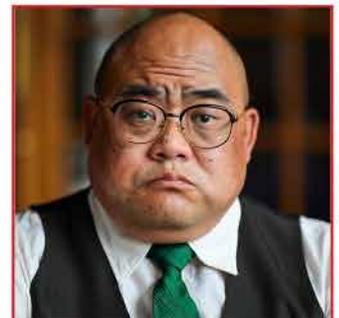
**Leon K:**

Spokesperson for the rockerclub  
"Bristles". Fired from "Happy Sausage"  
last summer. Motto: The Pigs Out  
of Commos".



**Maria F:**

Deputy mayor, elected for the Center  
Party.  
Married to local newspaper editor  
Max F. Motto: "Clean Commos".



**Max F:**

Editor. The Commos News,  
Member of the Business Party.  
Married to Maria F.



**Mia O:**

Director for The Local Bank. Motto:  
"Commos business is our business".  
Lives with Sophie M.



**Samuel E:**

PR manager for the construction  
company Build 2.  
Motto: "I'm sick of Pigs City".



**Sophie M:**

Owens the Factory: Happy Sausage".  
Motto: No pigs - no Commos".  
Lives with Mia O.



**Uvili X:**

Popular captain of the Commos first  
team and spokesman for Pajanesse  
in Commos.  
Motto: "In the long run, we will win".



### 3.3 Critical Media Literacy – Conspiracy Theories and Social Media

#### Module 1 “Psychological factors influencing a belief in conspiracy theories”

Conspiracy theories are increasingly being studied in educational studies in the search for a solution, which has led to media data literacy education being presented as a viable educational approach. To describe the spread of online disinformation and conspiracy theories about the Covid-19 pandemic, the WHO adopted the term “infodemics.” Education to make citizens aware of the dangers of infodemics is increasingly seen as a critical response to the spread of conspiracy media narratives. A number of studies have shown that educators are challenged with a choice between addressing conspiracy theories in the classroom or trying to “correct” the disinformation on which conspiracy beliefs are based.<sup>13</sup>

The educational goal of the module is to introduce students to the main factors that lead people to believe in conspiracy theories and the facilitating role of social media:

- Students can outline the roots causes of their assumptions;
- Students can analyse the cognitive biases underlying conclusions;
- Students can transfer their knowledge when watching videos, reading posts and listening to others;
- Students remind self-reflection when exposed to social media content.

The module introduces students to the antecedents of conspiracy beliefs and raises questions about why people are prone to conspiracy thinking. It aims to promote critical thinking and to explain why everyone in modern society not only has the potential but also comes under attack from a plethora of (dis)information, often deliberate and manipulative. Due to the overwhelming media environment and especially the strong influence of social media on young people, the topic is important because research and practice show that both young people and adults believe they can manage and use information in a safe way.

In this module, students will learn to identify and to become sensitive to the factors underlying their conclusions and decisions, to critically evaluate and rationalise their decisions, to analyse the cognitive biases and stable preferences underlying individual positions, to transfer their knowledge when using social media content, and to reflect on their own actions.

The module contains two lessons of 45 minutes. The first covers the psychological factors underlying conspiracy beliefs. It includes examples of cognitive biases, the place of role and uncertainty, groupthink, and social identity. The second focusses on the influence of social media on the formation of trust and conspiratorial attitudes.

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<sup>13</sup> Fabbro, F., & Gabbi, E. (2024). Addressing conspiracy theories through Media and Data Literacy Education. An exploratory case study. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 16(1), 19-36. <https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2024-16-1-2>



## Lesson 1 “Psychological factors influencing a belief in conspiracy theories”

<b>Age group</b>	15-18 years
<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The students know about of the psychological factors, underlying conspiracy beliefs and the role of social media.</li> <li>• The students can explain how conspiracy theories spread and why they are maintained.</li> <li>• The students discuss and analyse what makes people prone to support conspiracy ideas and beliefs.</li> </ul>
<b>Overall time</b>	45 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	<p>No preparation for the lesson itself is needed.</p> <p>It is recommended that the teacher watch the video and the questions in view to moderate the discussion</p>
<b>List of materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital devices and internet access to show a video</li> <li>• Visual aid to present the mind maps (e.g. flipchart, colour markers)</li> </ul>

### Overview of phases

Phase	Aim	Time (min.)
<b>Warm-up</b>	The role of the warm-up is to give students an idea of subjective perception and why everyone has their own subjective truth.	10'
<b>Transition</b>	Links the warm-up to the work phase.	5'
<b>Work phase</b>	Students learn about the prerequisites, underlying conspiracy thinking, and the two main factors that make people susceptible to disinformation as well as the important role of social media.	20'
<b>Evaluation</b>	Each group of students share in plenary and create a mind map showing the prerequisites of spreading conspiracies and the role of social media.	10'

### Detailed description of steps

#### Warm-up (10'):

- **Share your favourite colour.** The teacher divides the group into pairs and asks the students in each pair to share what their favourite colour is and why, and to give arguments in favour of their favourite colour.

- Then the whole class discusses:
  - How do you feel about the difference in personal colour preferences?
  - Do you feel any pressure or confrontation?
  - Why?
- Because this is a personal choice and no one expects others to support/share their preference. Colour is a personal choice – this can be linked to other discussions in society. In order to avoid extreme positions, reflection and self-reflection are fundamental:
  - What can we say about personal choices in other areas?
  - What do you think can cause confrontation?

#### Transition (5’):

- The experiential exercise is related to assertive behaviour - we all need to maintain our boundaries while respecting the boundaries of others. To the extent that some issues do not cause confrontation, many issues, judgments, and positions divide and confront people. Let's take an example.
- Why do we not feel pressure? Because it is our choice. Because everyone has subjective preferences, and if it is like the favourite colour, we do not overstep the boundaries and do not fight.
- Or the assertive behaviour - keep your boundaries and respect the boundaries of others.

#### Work phase (20’):

- Students watch the following video (in English):  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmXjM9ZtIN4>  
 or as an alternative: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzWQLy2cVhY>
- Note: The video discusses the prerequisites, underlying conspiracy thinking, and the two main factors that make people susceptible to disinformation. It also discusses the important role of social media. If the video is no longer online, a video or text explaining these concepts can be used.
- The class is divided into groups and each group has to reflect and answer the some of the following questions:
  - What makes people vulnerable to accept information without fact-checking?
  - What makes people subjective in their assessment and position?
  - What makes people believe in a conspiracy theory?
  - What is the role of social media that can support conspiracy mindset?
  - What makes social media influential?

- What examples can be given from a personal perspective?
- What can we do?
- Students are asked to draw a chain of influence through social media based on the video.  
Suggested solution: Influencer + unexplained topic: someone who is hostile, endangering → threat of disenfranchisement + anxiety → defence: anger, search for security → influence (+ people who believe in one also often believe in other conspiracy theories)

**Evaluation (10’):**

- The teacher asks the students to try to define (using key words/phrases) what underlies our beliefs and judgements in general and why we are all prone to bias and vulnerable to disinformation and also conspiracy theories, based on the activities and reflections. Students are asked also about the specific role of social media.
- List of key words for the mind map: prior expectations, dangers, benefits, fear, (dis)trust, anger, group and social identity, conspiracy theory, role of social media, influencers, unexplained topic, search for security/explanation,
- Students answer and the teacher creates a mind map based on the students’ answers (using M3 if needed to add supplement)

**Lesson 2 “Influence of social media on the formation of trust and conspiratorial attitudes – Me and Social media. Do your own research! “**

<b>Age group</b>	15-18 years
<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The students simulate meeting people who are proponents of extreme positions and how they can be dealt with.</li> <li>● Students get understanding why people can be radicalized.</li> <li>● Students gain a deeper understanding of social media influence.</li> </ul>
<b>Overall time</b>	45 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	No preparation for the lesson itself is needed.
<b>List of materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Digital devices and internet access for research</li> <li>● M1: Handout for the neutral group</li> </ul>

## Overview of phases

Phase	Aim	Time (min.)
Warm-up	Discussion of popular topic in social media to create interest among students	5'
Work phase 1	Students prepare arguments in order to simulate meeting people who are proponents of extreme positions.	20'
Work phase 2	The proponents and opponents present their position. The neutral group tries to “mitigate” the discussion	10'
Evaluation	The students share and reflect their experiences.	10'

## Detailed description of steps

### Warm-up (5'):

- Students discuss and recall what are the most widely spread and “hot” topic in social media they have encountered recently:
  - What is the extent of links to the official news and social topics, discussed in media?
  - What polar positions have they encountered?

### Work phase 1 (20'):

- The teacher divides the class into three groups.
- The task of each group is to research the Flat Earth conspiracy theory from a particular point of view and prepare to defend the position:
  - Group 1 Flat Earth Proponents
  - Group 2 Flat Earth Opponents
  - Group 3 Neutral.
- Groups 1 and 2 have to browse online and find arguments in support of their role and prepare 1-2 minutes substantiated statement of the positions.
  - Group 1 can use these examples e.g.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BHFVyrEgBfo>  
 or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zgchNjPmMEs>.
  - Group 2 can use these examples e.g.:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jxLdAkmRgJg>
- Group 3 discusses and recalls the main points of the mind map from the previous lesson or can be given M1. They can also browse online to find information on how to speak with Flat Earthers (e.g. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYnjzsjeMK8>).

- Alternative conspiracy theories:
  - The Covid-19 pandemic was not an accident, but a long-planned event.
  - Great Replacement.
  - The best way is a preliminary survey for a topic, which is of interest and of which students are aware
- Each group has 15 minutes to search for information and 5 minutes to summarize its key points and most influential arguments.

#### **Work phase 2 (10'):**

- The three groups have the floor to present their positions.
- The discussion can be moderated with time limitation (e.g. 1-2 minutes for presentation) or the discussion can be left open in view to simulate real situation.

#### **Evaluation (10'):**

- The students share and reflect their experiences. The following questions can be used:
  - What made it difficult for you? What made it easier for you?
  - How did it make you feel?
  - What supports your position – prior knowledge/beliefs? What are they?
  - Are you bringing anything new to the argument, addressing what you heard or just using your previous position?
  - Have you changed your position in any way? Why (whether the answer is yes or no)?
  - What did you learn?
  - How can you apply what you have learned?



## Material 1

### Handout for the neutral group:

#### How do we talk to believers in Flat Earth and nanobots in vaccines?

The rise of science denialism, including beliefs that the Earth is flat or that Covid-19 vaccines contain nanobots, poses significant societal challenges. While such ideas once seemed fringe, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the divide between those who trust science and those who reject it. This has led researchers to explore how to engage with science deniers effectively.

#### The Failure of Facts Alone

For years, the rational approach relied on presenting irrefutable facts and statistics. However, this strategy has largely failed. Philosopher Lee McIntyre, in his book [How to Talk to Science Deniers](#), argues that denialism stems not from a lack of information but from distrust. "We live in a culture of denial, in which people say things they cannot be held to account for," the researcher reports. He emphasizes that addressing this distrust requires empathy, patience, and face-to-face conversations rather than bombarding people with evidence.

#### Understanding Science Denial

McIntyre identifies five common traits of science denial: selective use of evidence, belief in conspiracy theories, illogical reasoning, reliance on fake experts, and the assumption that imperfect explanations invalidate opposing views. He argues that challenging these beliefs often threatens a person's identity, making them resistant to change. At the 2018 International Flat Earth Conference in Denver, McIntyre observed that flat-earthers distrust authority but strongly value personal experience. Their beliefs are less about evidence and more about social identity. Many attendees had experienced trauma or rejection and found meaning in their flat-earth worldview. "The denial of science has nothing to do with doubt, it has to do with distrust," believes McIntyre.

#### A New Approach

So Lee McIntyre decided to change his approach. "If I was right, it turns out that everything about the flat Earth didn't rest on the 'evidence' at all. They were just a huge rationalization for the social identity of these people. This explains why flat-earthers take attempts to challenge their beliefs so personally. What they have is not just a belief. It is their essence, it explains who they are," the researcher wrote. Instead of debating evidence endlessly, McIntyre shifted his focus to understanding the emotional roots of these beliefs. He found that empathy and genuine curiosity about their lives were more effective than confrontation.

Similarly, Gleb Tsipursky, writing in [Scientific American](#), stresses that building trust through respect and interpersonal connection is key to meaningful dialogue with science deniers. In summary, engaging with science deniers requires moving beyond facts to address the emotional and social factors underpinning their beliefs. Trust, empathy, and patience are essential for fostering productive conversations. This version retains the core ideas while being more concise and easier to follow. "If someone denies undeniable facts, you can safely





## Material 1

*assume it is their emotions that are distracting them from reality. That's why we need to  
40 unleash our capacity for empathy, which means trying to understand other people's  
emotions, to determine what emotional blockages may be getting in the way and causing  
them to bury their heads in the sand," writes Gleb Tsipurski.*

*"It is an axiom in science communication that you cannot convince a person who denies  
science of anything with facts alone. Most people who deny science are not lacking  
45 information. They lack credibility. And trust must be built with patience, respect, empathy  
and interpersonal connections," summarizes Lee McIntyre.*



## Module 2 “Education and Media Literacy”

This module is designed to help students analyse and critically evaluate media content, to understand the mechanisms behind media influence, and develop skills to responsibly navigate the complex media landscape. In an era where information flows seamlessly across platforms and borders, the ability to critically engage with media is essential for informed participation in society. Throughout the module, students will delve into several essential topics to provide a comprehensive understanding of how media shapes beliefs and perceptions:

- Dissemination of information and framing narratives: We will examine how media channels serve as primary sources of information, shaping public understanding by presenting issues in specific contexts and narratives.
- Impact of agenda setting: Students will learn how media outlets influence public discourse by prioritizing certain topics while sidelining others, steering societal priorities and perceptions.
- Persuasion techniques in media: The course will highlight the tools and methods used by media, such as emotional appeals, tone, imagery, and language, to influence audience reactions and behaviours.
- Influence on cultural norms and values: Media’s role in shaping societal norms, stereotypes, and cultural values will be explored, particularly its impact on identity, inclusivity, and representation.
- Challenges of digital media: The complexities of navigating digital landscapes, including the rise of echo chambers and filter bubbles that reinforce biases, will be a focus area.
- Counterweight role of media: Investigative journalism and fact-checking as tools to challenge authority and provide alternative perspectives will be analysed.

### Educational Goals:

- Develop skills for selective media consumption: Equip students with the ability to critically analyse media content and adopt a selective approach in perceiving information.
- Detect fake news: Train students to identify misinformation and disinformation by using fact-checking methods and credible sources.
- Enhance information evaluation: Improve the ability of students to assess the accuracy, bias, and reliability of the information they encounter.

The module is structured into two 45-minute lessons, each focusing on a specific aspect of media literacy:

- Lesson One: The role of media in shaping beliefs This lesson introduces students to the ways media influences public perceptions, with a focus on identifying fake news and employing fact-checking techniques to verify information. Through engaging

discussions and activities, students will practice evaluating news stories and identifying potential biases or inaccuracies.

- Lesson Two: Debunking myths and building critical thinking The second lesson delves into the processes of myth-busting and filtering information. Students will learn to critically assess claims, differentiate between credible and misleading sources, and refine their critical thinking skills. Exercises will include analysing case studies of debunked myths and creating strategies for responsibly sharing information online.

By the end of this module, students will possess the tools and confidence to approach media critically and responsibly. They will be better prepared to navigate an information-rich world, make informed choices about the content they consume, and contribute positively to the media ecosystem.

## Lesson 2 “Role of Media in Shaping Beliefs”

<b>Age group</b>	15-18 years
<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of skills for a selective approach in the perception of information from the media.</li> <li>• Students should be able to detect fake news using fact-checking methods.</li> <li>• Improve students' ability to evaluate the information they receive.</li> </ul>
<b>Overall time</b>	45 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	<p>The teacher prepares a presentation on key aspects describing the role of the media in the formation of beliefs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information Dissemination: Media provides news, analysis, and perspectives that influence how people perceive reality and form beliefs.</li> <li>• Agenda Setting: Media prioritizes issues, directing public attention and shaping what society considers important.</li> <li>• Persuasion and Framing: Media uses language, visualization, and tone to evoke emotions and shape audience interpretations.</li> <li>• Cultural Socialization: Media reinforces cultural norms, values, and ideological understanding of acceptable social behaviours.</li> <li>• Echo Chambers: Digital media enables selective content consumption, potentially reinforcing existing beliefs and limiting diverse perspectives.</li> <li>• Accountability Role: Media challenges power through investigative journalism, critical analysis, and fact-checking.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Representation Dynamics: Media shapes cultural narratives by depicting groups' identities, influencing public perceptions and stereotypes.</li> </ul>
<b>List of materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>M1: Media Literacy Worksheet</li> <li>M2: Media Information Perception Self-Assessment</li> </ul>

## Overview of phases

Phase	Aim	Time (min.)
<b>Warm-up</b>	Teacher introduces the topic: Role of media in shaping beliefs.	5'
<b>Work phase 1</b>	Students discuss the role of media in forming opinions and beliefs.	10'
<b>Transition</b>	The teacher explains the importance of media in shaping people's beliefs.	5'
<b>Work phase 2</b>	Students are able to implement the steps for verification presented in work phase 1.	15'
<b>Evaluation</b>	Students reflect on the lesson by completing a media information perception self-assessment	10'

## Detailed description of steps

### Warm-up (5')

- Teacher introduce the topic: „Over 70 percent of Europeans regularly encounter fake news. The frequency with which we encounter fake news and its potential to influence the way we think, how we vote, and what we believe, has made it an important issue in society today. The publishing and sharing of fake news has become easier in an increasingly digital world, and social media plays a large part.“<sup>14</sup>
- Teacher asks students:
  - Please indicate news that you are sure is fake.
  - How did you know that this was fake news or that it contained partially false information?
- The answers can be collected, e.g. in a mind map, in order to compare them to the basic steps for verifying information in the next phase.

### Work phase 1 (10')

- The teacher presents the basic steps for verifying information in the media:

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.statista.com/topics/5833/fake-news-in-europe/>



- **Check the source:** Where is the news is shared? Is it an authoritative news organization, a personal blog or a satirical site? Reputable news sources tend to build trust, while unknown or obscure sites may be less reliable.
  - **Look for multiple sources:** Check other sources to see if the same story is reported elsewhere. If this is a major news event, it should be covered by multiple reputable sources.
  - **Check the author:** Who is the author? Do they have a history of reliable information?
  - **Check the date:** Fake news often reappears with outdated information presented as current. Make sure that the news you see is up-to-date.
  - **Evidence:** Does the article provide evidence to support its claims? Look for quotes from experts, official documents, or links to other reliable sources.
  - **Tone and language:** Fake news often uses exaggerated language, sensational headlines, or relies on emotional manipulation to get attention. Be sceptical of articles that seem overly dramatic or biased.
  - **Fact-checking websites:** Use fact-checking websites like Snopes, FactCheck.org to verify the accuracy of the information. These sites specialize in debunking false claims and rumours.
  - **Check for inconsistencies:** Look for inconsistencies within the article itself or between different sources. Fake news may contain conflicting information or logical fallacies.
  - **Question your own biases:** Be aware of your own biases and how they can affect your perception of the news.
- **Note:** These points could be distributed as a handout or a presentation for the students.

### Transition (5')

- The teacher's next task is to explain the importance of media in shaping people's beliefs:
  - “Media plays a crucial role in shaping people's beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions about the world around them. As the primary source of information for many, media has the power to highlight issues, frame narratives, and influence public discourse. It can reinforce cultural norms, challenge stereotypes, and provide a platform for diverse voices.
  - Through agenda-setting, media determines what people consider important by prioritizing certain topics. The way stories are framed—using language, visuals, and tone—affects how audiences interpret and react to information, often evoking specific emotions or responses. Additionally, the rise of digital media has amplified media's impact, allowing individuals to curate their



content and creating environments like echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs.

- While media has immense potential to educate and inform, it also carries the responsibility to promote accuracy, fairness, and inclusivity. Its ability to shape beliefs underscores the need for critical media literacy, ensuring people can evaluate media content thoughtfully and make informed decisions.”

### Work phase 2 (15')

- Teacher divides the class into small groups and asks them:
  - Truth or fake news? „Switzerland: The ‘Burqa ban’ will be effective January 1, 2025, and violators could face fines of up to 1,000 Swiss francs (approximately 1060€).“
  - Source: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/swiss-burqa-ban-to-take-effect-from-january-1-what-are-the-exceptions-101731037833556.html>
- Note: If English presents a language barrier, substitute the example.
- Students work in small groups (3-5 people) and use the steps for verification presented in work phase 1.
- Students present the answers of each group and compare their responses.

### Evaluation (10')

- Students complete M1 and/or M”.
- Based on their responses. the teacher asks students to reflect on the following questions:
  - Which areas of media literacy do you feel confident in?
  - What steps can you take to improve your critical thinking and media evaluation skills?
  - Are there specific habits you can adopt to avoid being influenced by biases or filter bubbles?
  - Write one or two actions you can take to enhance your ability to perceive and evaluate media information critically.

## Material 1

### Media Literacy Worksheet

#### Part 1: Key Concepts Review

Fill in the blanks with the correct terms based on what you've learned about the role of media in shaping beliefs.

- 1) Media serve as the main source of \_\_\_\_\_ for people, providing news, analysis, opinions, and perspectives.
- 2) The ability of media to prioritize certain issues over others is called \_\_\_\_\_.
- 3) The way a media outlet frames a story using language, visuals, and tone to influence the audience's interpretation is known as \_\_\_\_\_.
- 4) Media plays an essential role in helping individuals adopt societal \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ through the process of socialization.
- 5) The creation of echo chambers and filter bubbles in digital media can reinforce \_\_\_\_\_ beliefs by exposing individuals primarily to information that aligns with their views.
- 6) Investigative journalism and fact-checking contribute to media's role as a \_\_\_\_\_ to power and authority.

#### Part 2: True or False

Read the statements below and decide whether they are true or false. Circle your answer.

- 1) Media can influence public perceptions of certain groups, identities, and experiences through their representations. (True / False)
- 2) Agenda-setting refers to the media's ability to entertain its audience through sensational content. (True / False)
- 3) Framing involves shaping stories in ways that can evoke specific emotions or influence beliefs. (True / False)
- 4) Echo chambers occur when media expose individuals to a variety of conflicting perspectives. (True / False)
- 5) The counterweight role of media focuses on holding governments and institutions accountable by offering alternative perspectives and questioning dominant narratives. (True / False)

#### Part 3: Media Analysis

Choose one piece of media (e.g., a news article, TV show, social media post, or advertisement) and answer the questions below.

- 1) What is the main message or theme of the media?
- 2) What techniques are used to persuade or influence the audience? (e.g., language, images, tone, framing)
- 3) Do you notice any potential bias or specific agenda in how the information is presented? Explain.
- 4) How does the media representation shape your beliefs about the topic or issue?

## Material 2

### Media Information Perception Self-Assessment

For each statement below, rate yourself on a scale from 1 to 5:

1 = Strongly Disagree / 2 = Disagree / 3 = Neutral / 4 = Agree / 5 = Strongly Agree

#### Section A: Critical Analysis of Media Content

- I actively question the purpose and credibility of the media content I consume.
- I can identify potential biases in news articles, broadcasts, or social media posts.
- I understand the techniques media use to frame stories and influence audiences.
- I assess whether media sources provide balanced perspectives on an issue.

#### Section B: Awareness of Media Influence

- I recognize how media shape cultural norms and values in society.
- I am aware of how media representations of gender, race, and other identities influence stereotypes.
- I consider how my beliefs and opinions might be influenced by the media I consume.
- I understand how echo chambers or filter bubbles might limit my exposure to diverse viewpoints.

#### Section C: Media Literacy and Responsible Consumption

- I critically evaluate the reliability of information found on social media platforms.
- I verify information using multiple sources before forming opinions or sharing content.
- I can distinguish between factual reporting, opinions, and propaganda in media content.
- I actively seek out alternative perspectives to broaden my understanding of issues.

#### Section D: Engagement and Impact

- I recognize how the language, tone, and visuals in media affect my emotional responses.
- I think about the social and cultural impact of the content I share online.
- I try to avoid spreading unverified or potentially misleading information.
- I use media as a tool to stay informed rather than as a sole source of truth.

## Lesson 2 “Debunking Myths and Misconceptions”

<b>Age group</b>	15-18 years
<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students get acquainted with the specifics of modern myths and the reasons for their existence.</li> <li>• Students develop skills to distinguish myths from real information.</li> <li>• Students learn about strategies to debunk myths.</li> </ul>
<b>Overall time</b>	45 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	<p>The teacher must be familiar with some effective strategies for debunking myths:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present factual, evidence-based information from credible sources.</li> <li>• Address the root cause of the myth's existence.</li> <li>• Use clear, accessible language for your audience.</li> <li>• Highlight and correct common misconceptions.</li> <li>• Utilize visual aids to enhance understanding.</li> <li>• Encourage critical thinking and source evaluation.</li> <li>• Acknowledge emotions and beliefs tied to the myth.</li> <li>• Use storytelling to make information relatable.</li> <li>• Engage with the audience, addressing questions and concerns.</li> <li>• Model critical thinking and healthy information consumption habits.</li> </ul>
<b>List of materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• M1: How to check if information is a myth or truth</li> <li>• M2: Strategies for Debunking Myths (Test)</li> </ul>

### Overview of phases

Phase	Aim	Time (min.)
<b>Warm-up</b>	Teacher introduces the lesson topic: Debunking myths and misconceptions	5'
<b>Work phase 1</b>	Students discuss contemporary myths and why there might be a need to debunk them.	10'
<b>Transition</b>	The teacher presents strategies for debunking myths.	5'

<b>Work phase 2</b>	Students work in small groups of 3-5 people to practically distinguish myths from real information using M1.	15'
<b>Evaluation</b>	Students review what they learned using M2.	10'

## Detailed description of steps

### Warm-up (5')

- Teacher starts by asking: “Is it a myth or not? – Alternative treatments are always more effective and safer than conventional medicine.”
- Teacher divides the class into two groups – the first group argues that this is true and the second group has to show that this is a myth.
- Students briefly present their main arguments.

### Work phase 1 (10')

- The teacher asks students about contemporary myths and why there might be a need to debunk them.
- Teacher gives the task: “Please indicate other myths that are relevant to modern person.”
- For example: Chupacabra, the Slender Man, government cover-ups (like the moon landing hoax or 9/11 conspiracy theories), secret societies (such as the Illuminati), as Bigfoot [Hunting Bigfoot: Uncovering the Elusive Truth \(S4\) | History's Greatest Mysteries \(youtube.com\)](#), the Loch Ness Monster [Loch Ness Monster Conspiracy EXPOSED | History's Greatest Mysteries \(Season 4\) \(youtube.com\)](#) among others)

### Transition (5')

- The teacher explains some effective strategies for debunking myths.

### Work phase 2 (15')

- Students work in small groups of 3-5 people to practically distinguish myths from real information using M1.

### Evaluation (10')

- Students review what they learned using M2.



## Material 1

### How to check if information is a myth or truth

**Check the source:** Check that the source of information is reliable and authoritative. Seek information from established media, scientists, government organizations, or other trustworthy sources.

**Fact checking:** Check information against other reliable sources or facts. This may include checking official statistics, scientific studies or other reliable sources.

**Check for consistency with logic and common sense:** If the information sounds too good, too unusual, or too incredible, additional verification may be necessary. Use your common sense to assess whether the information is reasonable and logical.

**Check for context:** Sometimes information can be distorted or distorted when taken out of context. Make sure you understand the full context of the information before making any conclusions about it.

**Consult experts:** Sometimes it is useful to consult experts in the relevant field who can help you assess the reliability of the information.

Once you've done these steps, you will have a clearer picture of whether an information is a myth or a truth. It is always important to be critical and check the information before accepting it as true.



### Strategies for Debunking Myths (Test)

#### Part 1: Multiple Choice

Choose the correct answer for each question.

- 1) Which of the following is NOT an effective strategy for debunking myths?
  - a) Provide factual information from credible sources.
  - b) Use technical jargon to demonstrate expertise.
  - c) Highlight common misconceptions and clarify them.
  - d) Encourage critical thinking and skepticism.
- 2) Why is it important to address the root cause of a myth or misconception?
  - a) To create emotional reactions that reinforce the myth.
  - b) To make the myth more relatable to the audience.
  - c) To prevent the myth from recurring by tackling its origins.
  - d) To use advanced language that confuses the audience.
- 3) What role do visual aids play in debunking myths?
  - a) They serve as distractions from factual evidence.
  - b) They simplify complex information and reinforce key points.
  - c) They rely on emotions rather than logic.
  - d) They are unnecessary if the text is comprehensive.
- 4) How can storytelling be an effective tool in myth debunking?
  - a) By making the myth more relatable and believable.
  - b) By evoking emotions and presenting information in a memorable format.
  - c) By confusing the audience with unnecessary details.
  - d) By replacing factual evidence with entertaining narratives.
- 5) Why is empathy important when addressing myths?
  - a) It helps debunk myths without considering the audience's emotions.
  - b) It acknowledges emotional investment and fosters understanding.
  - c) It discourages critical thinking by appealing to feelings.
  - d) It creates stronger emotional ties to the myth.

## Material 2

### Part 2: True or False

Read each statement and determine if it is true or false.

- 1) Visual aids like charts and infographics are not useful when presenting information.  
(True / False)
- 2) Addressing common misconceptions can help clarify why they are inaccurate.  
(True / False)
- 3) Using inaccessible language and technical terms can alienate the audience.  
(True / False)
- 4) Encouraging critical thinking helps the audience identify logical fallacies and assess credibility.  
(True / False)
- 5) Engaging with the audience and fostering discussion can hinder myth debunking efforts.  
(True / False)

### Part 3: Short Answer

Answer the following questions in one or two sentences.

- 1) Why is it important to use credible sources when providing factual information?
- 2) How does engaging with the audience contribute to effective myth debunking?
- 3) What is the role of emotions and beliefs in the spread of myths?
- 4) How can leading by example help others become more critical of the information they consume?



### **Module 3 “Critical Media Literacy”**

Critical Media Literacy is the ability to critically analyse, interpret, and evaluate media content across various platforms, understanding its construction, purpose, and the sociocultural contexts in which it exists. It extends beyond basic media literacy to encompass an awareness of power dynamics, bias, and the economic, political, and ideological forces shaping media narratives.

The rapid growth of digital media has made Critical Media Literacy essential for navigating misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda. This skill helps individuals identify credible sources, deconstruct media messages, and question dominant narratives, empowering them to engage in informed public discourse and hold power structures accountable—key components of active citizenship in democratic societies. Modern media often uses manipulative techniques to shape opinions and behaviours. Critical Media Literacy teaches people to recognize rhetorical strategies, framing effects, and cognitive biases, fostering skepticism and reducing susceptibility to such tactics.

For young people, who are particularly influenced by digital platforms, integrating Critical Media Literacy into education promotes critical thinking, digital responsibility, and resilience against misinformation. Drawing on psychology, sociology, and communication studies, Critical Media Literacy helps individuals understand how media influences perceptions. It reduces anxiety from polarizing content, broadens perspectives by mitigating echo chambers, and encourages balanced societal discourse. As a foundational skill for navigating today’s media-saturated world, it supports democratic values, intellectual independence, and social harmony. For students aged 15–18, Critical Media Literacy is especially relevant. At this developmental stage, they are forming critical thinking skills and engaging heavily with social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok. Teaching them to identify manipulation techniques prepares them to navigate digital spaces responsibly and critically assess political campaigns and societal issues as they approach adulthood.

In this module, students will be introduced to the essential characteristics of critical media literacy, which is a relevant skill in today’s information-saturated and digitally influenced world, especially in the context of social media and the spread of conspiracy theories.

#### **Educational goals:**

- Students are able to critically think and rationalize their choices of behaviour in an online environment.
- Students develop the ability to create media content responsibly, understanding the impact of choices in content creation and dissemination.

The module contains two lessons of 45 minutes. The first lesson is about developing critical thinking and to understand its importance when using social media. In the second lesson, students acquire practical skills to create media content.



## Lesson 1 “Developing critical thinking about social media”

<b>Age group</b>	15-18 years
<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are able to critically think in connection to social media.</li> <li>• Students can rationalize their choices of behaviour in online environment.</li> </ul>
<b>Overall time</b>	45 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	<p>No preparation for the lesson itself is needed.</p> <p>It is recommended that the teacher read about the key components of critical media literacy as described in the warm-up (see below).</p>
<b>List of materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• M 1: Developing Critical Thinking</li> <li>• M 2: Self-evaluation Questionnaire</li> </ul>

### Overview of phases

Phase	Aim	Time (min.)
<b>Warm-up</b>	Teacher introduces the lesson topic: Critical thinking about social media.	5'
<b>Work phase 1</b>	Students discuss what critical thinking is.	10'
<b>Transition</b>	The teacher explains the importance of critical thinking when using social media.	5'
<b>Work phase 2</b>	Students work in small groups to identify solutions and strategies to deal with the situation, cases or scenario.	15'
<b>Evaluation</b>	Students complete and reflect on a self-assessment questionnaire.	10'

### Detailed description of steps

#### Warm-up (5'):

- Teacher introduces the lesson topic and objective: Critical thinking about social media. This can be done in two ways:
  - 1) The teacher presents a definition of the concept, if the students do not have any prior experience and knowledge:

For example: Critical media literacy refers to the ability to critically analyse, evaluate, and understand media messages in various forms, including print, television, film, and digital media. It involves questioning the purpose, perspective, credibility, and potential biases of media content.



2) The teacher allows the students to brainstorm a definition and main characteristics – this would turn the warm-up into a work phase. Key components of critical media literacy include:

- **Media Deconstruction:** Breaking down media texts to examine their underlying messages, techniques, and intended audience.
- **Understanding Media Institutions:** Investigating the ownership, control, and economic interests behind media organizations to recognize potential biases or agendas.
- **Recognizing Bias and Stereotypes:** Identifying implicit or explicit biases, stereotypes, and framing techniques used in media representations.
- **Media Production Skills:** Developing the ability to create media content responsibly, understanding the impact of choices in content creation and dissemination.
- **Digital Literacy:** Navigating and evaluating information in digital formats, including understanding algorithms, recognizing fake news, and verifying sources

#### **Work phase 1 (10'):**

- There are two options depending on what is done during the warm-up:
  - 1) If the teacher gives a definition during the warm-up, the students should write it down and discuss whether this understanding matches their expectations and familiar interpretations or is something new.
  - 2) Students brainstorm a definition and main characteristics of critical media literacy as described in the warm-up.

#### **Transition (5'):**

- The teacher explains the importance of critical thinking when using social media:

“In today's interconnected world, social media has become an integral part of our daily lives. While these platforms offer unprecedented opportunities for connection and information sharing, they also present significant challenges to understanding and interpreting content. The next task focuses on exploring how critical thinking can serve as a powerful tool to navigate the complex landscape of social media. By developing skills to analyse, question, and evaluate online information, you can protect yourselves from misinformation, understand media manipulation techniques, and become more responsible digital citizens.”

#### **Work phase 2 (15'):**

- The teacher divides students into groups.
- Each group is given a situation or task related to applying critical thinking to the use of social media. The suggested situations are:





- **Group 1:** Sharing of personal information on a social network (Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok, Reddit),
- **Group 2:** Spreading fake news,
- **Group 3:** Spreading a conspiracy theory.
- Students work in small groups of up to 3-5 people to find solutions and strategies to deal with the situation, cases or scenarios. They can apply the techniques for developing critical thinking by following the steps in M1.
- There are two options suggested for presenting the results:
  - 1) The teacher gives the floor to a representative (speaker) of each group to present their results. The results are discussed and additional questions can be asked of each group about their solutions.
  - 2) Upload all result or create a gallery of the examples and the results of all groups. The students can view the gallery and discuss the solutions.

#### **Evaluation (10'):**

- Students complete a self-assessment questionnaire (M2) and then share what they have written.
- Students reflect on what they have written in the self-assessment. This can encourage students to continue to develop their critical thinking skills in this area.

Optional follow up task: Students to review their social media profiles and those who do not have a profile could review the profiles of a loved one (parent, siblings) and note what types of information they share, how much it allows for manipulation, and what could be improved based on what they learned.





## Material 1

### Developing Critical Thinking

Technique for developing critical thinking with six types of questions:

- 1) **Simple questions** that presuppose knowledge of certain facts: Who? When? Where? How?
- 2) **Clarifying questions** to obtain missing information that could be implied in the available data: Did I understand correctly ... ?
- 3) **Practical questions** to establish a link between theory and practice: How can I apply ... ?
- 4) **Explanatory questions** which are needed to establish causal relationships: Why?
- 5) **Creative questions** that are necessary to predict the outcomes of a decision: What will happen if ... ?
- 6) **Evaluation questions** that define the criteria for evaluating events: How do you feel about it?



## Material 2

### Self-evaluation Questionnaire

Think about the previous lesson and fill out the self-evaluation:

1) The most important thing that I learned	
2) I found it difficult to	
3) What I liked the most	
4) What confuses me	
5) What surprises me	
6) The new thing I learned	
7) What really got me thinking	
8) What I want to learn more about	
9) I need more help with	
10) What I would like to change about this activity	

## Lesson 2 “Creating Media Content”

<b>Age group</b>	15-18 years
<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students develop the ability to create media content responsibly.</li> <li>• Students reflect on their choices regarding content creation and dissemination.</li> </ul>
<b>Overall time</b>	45 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	<p>The teacher finds and chooses one or two posts from a popular social media platform on a topic that captures the attention of students in the particular class for the warm-up.</p> <p><u>Note:</u> Posts and topics or tasks should be selected by the teacher depending on: The age and cognitive abilities of the students, levels of their digital competence, past experience using social media and networks, the socio-cultural environment in which the school is located, the ethnic and religious characteristics of the students and their families.</p>
<b>List of materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Posts from social media (see preparation)</li> <li>• Digital devices</li> </ul>

### Overview of phases

Phase	Aim	Time (min.)
<b>Warm-up</b>	Drawing students' attention with one or two examples of impressive and attention-grabbing social media posts and initiates a discussion about why they are good.	10'
<b>Work phase 1</b>	Students are familiar with the elements of quality content.	10'
<b>Transition</b>	Students discuss how to combine these elements to create engaging and effective content.	5'
<b>Work phase 2</b>	Students create posts.	15'
<b>Evaluation</b>	Students critically discuss the content created.	5'

### Detailed description of steps

#### Warm-up (10'):

- The teacher presents the main goal on the lesson: To develop the student's ability to create media content responsibly, understanding the impact of choices in content creation and dissemination.



- The teacher shows one or two examples of impressive and attention-grabbing positive social media posts.
- Students discuss why they are good.

#### **Work phase 1 (10'):**

- The teacher introduces the basic elements of quality content for social media, such as knowing your target audience, attention-grabbing hooks, storytelling techniques, high quality visual, relevant emojis, clear call-to-action, trending hashtags and encouraging audience interaction.
- Students take notes or make a mind map.

#### **Transition (5'):**

- The class discusses:
  - How to combine these elements to create engaging and effective content.
  - The possibilities of creating an attention-grabbing fake news story using some of the elements.

#### **Work phase 2 (15'):**

- The teacher divides the students into small groups.
- Each group chooses a task or topic to create social media content: Half of the groups are tasked with creating a positive post with good news, while the other group is tasked with creating fake news.
- Students present their created posts to their classmates.

#### **Evaluation (5'):**

- After presenting the posts to each other, the other group must guess whether it is true or fabricated/false.
- Students reflect what they are guides their decision whether it is true or not.
- Students discuss who should be held responsible for false content (creators, platforms, audience, others).



### 3.4 Civic Education

#### Module 1 “DemoCrazy Game”

This module focuses on developing the students' opinions on democratic processes as well as their visions of how decisions should be made in their ideal society. This is done by encouraging students to create their own ideal society as well as giving them room to reflect on different definitions of democracy that have existed over time. Democracy is not only a formal act but needs to be actively shaped by those living in it. This requires citizens to develop a critical understanding of how democracy works. By giving the students the room to reflect on their ideal visions of society, we want to encourage them to become better citizens by actively participating in shaping the world they want to live in. The module consists of three lessons: the first two focus on a gamified approach where students create their own fictional nation,<sup>15</sup> and the third involves reflecting on various definitions of democracy as well as on their experiences from the first two lessons.

#### Lesson 1 “DemoCrazy Game” Part 1

<b>Age group</b>	15-18 years
<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students will gain a basic understanding of and be able to describe democratic decision-making processes in their national context, including voting systems and legislative structures.</li> <li>• Students will develop their ideal vision for decision-making by contrasting and comparing it with their real world system.</li> </ul>
<b>Overall time</b>	45 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The teacher needs to prepare a short input in the form of a handout demonstrating the decision-making process and voting systems that is applicable to the national context.</li> <li>• It would be beneficial for the teacher to inform themselves on different modes of decision-making and voting.</li> </ul>
<b>List of materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organisation chart or other material on national political system specifically the legislative branch and decision-making processes (either digitally or printed out) [see M1 example]</li> </ul>

<sup>15</sup> Resources for similar games in German:

<https://www.bpb.de/lernen/angebote/planspiele/265719/die-beste-aller-welten-drei-planspiele-zur-demokratischen-bildung-fuer-jugendliche/>

<https://deine-insel.zdf.de/chat>

[https://www.demokratiezentrum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Windischbauer\\_Spiel\\_29\\_Wie\\_wird\\_gewaehlt.pdf](https://www.demokratiezentrum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Windischbauer_Spiel_29_Wie_wird_gewaehlt.pdf)

[https://www.demokratiezentrum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Windischbauer\\_Spiel\\_28\\_Wir\\_bestimmen\\_mit.pdf](https://www.demokratiezentrum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Windischbauer_Spiel_28_Wir_bestimmen_mit.pdf)

- M1: DemoCrazy Game (Example for AUSTRIA)

## Overview of phases

Phase	Aim	Time (min.)
Introduction	The teacher introduces the game and explains the tasks.	5'
Group Work	Students design their fantasy society/country and decide which methods of decision-making they would introduce.	40'

## Detailed description of steps

### Introduction (5'):

- Each group should imagine that they are tasked with creating the decision-making process in a fictitious new country. At first, they have to decide on a name, capital, most famous sight, climate, tradition, symbol, language, currency and flag. The most important task however is that:
  - (1) They have to decide whether they want to have **representatives that represent them in a parliament** or **whether every citizen of their new nation should be able to decide on matters**.
  - (2) They have to decide whether they want decisions to have to be **unanimous, based on simple majority, a two thirds majority, or additional modes** of finding a consensus. If they have **other ideas** on how decisions should be made, they are welcome to discuss those.
- Rules:
 

“Everyone is considered equal and no one is more important than the other person. There is no economic, social, gender, health or any other kind of inequality. Everyone is free to voice their opinion as long as they are not discriminating against anyone. These basic rules are not changeable. The new fictitious country consists of 250 persons of all genders and ages, abilities, occupations. They all have a say and all of their interests are of equal value. In the discussion the results have to be made consensually, aka no compromise, and everyone is encouraged in participating.”
- The setting can be described as:
 

“Imagine you are living in a new nation. Together as a group of 250 persons you are tasked with deciding on how decisions should be made in the future. At the end of this exercise you should decide on the following points. This decision needs to be made by the group as a whole. *Firstly*, you are tasked with deciding if you want to have representatives that make decisions on your behalf or if all decisions are to be made by all citizens of this new nation. *Secondly*, you are tasked with deciding on what mode of voting rules you are going to implement (e.g.: simple majority, two-thirds majority/qualified majority, unanimity, proportional representation, etc.). When solving these tasks you have to consider that every person is equal and their



rights cannot be limited in any way. There are and can be no forms of inequality (such as gender, health, economic, etc.).”

- Additional thoughts: The students are encouraged to go beyond the suggested points and be made aware that they are not restricted to using already existing modes of decision making. They are supposed to think about their ideal society and how they would like the decision-making process to be organised. The groups do not necessarily need to have a finished result. The focus should also be on the process of coming to a decision.

#### **Group Work (40’):**

- The teacher hands out the worksheet (M1).
- In small groups the students read through the worksheet and design their fantasy country.





## Material 1

### DemoCrazy Game (Example for AUSTRIA)

You are the founders of a new country! There are lots of things to decide now...

**Name:**

**Capital:**

**Most famous sight:**

**Climate:**

**Tradition:**

**Symbol:**

**Language:**

**Currency:**

**Flag:**



## Material 1

### System of legislation/decision-making:

Are there selected representatives who make decisions on your behalf?

OR

Do all citizens make decisions themselves?

### Voting system:

- simple majority,
- two thirds = qualified majority,
- unanimity (unanimous decisions only, i.e. all agree),
- proportional representation,
- other voting system?

## RULES

<p><b>EQUALITY</b></p> <p>no one is more important than the other</p> <p>no inequality based on economic or social status, gender, health, ...</p>	<p><b>FREEDOM OF SPEECH</b></p> <p>everyone is free to voice their opinion as long as they are not discriminating against others</p>
<p><b>POPULATION</b></p> <p>250 persons</p> <p>all genders and ages</p> <p>all abilities and occupations</p>	<p><b>CONSENSUS</b></p> <p>all decisions are to be made consensually</p> <p>no compromise</p>



## Material 1

### This is how the political system works in AUSTRIA

#### The Constitution

Austria is a democratic republic. The territory of the Federal Republic consists of nine federal states or provinces (Bundesland, Land; plural: Bundesländer, Länder). Vienna is the federal capital and the seat of the supreme federal authorities. Since 1995, Austria has been a member state of the European Union.

Five political parties are currently represented in the Austrian Parliament: the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), the Social Democratic Party of Austria (SPÖ), the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), the Greens and the NEOS.

#### Elections

All political institutions established by the Constitution derive their powers either directly or indirectly from elections by secret, personal and equal ballot. Austrian citizens elect

- the National Assembly (Nationalrat, the people's chamber of Parliament), every 5 years
- the Provincial Parliament (Landtag, Parliament of a Province), every 5 or 6 years
- the Municipal Council (EU citizens resident in the municipality can also vote), every 5 or 6 years
- the Austrian Members of the European Parliament (citizens of other EU countries with their main residence in Austria have the right to vote)
- the Federal President, every 6 years

Other instruments of democracy are the referendum or plebiscite (Volksbefragung, Volksabstimmung, Volksbegehren in Austria).

All Austrians (and in some elections also citizens of other EU member states, e.g.: Germany, Belgium and Malta) who reach age 16 before the appointed date can vote.



## Lesson 2 “DemoCrazy Game” Part 2

<b>Age group</b>	15-18 years
<b>Aims</b>	Students present their fictional country and explain how the decision-making process in their fantasy country will be structured.
<b>Overall time</b>	45 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	None
<b>List of materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Results from previous lesson</li> </ul>

### Overview of phases

Phase	Aim	Time (min.)
<b>Presentation</b>	All groups present the results of their group work to the rest of the class.	45'

### Detailed description of steps

#### Presentations (45'):

- The students present their fantasy countries to the rest of the class.
- Note: A reflection phase is planned for the third lesson of the module.

## Lesson 3 „DemoCrazy?“

<b>Age group</b>	15-18 years
<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The students will learn about and evaluate various definitions of democracy.</li> <li>• The students will reflect on the results as well as the process during the game in lesson 1 and 2.</li> <li>• The students will reflect on their definition of democracy and develop some basic arguments in favour of democracy.</li> </ul>
<b>Overall time</b>	45 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	Print out the Handouts for the lesson (M2 and M3).
<b>List of materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• M2: DemoCrazy? Quotes</li> <li>• M3: Reflections – The DemoCrazy Game</li> </ul>

### Overview of phases

Phase	Aim	Time (min.)
<b>Individual Work 1</b>	Students receive M2 and work on the given tasks.	10'
<b>Group Discussion</b>	The students discuss the result of their individual work.	25'
<b>Individual Work 2</b>	Students receive M3 and reflect on the past lessons.	10'

### Detailed description of steps

#### Individual Work 1 (10'):

- All students receive the handout M2 “DemoCrazy? Quotes”. The handout includes five definitions of Democracy from various points in history.
- The students are tasked with sorting the quotes from eldest to most recent.
- After sorting the quotes, the students should decide on one quote that for them most accurately defines democracy for them and one quote that most accurately reflects the results of their fictional country.

#### Discussions (25'):

- The teacher reveals the correct results.
- The students are tasked with discussing the following questions.



- Are you surprised by the results? Did something particularly surprise or confuse you?
- What definitions did each group choose and why?
- Which quote most accurately reflects your own view of democracy?

**Individual Work 1 (10’):**

- All students receive handout M3.
- They are tasked with reflecting on the past three lessons and what they have learnt.



## Material 2

### DemoCrazy? Quotes

[...] and that government of the people, by the people, for the people

The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

Democracy is not just the right to vote, it is the right to live in dignity.

In a democracy the poor will have more power than the rich, because there are more of them, and the will of the majority is supreme.

If we take the term in the strict sense, there never has been a real democracy, and there never will be. It is against the natural order for the many to govern and the few to be governed.



## Material 2(solution)

### DemoCrazy? Quotes

In a democracy the poor will have more power than the rich, because there are more of them, and the will of the majority is supreme. – Politics (4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.), *Aristoteles*

“If we take the term in the strict sense, there never has been a real democracy, and there never will be. It is against the natural order for the many to govern and the few to be governed.” – The Social Contract (1762), *Jean-Jaques Rousseau*

“[...] and that government of the people, by the people, for the people [...]” – Gettysburg Address (1863), *Abraham Lincoln*

“The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.” – Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), *United Nations*

“Democracy is not just the right to vote, it is the right to live in dignity.”// “Demokratie ist nicht nur das Recht zu wählen, es ist das Recht in Würde zu leben.” – *Naomi Klein* (born 1970)





## Material 3

### Reflections – The DemoCrazy Game

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1) Describe the decision-making process within the game: Did everyone have a say? Were decisions made consensually? Did YOU have a say?

2) Describe your feelings while participating in this activity.

3) Speculate on the possible purpose of the activity.

4) Briefly state what you think you have learned in this activity.



## Module 2 “Democratic Values”

This module is centred on students understanding the role that certain democratic values play in our society. Terms like freedom, equality, and solidarity are often used without there being a clear understanding of what these terms imply. These lessons aim to help students understand how context can influence the use and understanding of these concepts and terms, as well as help them make arguments in favour of democracy. In the first lesson, students research various definitions of the same value and explore what functions these values fulfil in different contexts. In the second lesson, students present the results of their research and discuss how important they deem these values, considering whether other values not mentioned might be more important.

### Lesson 1 “Democratic Values” Part 1

<b>Age group</b>	15-18 years
<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students research and summarize definitions of democratic values such as freedom, solidarity, and equality.</li> <li>• Students are able to analyse how these values are embedded in their national context (e.g.: referencing constitutional laws).</li> <li>• Students will develop and articulate a personal stance on the importance of these values in society.</li> </ul>
<b>Overall time</b>	45 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Optional</u>: Set up a WordCloud.</li> </ul>
<b>List of materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital devices with internet access</li> <li>• Flipcharts and writing materials</li> </ul>

### Overview of phases

Phase	Aim	Time (min.)
<b>Warm Up</b>	The students share their associations with democratic values.	10'
<b>Group Work</b>	In groups the students are tasked with researching and creating posters based on three democratic values.	35'

### Detailed description of steps

#### Warm Up (10’):

- The teacher asks the students what they believe democratic values are and to name examples.



- To visualise the answers the students can use a wordcloud of a similar application.

### Group Work (35'):

- The class is divided into three groups. Each group is tasked with researching one basic democratic value (freedom, equality, solidarity).
- After their research each group should summarise their findings on a flipchart/ padlet to create a poster.
- The poster can include definitions, such as definitions from the national constitution or laws that ensure the existence of this value, first historical conceptualisation of the word, etymology, etc.
- For their research, students can use the following websites as starting points:<sup>16</sup>
  - Oxford English Dictionary <https://www.oed.com/>
  - Britannica <https://www.britannica.com/>
  - Online Etymology Dictionary <https://www.etymonline.com/>
  - More detailed research:
    - Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <https://plato.stanford.edu/index.html>
    - Encyclopedia.com <https://www.encyclopedia.com/>
- It would be ideal if the students include a definition from their national constitution and maybe some laws.
- The goal is to condense the information in a way that they can explain it to their colleagues who haven't researched the topics.
- The students are also tasked with reflecting on how they think this value is represented in the current political context and how important this value is for them.
- Note: The presentation of the results is planned for lesson 2.

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<sup>16</sup> Resources for Austria:

[https://www.demokratiezentrum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/welan\\_grundrechte.pdf](https://www.demokratiezentrum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/welan_grundrechte.pdf)

<https://www.oesterreich.gv.at/lexicon/G/Seite.991535.html>

<https://hdgoe.at/eu-grundrechtecharta>

[https://hdgoe.at/nachgefragt\\_griss\\_grundrechte](https://hdgoe.at/nachgefragt_griss_grundrechte)

<https://grundrechte.at>

<https://polipedia.at/tiki-index.php?page=Grundrechte+in+Österreich>

<https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/lexika/politiklexikon/>



## Lesson 2 “Democratic Values” Part 2

<b>Age group</b>	15-18 years
<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students deliver a presentation of their research on democratic values.</li> <li>• Students will engage in discussions to compare the significance of democratic values and as well as their relevance in today’s society.</li> </ul>
<b>Overall time</b>	45 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	None
<b>List of materials</b>	Posters from previous lesson (Lesson 1).

### Overview of phases

Phase	Aim	Time (min.)
Group Presentations	The groups present the results of their research.	30’
Discussion	The class discusses and reflects on what they have learnt.	15’

### Detailed description of steps

#### Group Presentations (30’):

- Each Group presents the results of their research and their poster from lesson 1.
- They should also explain how they think this value is represented in the current political context and how important this value is for them.

#### Discussion (15’):

- Together the class discusses what they have learnt and if they believe that freedom, equality and solidarity are fundamental principles of the current democratic system also taking into account the statements the student made at the beginning of the previous lesson.

## Module 3 “Political Participation”

This module focuses on another aspect of democracy and citizen engagement: political participation. Political participation is often reduced to the act of voting or participating in political parties, but it is not limited to these institutional forms. It also encompasses non-institutionalized forms such as protests, petitions, and grassroots movements. As in the first module, this lesson is guided by the idea that democracy requires active participation. By showing students hands-on examples of political participation that go beyond voting or party membership, this module aims to encourage students to engage politically. These forms of participation are low-threshold ways for young people to get involved in democratic processes and influence political decisions. Students research and explore real-world examples of political movements to understand their goals, methods, and significance in promoting democracy.

### Lesson “Forms of Political Participation”

<b>Age group</b>	15-18 years
<b>Aims</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students will learn about different forms of political participation, distinguishing between institutionalized and non-institutionalized methods.</li> <li>• Students will research an initiative/movement and present their findings to the rest of their class.</li> <li>• Students will learn through real life examples how low-barrier participation can be.</li> </ul>
<b>Overall time</b>	45 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prepare a list of current political movements that are suitable for the class (list of examples included with the materials).</li> <li>• Print M1</li> </ul>
<b>List of materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• M1: What is Political Participation?</li> <li>• Flipcharts and writing materials</li> <li>• Digital devices with internet access,</li> </ul>

### Overview of phases

Phase	Aim	Time (min.)
<b>Group Work</b>	Students research a political movement and prepare posters.	30
<b>Group Presentations</b>	In new groups students present the results of their research.	15'

## Detailed description of steps

### Group Work (30'):

- In groups of four the students receive the handout M1 on forms of participation.
- After reading the handout the students are tasked with researching one example (see below) of a movement/initiative operating outside institutionalized forms of political forms of participation.
- They can use flipcharts to create posters. It is encouraged to use alternative forms, such as digital tools, to create posters.
- These posters should include information on where and when the initiative/movement was founded, what the main topics and goals are and what type of political participation this initiative/movement can be categorised as.
- Examples:
  - **Fridays for Future:**  
Global social movement, based on pupils and students, which campaigns for more and more effective climate protection, including the form of the school strike. Climate justice as an overarching purpose. The movement is supported by civil society and academia. <https://fridaysforfuture.org/>
  - **Extinction Rebellion:**  
Environmental protection movement with the aim of forcing the government to take environmental protection measures by means of civil disobedience in order to counteract the mass extinction of plants, animals, habitats and humanity. <https://rebellion.global/de/about-us/>
  - **Pulse of Europe:**  
Independent and cross-party citizens' initiative as a public, pro-European movement with the aim of making the European idea visible and audible again (development of a positive narrative of the EU). <https://pulseofeurope.eu/>
  - **Black Lives Matter:**  
Transnational movement that campaigns against violence against black people and people of colour. Started in America, but also has an impact in various European countries. Organises protests to speak out against the killing of black people by police officers and against racial profiling, police violence and racism. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/>

### Group Presentations (15'):

- The students form new groups and make sure that at least one person of each researched movement/initiative is represented.
- The students present the results of their research to each other.



- If there is time after the presentations, students should discuss how these movements contribute to promoting/creating lively democracy.



## Material 1

### What is Political Participation? <sup>17</sup>

The term political participation refers to political opportunities to participate in and thus influence democratic processes.

Political participation therefore includes the behaviour of citizens who, as a group or on their own, voluntarily want to exert influence on political decisions at various levels of the political system (local, state, federal and European).

All models, methods, measures and initiatives that enable people in a democracy to actively participate in democratic decision-making processes can be described as participation. This in turn means that democracies are dependent on the participation of the people who live in them.

Specific examples of participation are:

- a) Participation in elections and voting;
- b) party-related activities;
- c) activities related to the community, election campaigns and politicians;
- d) legal protest (e.g. demonstrations);
- e) civil protest;

Different forms of political participation:

1) Institutionalised (also known as *conventional, constitutional* forms): legally regulated forms (e.g. participation in elections or membership of parties and trade unions).

2) Non-institutionalised (also known as *unconventional or less/non-constitutional* forms) as an "extended form of political participation", including, for example, signature collections/petitions (digital and analogue), demonstrations and protests, citizens' initiatives, product boycotts, strikes, letters to the editor, squatting and even forms of civil disobedience. These non-institutionalised forms of participation are particularly important for those parts of civil society that take minority political positions and find it difficult to assert their interests through institutionalised channels (e.g. elections of elected representatives). This form of participation is equally important for younger people and young adults who want to participate and exert influence but have not yet reached the required voting age. Through non-institutionalised forms of participation, these people can also influence public opinion and thus participate in democratic processes.

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<sup>17</sup>Source: <https://oxfordre.com/politics/display/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228637-e-68> [19.12.2024]