

Observatory of Fake News: suggestions for pedagogical use

1. Introduction

The CoMMITTEd project is a joint effort by four research teams from universities in Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain to tackle Fake News relating migrants and minorities to the origins and spread of COVID-19. The aim of this project is to favor the development of intercultural and digital competences to deal with the spreading of Fake News and develop tools to be used in teacher education programs, through intercultural learning and media literacy development (Sádaba & Salaverría, 2022). Fake News is a kind of information disorder (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017).

The CoMMITTEd project has three practical outcomes, geared toward educators and teachers: two online teacher education modules, a pedagogical e-handbook for teachers and teacher trainers, and an online database of Fake News. This database is accompanied by suggestions for use in the classroom, in different subjects or across the curriculum, in out-of-school contexts, and in teacher education programs. The document you are currently viewing contains suggestions about how to use these resources.

2. What is this Observatory all about?

2.1 Brief description of the Observatory

This database contains pieces of FN relating migrants and minorities to COVID-19, analyzing and deconstructing them. The 20 FN that make up the Observatory have in common that they address several of the issues that were raised during the period of the pandemic caused by COVID-19. Professionals can use these resources to teach critical thinking skills to address media content and, at the same time, incorporate aspects of diversity into the discussion. The decision to select FN involving social minorities (instead of climate change, for instance) is related to our intended audience: teachers work in diverse classrooms and sometimes they may not be sensitized to approach FN and hate discourses that affect their students, or may not have tools to deal with such content. By starting with a socially relatable and directly observable situation in classrooms, professionals can also transfer the knowledge gained to other (media) content and to social interactions.

Each team selected 5 pieces of FN associating migrants with COVID-19 for analysis taken from their individual contexts; in total, 20 (news and social media) items were analysed.

The database created with these items is multilingual and also multimodal as it contains texts, images and videos circulating on social media and FN websites.

2.2 Brief description and analysis of all Fake News

In the online observatory, the pieces of FN and accompanying analyses are presented as downloadable PDF files (from 4 to 6 pages) with screenshots of the FN and explanations written by team members. First, the context of the FN item is presented, providing information about its source, relevant actors and situations involved. Then the key notions about how to identify the piece as FN are explained: these are based on its content (e.g. “migrants jump ahead in the vaccination queue”), the way the content is presented (e.g. grammar or spelling mistakes, no sources mentioned, hateful and discriminatory claims), and the format of the FN (e.g. attempts to provide credibility to the content by mimicking quality-journalism websites or, conversely, appealing to the readers’ emotions by manipulating images). Where the news includes oral elements, these are transcribed to guarantee that the FN will be permanently available. Posts in social networks do not stand by themselves, but also include reactions from readers which are visible to those reading a post, and so those reactions are also included in the analyses.

Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, most of the data selected for the Observatory come from social networks and are connected to right-wing groups or individuals (see Alba Juez & Mackenzie, 2019). The first indicator that shows the presence of Othering minorities and migrants is the way they are named in the titles given to the pieces of FN analyzed. In our observatory, migrants and minorities are associated with certain countries of origin (Chinese, Colombian, Moroccan, etc.) and religions (Jews), or associated with specific migrant status (refugees), or through the use of stereotyped onomastics as identifiers (Mohammed and Fatima) (see Breeze, Gintsburg, & Baynham, 2022). Such designations are amalgams (they are generally in the plural form), often combined with depreciative adjectives (“rejected asylum seekers”, “infected Moroccans”) or framed as problems (the “problem of refugees”).

In terms of the conventional categories of “information disorder” (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017), misleading content was the most common type of FN included in the analyses, whereas the second most common category was false context. Both categories are challenging in terms of identification, as they contain true elements, misleadingly intermingled with false or manipulated content.

In terms of rhetorical and multimodal strategies, the Fake News items analyzed in the Observatory include a diverse set of strategies:

Rhetorical strategies	Multimodal strategies
<p>onomastics and amalgams: merging migrant individuals into one stereotypical person (“Fatima”, “Mohammed”)</p> <p>predication: using depreciative adjectives for migrants and minorities (“rejected”, “infected”) and labeling the majority with perceived positive attributes (“honest”, “normal people”)</p> <p>misleading problem-framing (“the problem of refugees”)</p> <p>synecdoche (the “Colombian variant” or “refugees” instead of “migrants”)</p> <p>exaggerations to provoke a more emotional reaction (e.g. “wide open borders”)</p> <p>false connections between facts: COVID-19 regulations are compared to refugee policies</p>	<p>nationalistic symbols, such as flags and colours;</p> <p>elements associated with credibility of the source / mediator of the information (who belongs to the majority group, is possibly a native speaker of the language and has a “respected” profession);</p> <p>different framing of the source / mediator and the targeted group(s), in quantitative and qualitative terms;</p> <p>visually misleading historical analogies (use of historical documents, timelines, etc.).</p>

2.3 Brief description and analysis of all Fake News

Dutch

The table below summarizes the five Dutch cases. They all have in common that the reports label a particular group as the cause of the emergence and spread of COVID-19 [Dutch commonalities].

Title (translated into English)	Date of publication	Source of the original FN
Chinese offended by distasteful Corona song with Radio 10 DJ Lex Gaarthuis	February 2020	DenD
The corona virus is a salafist conspiracy	28.02.2020	Joop
Spot the difference 1940- 2020	January 2021	De Gelderlander
Bunkers in Zeeland plastered with Jewish stars with the word COVID	25.05.2021	Nu.nl
PvV leader Geert Wilders: Henk and Ingrid versus Mohammed and Fatima.	11.10.2020	Twitter

German

The five news items included in the German Fake News section are mostly related to the spreading of COVID-19 due to the alleged inability of migrants to social distance (because they supposedly have larger families and take part in specific festive events that are attended by large numbers of members of their communities) or are allegedly more likely to believe Fake News about vaccination with the result that the vaccination rate is supposedly lower among migrants. The news is embedded in two main narratives: that Germany's borders are too open and should be controlled, and that Germany is spending too many material resources on hosting refugees and asylum seekers (even those supposedly in an illegal situation).

Title (translated into English)	Date of publication	Source of the original FN
A controversy in Berlin	07.01.2022	RBB
Border control instead of vaccination control	19.01.2022	Instagram
Corona numbers among migrants	20.04.2021	PI-News
Special payment even for rejected asylum seekers	07.11.2021	Facebook
Multikulti vs. Coronavirus	03.03.2021	Tweet

The topics of the open border and the financial assistance to newcomers fit into the narrative, generally disseminated by some ideological groups, that the German 'multikulti' (multicultural) model has failed and therefore the entry of migrants and refugees should be limited. In the news about the spread of COVID-19, that narrative is re-appropriated as further supposed "proof" of its veracity.

Portuguese

The five cases presented in the Portuguese version of the Observatory have the common element of representing migrants and refugees as scapegoats, labeling them as disrespectful, violent, disruptive, and as responsible for spreading the disease. Specifically, the Fake News items analyzed focus on: the spread of the disease; the alleged use of the virus as a means of population control by the government(s); the exploitation of the use of the masks to lead to population replacement and Islamization, violent resistance to vaccination; and the origin of the variants.

Title (translated into English)	Date of publication	Source of the original FN
Native Australians resist vaccination against COVID-19	18./19.10.2021	Twitter
Zmar Eco Resort - A "nazified" accommodation complex	01.05.2021	Facebook
The problem of refugees - which M&M are you going to eat?	22.04.2020	Facebook
Population replacement with masks against COVID-19	07.12.2021	Facebook
COVID-19 variants origin	26.07.2021	Facebook

These themes are linked to the discourses conveyed by extreme right-wing movements, which have been gaining popularity in recent elections in the country, where positions of ostracizing minorities (because of their gender, sexuality, ethnicity or migratory past) are identified, based on narratives of exclusion, on gendered and racialized binary articulations, which oppose an "us" to a "them".

Spanish

The five Spanish case studies aim to deconstruct Fake News items in which minority groups, particularly migrants and Jews, are held responsible for different social concerns triggered by COVID-19. These include the saturation of public healthcare facilities, lack of tourism, unemployment, civil insecurity, and fear of contagion. Migrants tend to be associated with poor hygiene, and are depicted as carriers of COVID and as criminals. During the pandemic, these groups were related to social benefits ("priority in vaccination"), invasion (the boats ("pateras") that arrive at the Spanish coasts full of people), disease and contagion ("infected Moroccans" and a new "Colombian strain") and to elite conspiracy (members of a Jewish conspiracy, which seems to be behind the pharmaceutical industries producing the vaccines).

Title (translated into English)	Date of publication	Source of the original FN
COVID-19 vaccination priority groups	January 2021	Instituto de Salud Global Barcelona (IS Global)
Spain opens its borders to a new tourism group	26.07.2020	Twitter
"Colombian variant" of COVID-19	05.06.2021	TikTok
Infected Moroccans in Cartagena, staying at Hostal Manolo	July 2020	WhatsApp
Jews behind the COVID-19 vaccines	03.03.2021	Twitter

The idea behind the analysis is to help students develop critical-reflective skills to correctly detect and deconstruct these stereotyped narratives. Another aim is to include students in the process of analyzing and verifying FN, showing them the ease with which hoaxes can be created in different media (such as Twitter, TIKTOK, WhatsApp), the danger each one of them implies and the complexity involved in verifying them. Often they are a mix of different types of informational disorders. The case studies offer an excellent opportunity to discuss different topics across subjects and age levels: for instance, how to differentiate quality journalism from imitation attempts and how to make students aware of changes in journalistic genres after the pandemic, since social media are now moving towards hybrid genres of videos, audio, and visual stories, where the limits between the public and the private are diluted.

3. Using the Observatory: some suggestions

3.1 For teacher educators

- make student teachers aware of the social need to develop students' media, news and intercultural literacy to navigate the world of Fake News.
- develop student teacher awareness that Fake News is everywhere and it is not just people lacking in instruction who fall for it: present the Fake News from the Observatory to the class and ask the student teachers which stories are credible and which are not, and reflect on strategies that can be applied to debunk them. Compare student teachers' answers with the analysis provided.

- encourage students to find Fake News around other themes related to their expertise (climate change, war, manipulation of election results, etc) and write an analysis similar to that provided in the Observatory.
- discuss student teachers' linguistic and cultural background, making them aware of the multiplicity of (language) biographies and paths to becoming plurilingual.

3.2 For teachers

In the L1 classroom

- select the Fake News and identify and analyse linguistic, rhetorical and multimodal strategies used in othering migrants and refugees.
- treat Fake News as a particular textual genre that needs to be properly read and interpreted, requiring training in reading strategies (discuss the structure, headings and subheadings, presence or absence of sources, progression of argumentation or lack thereof, etc).
- identify and analyze lexical choices (in terms of adjectives, verbs and nouns) and particular grammatical constructions (consecutive sentences, for example).
- use linguistic corpus analysis to analyze commonalities in the ways the targeted groups are represented in social media.
- use the analysis provided to write counter-narratives on the Fake News websites or social media accounts where the Fake News appeared, as a strategy to develop “savoir s’engager” skills (Byram, 1997).
- analyze the use and functions of smileys, emojis, memes, and other communicative sense containers in those Fake News items.
- transform the Fake News in the Observatory into parodies, by manipulating their multimodal elements (changing photos, inserting memes, using smileys and emojis, etc).
- ask students to find Fake News around other themes related to their lives (celebrities and influencers, climate change, etc) and help them write an analysis similar to that provided by the Observatory.
- analyze the use of terms from the field of migration and match the terms used with the definition in the dictionary.

In foreign language classes

- compare Fake News on the same theme in different languages (for example, on vaccination), promoting reasoning skills across languages and cultures, and intercomprehension abilities.
- use the analysis provided to write counter-narratives on the Fake News websites or social media accounts where the Fake News appeared, as a strategy to develop “savoir s’engager” skills (Byram, 1997).
- analyse the use and functions of smileys, emojis, memes, and other communicative sense containers in those Fake News items.
- discuss students’ linguistic and cultural background, making them aware of the multiplicity of (language) biographies in the classroom, and the feeling that they also can become a target of Fake News.
- develop decentering strategies through the use of role play, in which the students have to give voice to characters they do not usually identify with. Example: imagine that you are one of the refugees in the boat, reading the Fake News once you arrive at a destiny.
- transform the Fake News from the Observatory into parodies, by manipulating its multimodal elements (changing photos, inserting memes, using smileys and emojis, etc).
- for advanced levels, ask students to find Fake News around other themes related to their lives (celebrities and influencers, climate change, etc.) and help them write an analysis similar to that provided by the Observatory.

In Philosophy / Ethics classes

- coanalyze the mechanisms of argumentation and construction of pseudo-logic (creation of false inferences, inductive and deductive reasoning).
- discuss philosophical concepts of “true” and “fact” by differentiating “true” from “false” facts in a Fake News item from the Observatory of your choice.
- discuss the notion of “identity” (the identity of migrants, refugees, minorities and one’s own), deconstructing false arguments about migrants or minorities as a threat to identity and to European/Western values.
- discuss strategies of depersonalization of minorities (by not showing their faces) and the agendas such strategies pursue.

- debate issues of censorship/moderation on the Internet: address the dilemmas around “free speech” and “hate discourse”.

In History classes

- spot the groups (ethnicities, nationalities, religions, status, etc.) being spotlighted and relate the FN to other episodes in History where these same groups were singled out and misrepresented.
- analyze parallelisms in History and across minority groups (rather than constructed instances to instill fear and other emotions), as a way to make students perceive the pseudo-logical machinery behind FN creation and spread.
- thematize the ways History and supposed historical documents (such as texts and photos) can be manipulated to serve obscure political agendas.

In Arts classes

- create "worlds in reverse", in which the strategies of depersonification and credibilization are inverted, with decentering effects.
- use the analysis provided to write a parody or create memes or short videos, in which the Fake News is debunked.
- use theater to make students take on roles they do not usually identify with, promoting the development of decentering skills.
- select different photos to illustrate the Fake News in the Observatory and compare the production of different feelings in the reader and connections to the content.
- transform the Fake News from the Observatory into parodies, by manipulating its multimodal elements (changing photos, inserting memes, using smileys and emojis, etc).

In Maths classes

- explain the role of algorithms and their functioning, namely in terms of influencing the information we are exposed to (at least in social media).
- address issues of probability, percentage, proportion and exponentiality used to manipulate the sense of quantifiers in Fake News.

In Religion classes

- address commonalities among religions and different religious groups in order to promote inter-religious dialogue.
- refer to religion as just one of the possible identity markers of a person.
- exploit how religion is scapegoated in FN.

For the German context

In PGW (Politik, Gesellschaft, Wirtschaft)

- develop awareness about and a critical stance towards the fact that not only right-wing outlets spread Fake News;
- explain the political and ideological agendas of both right-wing and left-wing political groups and explore how the same elements of Fake News are used in both;
- by comparing the same Fake News in different countries, analyze the transversality of those agendas around the world;
- address the social, political and economic contexts in which Fake News most commonly emerges and evolves;
- problematize the definition of the German “Multikulti” notion, and compare it to other terms, such as “intercultural” or “transcultural”.
- analyze the role politicians play as representatives in the Fake News presented in the Observatory.

In Projektwoche

- analyze the Fake News of the Observatory from different content-subject perspectives and search for Fake News around other themes;
- problematize the effects of Fake News about migrants and the pandemic within the German (political, social and health) context;
- compare the German context to other national contexts using the different materials in the Observatory and complement it with material from other contexts (keeping in mind students’ migration backgrounds or school partnerships);
- place the analysis of the Fake News in a broader Data Literacy context across the curriculum;
- prepare presentations on Fake News and their impact for the students’ parents for a concluding school-wide project day.

For the Portuguese context

In “Educação para a Cidadania” (Citizenship Education)

- analyze the Observatory's Fake News and identify the minority groups that are targeted;
- reflect on the possible reasons why minority groups are targeted as the scapegoats in Fake News;
- identify the strategies (discursive and pictorial) used to make the "other" more "other" (Othering);
- reflect on the role of the media in the dissemination of Fake News;
- analyze different types of information sources and understand the importance of using credible information sources.

In “Domínio de Autonomia Curricular” (Area of Curricular Autonomy)

Possible project work:

- promoting critical thinking around the Fake News Observatory: identify the elements that characterize Fake News, compare Fake News from different countries and reflect on common and divergent points;
- promote communication skills: elaborate infographics for the school community on how to identify Fake News.

In “Disciplina de Oferta de Escola” (School Offered Subject)

- articulate with the school's educational project
- example of "Técnicas de Expressão Plástica (TEP)" discipline
 - explore the Observatory's Fake News through plastic expression techniques, considering guiding topics such as the theme of Fake News, the people targeted in Fake News, or the graphic strategies used in Fake News;
 - organize an exhibition of the students' work;
 - promote communication skills: each student presents orally or in writing his/her work.

For the Spanish context

In Lengua Castellana y Literatura (Spanish Language and Literature)

- help students understand the difference between a serious daily newspaper and a tabloid, an advertisement or a logo, a billboard or a webpage, a video game, or a novel. What makes one website legitimate and another a hoax, or how do advertisers package products to entice us to buy? Use the examples of the Observatory and everyday, local ones to help students differentiate between the different text genres.
- teach students to identify patterns in the disinformation narratives from the Observatory. What themes, adjectives and connotations are migrants/minorities usually associated with, what strategies/tools are used to do this, and why?
- develop students' critical metadiscourse skills with tasks such as: "Imagine you show one of the examples from the Observatory to your little brother, who believes them. What strategies would you recommend for him to analyze them correctly and avoid spreading/sharing them?"

In Educación para la Ciudadanía (Citizenship education)

- use the cases from the Observatory to find out how the different minority groups (migrants and Jews) are presented as a supposed threat to public security, health, wealth and citizen identity. Please encourage students to look for similar examples in the news and media and make them reflect on the reason for these connections.
- ask the students to interview people from different backgrounds (age, gender, education, cultural upbringing) and ask them to comment on one of the examples from the Observatory. Write a report on the different viewpoints afterwards and try to explain the different responses. Alternative option: Create a role-play in class so the students can experience other people's points of view.

Research projects:

- develop your "own/class FN-ethnography" over X days (the number of days depends on the level). You will be writing down the pieces of news you will be reading. Choose those pieces that drew your attention, and explain why this was the case. Examine how different websites report the same information. Take screenshots, and document your reaction. Analyze your reaction using the concepts and ideas you learned through the Observatory.

Examples in the Spanish context:

- Programa de Alfabetización Digital: [proyecto Eraser](#)
- Educational resources provided by [maldita.es](https://maldita.es/malditaeduca/) (<https://maldita.es/malditaeduca/>)

For the Dutch context

In the Netherlands, there is no centrally regulated program for dealing with Fake News. Nevertheless, there are several initiatives from all kinds of curriculum organizations that offer suggestions for dealing with Fake News. We will mention the most well-known of these.

- at the Sound and Vision Museum, workshops can be booked in which 'pupils are introduced to the techniques and mechanisms behind disinformation and they will make and spread Fake News themselves'.
- the media wisdom website gives suggestions on how to deal with Fake News: 'Fake news is misleading and inaccurate information that is spread to make money or to influence public opinion. It is a form of disinformation. Disinformation and Fake News can take many forms: a news item on the internet, a video on social media or a picture in an app group. It is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between them and form an informed opinion'.
- the Foundation for Curriculum Development (SLO) contains an arsenal of training courses and modules for digital literacy. On its website, the organization states the following: 'Is Wikipedia a reliable source or not? What is Fake News and what is real? What do you share online with your friends and the world? And how do you deal with online shaming?'

4. Synthesis

After reviewing the analyses of the Fake News from the CoMMITTEd project, it becomes apparent that there are common trends regarding Othering across the different national contexts. This includes targeting certain groups (Muslim and Jewish people, and Black and Brown people living in Europe) as well as reproducing stereotypes and exaggerations. It is therefore important to make students and student teachers aware of strategies, both rhetorical and multimodal, targeting those groups, and of the narratives informing those false narratives.

Through the treatment of Fake News, teachers and teacher educators might make students aware that such narratives are based on ethnocentric presuppositions and ideologies and such narratives might either differ from one country to another (according to national or geopolitical particularities) or present commonalities across different countries (because of experiencing the same historical events or because of the circulation of global narratives).

5. External resources

- [Glossary](#)
- [Observatory](#)

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