

**WHAT'S
NEW?**

MANUAL FOR TEACHERS

WHAT'S NEW?

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HOW IT ALL STARTED AND WHAT IT HAS LED TO

How do we handle **propaganda, conspiracy theories and misleading information** these days? It's a challenge, that much is certain! Every day we receive thousands of messages through (social) media, all of varying value. They range from hard, undisputable(?) facts to complete nonsense. **Being 'media-wise' is really important**, because walking right into the traps of these messages can have serious consequences.

Mediawijs and Kazerne Dossin joined forces and went looking for ways to discuss conspiracy theories and propaganda with youngsters. Mediawijs is 'media-wise' down to the core, while Kazerne Dossin has tons of expertise on historical propaganda and conspiracies. All of this knowledge and experience resulted in the project **'What's New?'**.

The goal is simple, and yet complex. We teach youngsters to identify (historical) examples of propaganda and conspiracy theories. This gives them more insight into mechanisms that are still used today. Pupils learn to ask critical questions and to expose the real message behind well thought-out, attractive stories.

The results of this collaboration can be found in the current document. It lets you get hands-on with ready-to-use classroom workshops. A **digital guided tour through Kazerne Dossin** completes the package.

Good luck, and don't get caught out!
Mediawijs and Kazerne Dossin

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TIPS FOR TEACHING ABOUT PROPAGANDA AND CONSPIRACY THEORIES

SIX THINGS TO REMEMBER

1. THE TIME IS NOW

Don't wait until a pupil starts telling his peers about a conspiracy theory with full conviction. Or until propaganda images get the whole school talking. You want your pupils to critically handle various media so that they are not easily misled.

By addressing the issue at a 'quiet' time, you have control over the examples you want to discuss, and you don't have to be led by current events. Prevention is better than chasing after the facts.

2. EMOTIONS NEED ATTENTION

As a teacher, your first reflex might be to look at everything objectively and to argue with facts and logic. But propaganda and conspiracy theories cleverly respond to present emotions, or elicit new ones - especially about topics that are important to pupils (religion, favourite sports club, love of animals, the climate, health, ...).

So don't ask them to look at everything rationally, because that will likely only get you 'socially desirable' responses, or lead to pupils withdrawing. Pay attention to what pupils are feeling: make them listen to others and appreciate their involvement.

3. FOCUS ON QUESTIONS

Don't immediately start asking for analyses or opinions when you discuss conspiracy theories and propaganda with pupils. Instead, invite them to ask as many questions as possible about videos, posters or texts. Every new question tickles their curiosity, but also encourages them to go looking for answers. Don't label their answers as right or wrong, but keep asking further questions to get them thinking.

4. FOCUS ON DIVERSITY

Propaganda and conspiracy theories flourish easily between like-minded people. Try to break up established groups and offer a wide range of insights. Different opinions invite people to defend their own point of view, come up with arguments, and potentially adjust their stance. Listening to various opinions can help to foster understanding for others.

5. DON'T JUST CALL IT 'NONSENSE' OR 'STUPID'!

Perhaps you really don't understand how someone can be so misled by propaganda or a conspiracy theory. But don't forget that these are techniques that cleverly play into frustrations, fears and other emotions. Science, government or media sometimes offer insufficient answers. Propagandists and conspiracy theorists tend to fill that gap by offering a clear answer (even if it's not entirely correct). A wrong answer can be more comforting than none at all. This doesn't mean that the pupil is stupid, but perhaps that they are worried or frustrated. Go looking for the reasons why someone believes something, rather than immediately trying to debunk it.

6. CORRECT MISTAKES

Refuting misleading communication isn't always easy. You don't have the necessary expertise on every possible subject. And often people are so convinced they are right that every counterargument is futile. Conspiracy thinkers believe that a lack of evidence is due to an elaborate cover-up. The 'elite' has destroyed all the evidence. Nevertheless, it is important to label incorrect information as such. Not to convince the conspiracy thinkers or propagandists, but to offer (other) pupils a wide range of perspectives.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Addressing conspiracy theories

GENERAL

A conspiracy theory is the suspicion that an (important) event is the consequence of a (secret) conspiracy. Conspiracy theories are popular amongst youngsters because they are exciting and because they offer easily understandable answers to (complex) questions.

In order to be resilient against conspiracy theories, pupils need to understand the following:

- We are all capable of coming up with believable fake stories.
- Keeping something secret for a long time is not easy.
- Conspiracy theories play into our frustrations, hopes and other emotions. This makes certain conspiracy theories attractive even to individuals who are normally not so easily influenced.
- Some conspiracy theories are dangerous and can incite violence or hatred.
- Conspiracy theories can usually be recognised by their specific structure.
- There is a diverse range of sources. Some are more reliable than others.

LET'S GET TO WORK

READY-TO-USE WORKSHOP: YOU COULD(N'T) MAKE THIS UP, SIR!

What's New? by Mediawijs and Kazerne Dossin offers a ready-to-use workshop for the classroom.

You can find the presentation and worksheets at www.mediawijs.be/conspiracy.

In the final exercise, we zoom in on a singular conspiracy theory. The aim is for pupils to analyse a few pre-determined sources and to judge them on their reliability, but also to go looking for information themselves.

The presentation delves into the conspiracy theory around the death of princess Diana, because:

- it's not a current event.
- it's unlikely to elicit tension between groups in class.

Alternative options are Flat Earth Society, the supposed death of Paul McCartney, ...

In order to execute the last exercise well, it's best for pupils to have some prior knowledge of looking for and assessing (news) sources.

But the experiment below is also a good option!

AN 'E'-EXPERIMENT: CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND FILTER BUBBLES

GOALS:

- Pupils discover that their own surfing behaviour influences the search results.
- Pupils learn about the concepts of algorithms and filter bubbles.
- Pupils realise that they have to critically judge online information.

INSTRUCTIONS:

1

CONDUCT THE FOLLOWING EXPERIMENT

The experiment takes place over several days. Pupils need to spend at least 15 minutes on it every day.

The class is divided into 2 groups:

- **Group 1:** searches for YouTube videos and only clicks videos with a **scientific** approach or coming from official news sources.
- **Group 2:** searches for YouTube videos and only clicks videos that elicit exciting questions and that are **sensationalised**.

The exercise is carried out individually and at home. Every pupil starts with the same search phrase.

Choose one conspiracy-heavy subject like:

- The moon landing
- The death of princess Diana
- Aliens and Area 51
- Covid vaccines

Pupils check their YouTube suggestion page every day and click the suggested videos that fit their assignment (either scientific or sensational).

In other words:

- They click on suggested videos on their homepage
- OR
- They click on suggested videos to the right of the current video that fit the theme.

After a few days, each pupil takes a screenshot of their YouTube suggestion page and prints it out or sends it through electronically.

Everyone's suggestion page will look very different.

2

COMPARE THE VARIOUS YOUTUBE SCREENSHOTS

Emphasise again that this is an experiment!

Ask the following questions:

- Can you differentiate between the sensationalised screenshots and the scientific ones?
Divide them into two piles (if printed).
- How come the end results are so different for everyone?

Briefly explain why the end result is different for everyone.

THEORY BEHIND THE EXPERIMENT:

Why are the results so different?

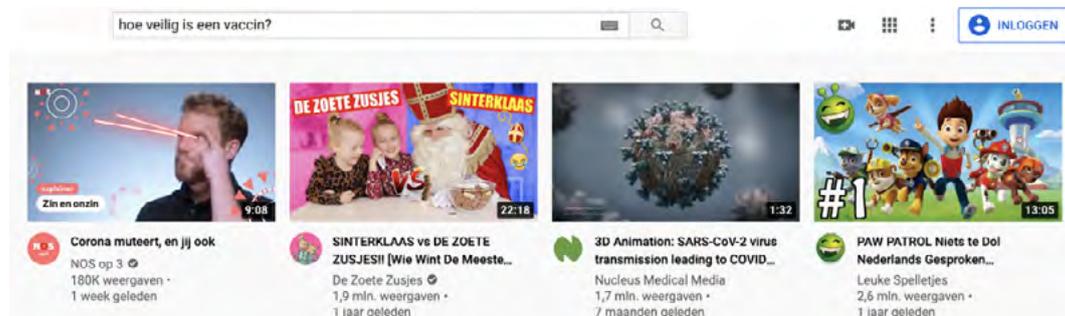
- Like other social media, YouTube wants to **earn money** with your views.
 - YouTube earns money by showing advertisements ...
 - ... so YouTube wants you to keep watching, so that they earn more money.
- YouTube **gives you what you want!**
 - Using calculations (algorithms), they discover what you are interested in and what you watch the most.
 - This is a calculation based on:
 - The videos you have watched in the past.
 - The videos that others with a similar profile watch.
 - The videos that are currently popular.
- Other information that YouTube has about you (e.g. Google search history).
- YouTube wants you to keep watching for a long time, because that way they can show you more advertisements (kaching!) . The system tries to avoid showing you videos that would make you angry or sad (because they contain a different opinion) and stop you watching.
- Everyone is in their own personal **filter bubble**.
 - A filter bubble only shows us what we are already interested in or like (which keeps us online for longer).
 - This is why other people have a very different YouTube suggestion page from yours. And ... why they develop a different outlook on the world: they receive different information!

**IMPORTANT!**

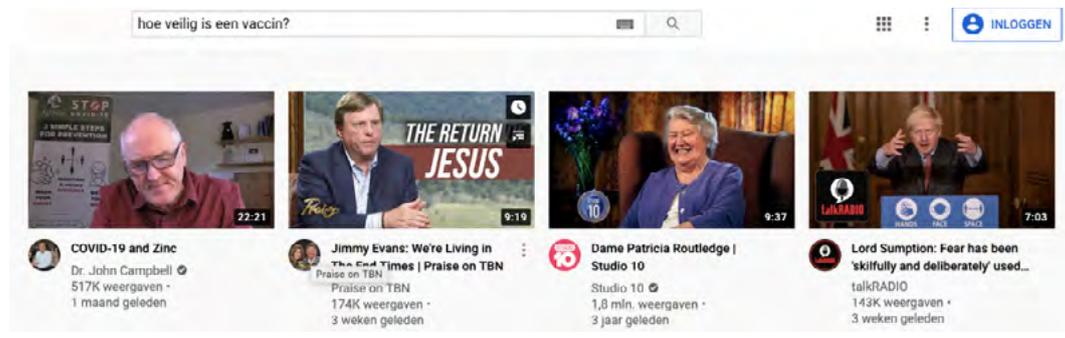
Make sure to delete all your cookies and your browser history after the experiment, so that you can restart your online experience with a blank slate. Do this regularly to counteract being misled by algorithms.

WE ALSO CONDUCTED THE EXPERIMENT!

The 'scientific' search for information about the Covid vaccine brings us to suggestions of official news sources (NOS) and a pharmaceuticals company.



The 'sensational' search for information about the Covid vaccine brings us to suggestions of a doctor, but also a video about the end times and a video about how governments instill fear in us.



LOOKING FOR MORE INSPIRATION AROUND CONSPIRACIES?

- **Conspiracy theories, a handy guide**

This brochure by Média Animation will help you understand the complex subject of conspiracy theories better, as well as analyse and debate it. Using concrete examples and exercises, you are guided through the world of conspiracy theories step by step.

- **Handling conspiracy theories in the classroom - Tips for teachers**

How do you handle a pupil who believes in conspiracy theories? What should you do and what should you avoid? A few practical tips and suggestions by the Anne Frank Foundation.

- **Anti conspiracy memewars**

This Instagram account tries to combat conspiracy thinking with humour.

- **10 infographics**

The European Commission designed 10 infographics to help recognise, debunk and combat harmful conspiracy theories.

LEARN FROM AN EXPERT

We asked Piia Varis - professor at Tilburg University and an expert on conspiracy theories in the digital age - how you can handle conspiracy theories in an educational context.

Watch **the video** to hear her tips.

Addressing propaganda

GENERAL

Propaganda is subjective information meant to influence the thoughts and actions of others. This means that propaganda is misleading, and contains a call to action.

In order to be resilient against propaganda, pupils need to understand the following:

- Propaganda can be recognised by a certain structure.
- Propaganda draws on emotions.
- Sometimes propaganda is based on pure lies, but not always.
- Some propaganda is strong and effective, some isn't.

LET'S GET TO WORK

THE WHAT'S NEW-APP IN KAZERNE DOSSIN

Pupils acquire basic knowledge of propaganda:

- What is propaganda?
- What are its features?
- How is it used?
- Who uses it?
- What is its goal?

For a thorough introduction to propaganda, visit the museum at Kazerne Dossin. Especially for pupils, the museum developed the **What's New-app**.

Alternatively, use the exercise below.

“CONVINCE THEM!” - MAKING YOUR OWN PROPAGANDA

For this exercise, make use of the **What's New** bookmark and poster. You can order them [here](#), or [download](#) and print them yourself.

GOALS:

- Pupils discover that they already know and master various propaganda techniques.
- Pupils learn the 4 most common propaganda techniques.
- Pupils realise that propaganda exists in various forms today.

1 SETTING THE SCENE (5')

Your pupils live on the fictional island of 'Flapolatia'. On the island, equality between men and women is very important: everyone has to be able to work, everyone is paid equally, everyone has the same freedoms. The way decisions are made is also equal and shared: anything can be said, everyone has a free voice in the debate, decisions are made by compromise. This culture of free speech is not always ideal. There are plenty of clashes and discussions between various groups within society.

The culture on the neighbouring island of 'Fringaria' is very different. All decisions are made by a single leader. He gets to decide everything. The division between men and women is also different: only men are allowed to work outside of the house, homework is unpaid, marriage is arranged. The inhabitants of the island live harmoniously as one group. Fringarians have a habit of being very kind to each other, and conflict is largely avoided. Everyone knows what is expected of them.

All of a sudden, Fringaria is faced with an insect plague. The island is completely destroyed by hungry insects. People starve due to food shortage. The Fringarians seek refuge on neighbouring islands. One day, hundreds of Fringarian refugees land on the shores of Flapolatia. According to tradition, a general vote will decide whether the Fringarians can stay, for how long, and under which conditions.

2 GROUP DISCUSSION (10')

Discuss with the pupils ...

- What are possible dangers or threats caused by the arrival of the Fringarians?
 - For the Flapolatians.
 - For public health.
 - For ecology.
 - For the political equilibrium.
 - For the economy.
 - For the relationships between the islanders.
 - ...
- Which opportunities does the arrival of the Fringarians bring?
 - For the Flapolatians.
 - For public health.
 - For ecology.
 - For the political equilibrium.
 - For the economy.
 - For the relationships between the islanders.
 - ...

3 CREATING PROPAGANDA (20')

Divide the class into 2 groups. One group is in favour of the Fringarians' arrival, the other group opposes their stay. Don't let the pupils choose which group they are in!

The pupils then form pairs, and each pair comes up with a propaganda plan to convince fellow Flapolatians of their position.

Questions that can help them as they come up with ideas:

- Which group in society are they trying to convince (e.g. the rich/poor, employers/employees, young/old, men/women, ...)?
- Which message would convince this group the most (e.g. what is important to Flapolatians in this group)?
- What is the best way to reach this group (e.g. posters, conversations, internet campaigns, videos, radio programmes, ...)?
- Are they trying to convince staunch opponents, or are they aiming at the more moderate or undecided group?

The pupils create a visual version of one of their ideas.

4 PERFORM THE CHECK! (5')

Pupils leave their results on the table. Working according to a rotation, each group checks out the examples of the other groups. They use the checklist on their bookmark/poster to evaluate the propaganda. More than 5 checks means it's strong, effective propaganda. Every group leaves a post-it or something similar next to the examples that pass the test.

5 GROUP DISCUSSION (10')

Finally, pupils individually stand next to the propaganda they think is the strongest. Discuss why those examples are strong. Let some of the pupils explain their choice while referring to the bookmark or poster.

Hang the examples in the classroom as a reminder of the power of propaganda.

LOOKING FOR MORE INSPIRATION ON PROPAGANDA?

- **Mind Over Media**

www.mindovermedia.eu is a website with plenty of current-day examples of propaganda. It offers a theoretical framework as well as classroom inspiration for recognising, analysing and discussing propaganda.

- **Which emotions does a meme elicit?**

Propaganda can be disguised as humour. Memes are one of the most recent and widespread forms of humorous propaganda. [News in the Classroom](#) encourages pupils to critically consider this phenomenon.

- **Voting leaflet**

In the lead-up to elections, we see lots of campaign slogans and posters. [This leaflet](#) offers quick insight into how a political message tries to convince you.

LEARN FROM AN EXPERT

We asked Renee Hobbs - international expert on media literacy and author of the book 'Mind Over Media: Propaganda Education for a Digital Age' - how best to discuss propaganda with youngsters.

Watch [the video](#) to hear her tips.