



The Mythbusters

Guide to Critical Thinking



CENTRE
FOR INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS

-
- Visegrad Fund
-
-

Partners:





INTRODUCTION

"This is a dangerous time. Moving forward, we need to be more vigilant with what we trust from the Internet," Barack Obama says in a video speech¹. This is a very relevant observation, all the more so as the statement is forged! The former US president has never uttered these words – even if he may actually believe in the message. The clip has been created to demonstrate how easy it has become to put invented words into someone else's mouth – taking advantage of rapidly improving technology, as well as using social media to proliferate all kinds of false information.

We live in an era of disinformation where everybody can produce their own news and easily disseminate it via the Internet. This creates opportunities to share and access a wide spectrum of narratives and opinions, but also requires the ability to think critically so as to be able to tell the difference between "true" or "false". Critical thinking is a necessary reaction to a changing media landscape, as well as an indispensable skill in everyday life. According to the World Economic Forum, it will be the second most needed asset (after complex problem solving) in the near future.²

With stories going viral even if they are untrue, the ability to distinguish information from fake news and propaganda, to overcome cognitive bias, and to deconstruct the media seems to be the best personal weapon against disinformation.

In our Guide to Critical Thinking – elaborated on the basis of pro-Kremlin disinformation campaigns in Central and Eastern Europe – we will unveil very practical tips that help to recognise disinformation and manipulation: how to fact-check and verify sources, distinguish facts from opinions, where to look for qualified information, what sources to beware of. We will also present narratives, techniques and case studies of pro-Kremlin propaganda, whose main aim is not necessarily to persuade the audience about a "proper" version of events, but perhaps first of all to sow distrust in Western democracies, together with their institutions and leaders. Hence, each time there is an important event from the Kremlin's perspective, various conspiracy theories pop up immediately. Our guide may help you to debunk some of them. Join our team of mythbusters!

Agnieszka Ostrowska
Programme Director
Centre for International Relations

¹ | <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQ54GDm1eL0>

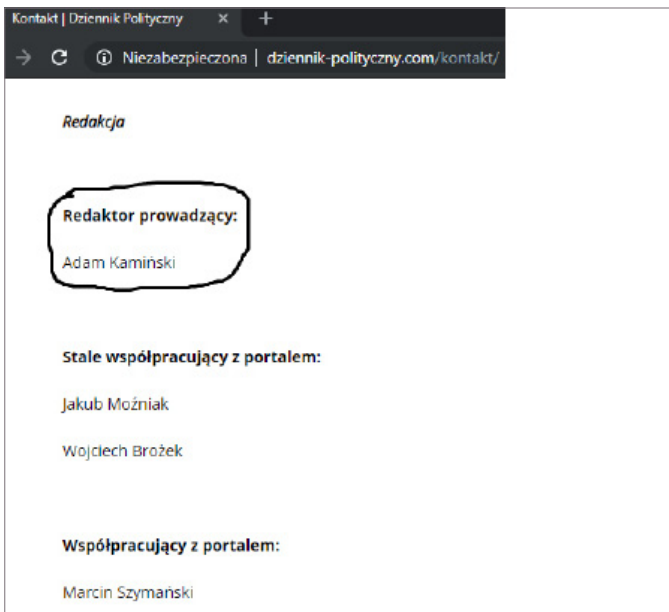
² | <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/07/the-skills-needed-to-survive-the-robot-invasion-of-the-workplace>



BE AWARE OF FAKE AUTHORS

QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- Who is the author of the article?
- Is she/he searchable on Google?
- Is it her/his real name or a nickname?
- Is it "admin" or a real person who has a track record of other publications?
- Check her/him on Twitter/LinkedIn.
- What other articles has she/he authored?
- Were they biased/unbiased?
- Is she/he independent or which media outlet has she/he worked for before?
- What do we know about the website (is there any contact information, an address)?
- Who might benefit from the story?



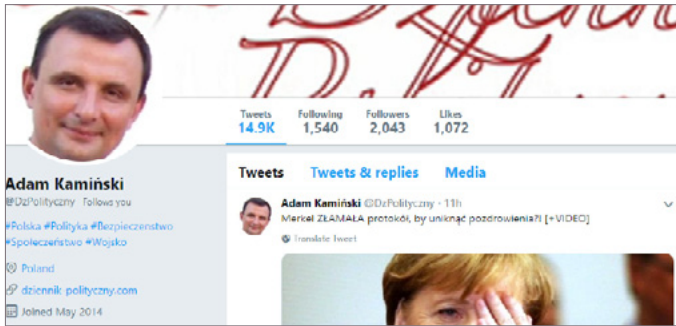
AN EXAMPLE FROM POLAND:

Even though the editor-in-chief of the Niezależny Dziennik Polityczny website, known for being the author of numerous disinformation stories, is present on Twitter and Facebook...





BE AWARE OF FAKE AUTHORS



...when you use Google Reverse Image Search (more about that later) of the picture you may find that Adam Kamiński is using the picture of Andrius Zukauskas – a Lithuanian orthopedist.



ATTENTION!

Fake profiles/disinformation websites in Poland often seem to be very patriotic (Polish flags, eagles, patriotic mottos).





BE AWARE OF IMITATIVE/SATIRICAL ORGANISATIONS

4

QUESTIONS TO ASK:

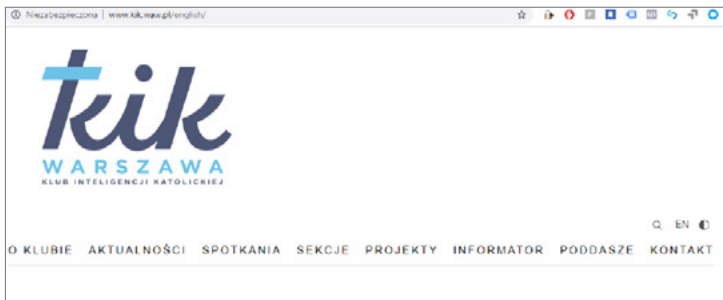
- What is the website url address/name?
- Is the website legitimate or is it trying to imitate a popular news site or organisation?
- Double check spelling, what it links to and if the website/media outlet/piece it links to exist.

AN EXAMPLE FROM POLAND:

(imitating a reputable organisation): the Club of the Polish Intelligentsia imitating the Club of the Catholic Intelligentsia.

The legitimate organisation: KIK – Klub Inteligencji Katolickiej (Club of the Catholic Intelligentsia) – formed in the post-October 1956 thaw.

In 1989, KIK acted as a bridge between the communist authorities and the opposition, co-creating the Round Table talks. Many KIK activists (including Tadeusz Mazowiecki) actively participated in the ongoing political changes in Poland.





Below: an association with a very similar name called the Club of the Polish Intelligentsia: an antisemitic, anti-vaccination, conspiracy theory-website (pushing chemitrails, anti-NATO).

On its website one can see its motto: Bóg (God), Honor (Honour), Ojczyzna (Fatherland) – the motto of the Polish Armed Forces. This pro-Kremlin website, as many others in Poland, tries to portray itself as being very patriotic – a com-

mon feature of disinformation/propaganda outlets in Poland aimed at influencing patriotic youth.

Note their mission (MISJA – using capital letters): "THE NATION NEEDS SPIRIT AND TRUTH BECAUSE THESE ARE THE PATHS TOWARDS FREEDOM, WELLNESS AND BEAUTY. LET THE SPIRIT AWAKE THE SLEEPING! (...)."



One of the articles on their website: "Alexander Dugin: what does the world elite fear?"³



Other articles include the following narratives: a chemitrails conspiracy theory, an anti-vaccination narrative, an anti-NATO narrative as well pro-Russian views.



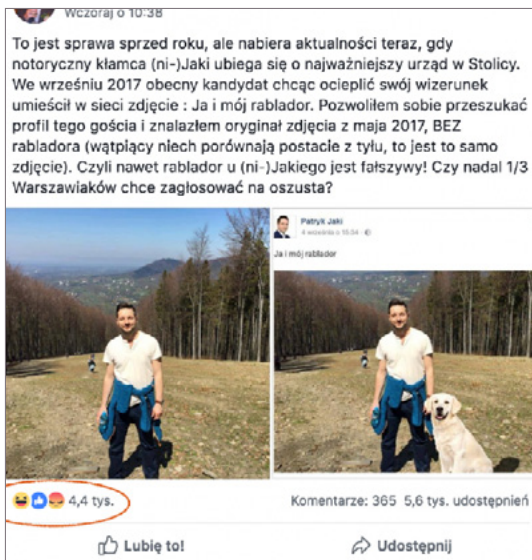
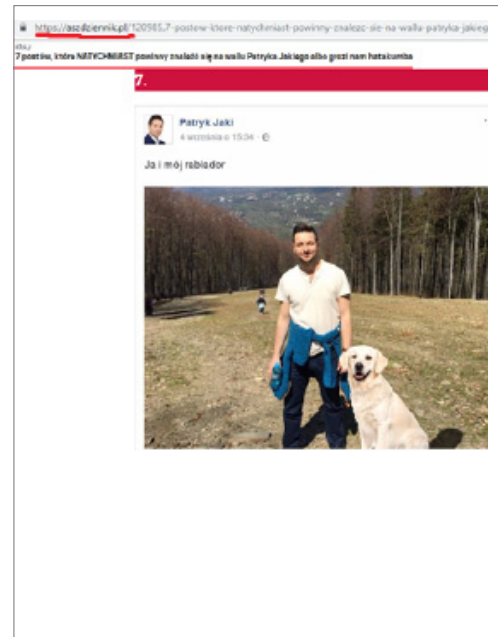
³ | Promotion of Alexander Dugin's ideology, who is Putin's favoured ideologist, is a common feature of many pro-Kremlin outlets in Poland.



AN EXAMPLE FROM POLAND

(satirical website):

Although disinformation is commonly seen as most widely spread by the Kremlin, it is also used as a weapon by other parties. In 2017, a satirical website ASZdziennik.pl, according to its own manifesto "the best fake news service in the country", wrote that the candidate of the ruling party (Law and Justice) Patryk Jaki for the position of mayor of Warsaw (eventually he lost the elections), had photo-shopped his picture by adding a labrador, to look more cool. ASZdziennik.pl claimed that he had not only done this 'immoral' thing but also made a mistake in the name of the breed, by writing "My rablador and me" instead of "My labrador and me".



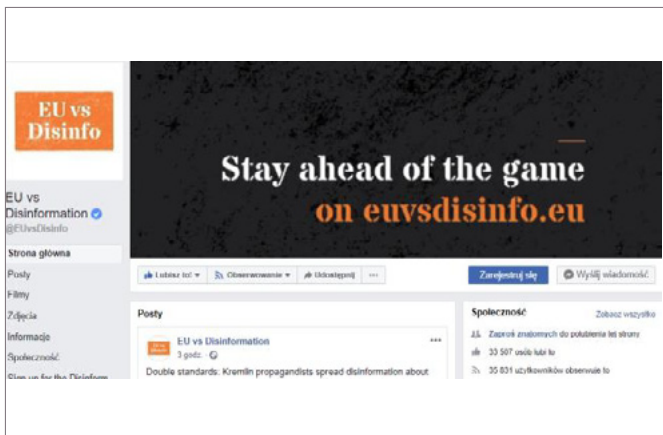
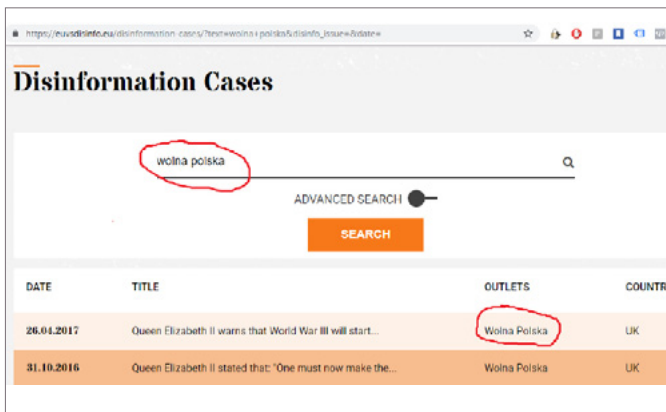
◀ This post was used a year later, during the final phase of the election campaign, this time not as a joke, but a serious proof that Mr Jaki is an immoral liar. The post was widely shared and perceived as a true story by many.



QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- Have you consulted a suspicious website with reputable disinformation experts? Check whether the source is already in the biggest disinformation cases

database (over 3,800 cases since September 2015 – figure from spring 2018)?



AN EXAMPLE FROM
THE EUROPEAN UNION:

If you stumble upon disinformation on the website such as <https://wolna-polska.pl/>, look it up in the disinformation cases table of the East Stratcom Task Force: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/>





NEVER TRUST HEADLINES

QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- Does a shocking headline have anything to do with the rest of the article?
- Pay attention to photos. Are they manipulating?
- Is the original source translated correctly?
- Is an emotional headline supported by an exclamation mark?
If yes, be suspicious.
- What is the article's date? Does it coincidence with important political events or anniversaries (e.g. NATO Summits, anniversaries such as 11th of July, the National Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Genocide perpetrated by Ukrainian nationalists, the Velvet Revolution anniversary)?
- Have you checked the quotes?
Quotes are used to verify if the content is valid, as serious officials back the story.
- Does the person exist? Is the quote in line with the general message of the organisation the quoted person represents?
- What is the source of the quote?
Original, based on an interview or taken from somewhere else.

AN EXAMPLE FROM CZECHIA:

During the Czech presidential elections in January 2018, a well-known website Parlamentní Listy released an article with a headline claiming that one of the candidates (Miloš Zeman) was endorsed by a popular pop singer, Karel Gott.

However the article only quoted Gott's interview for tabloid Blesk, where he described general qualities that a president should have, without mentioning any particular candidate.

The conclusion that Gott supported Zeman (and was only afraid to say it directly) was made by the author himself. When the case was publicly revealed, website Parlamentní listy altered the headline to sound more neutral, but the change was not mentioned anywhere.





NEVER TRUST HEADLINES



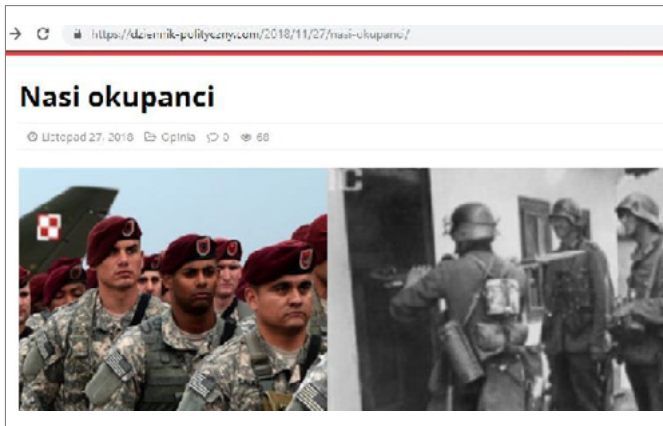
Original headline: "Karel Gott will vote for Miloš Zeman".



The headline after the change was made: "Karel Gott states unambiguously who he would vote for".

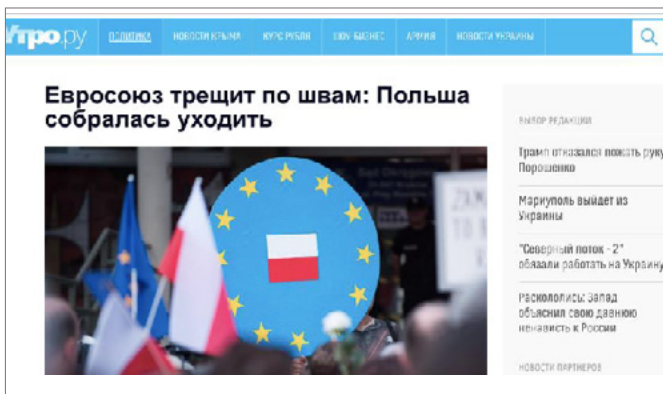


NEVER TRUST HEADLINES



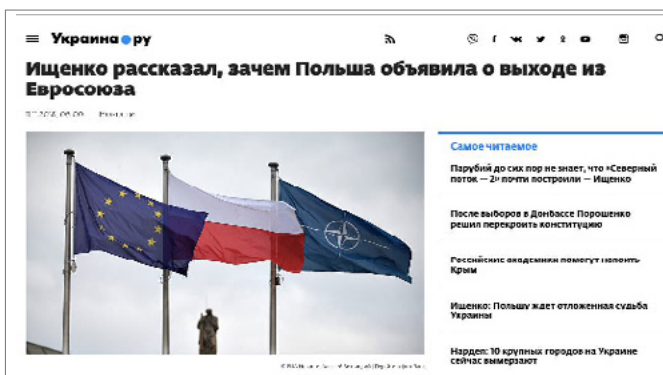
AN EXAMPLE FROM POLAND:

Article entitled "Our occupants" with 2 pictures next to each other: comparing American soldiers to Nazi ones.



AN EXAMPLE FROM UKRAINE:

"Lost in translation" is a common trick used in disinformation. On 11 October 2018 a number of Russian and pro-Kremlin media outlets, such as RIA Novosti and Utro.ru, predicted a complete EU collapse and claimed Poland was pulling out. Title: "EU is falling apart: Poland decides to leave".



Title: "Ishchenko explains, why Poland announced its withdrawal from the EU".





The mentioned source for this fake narrative was none other than European Council President and Poland's former Prime Minister Donald Tusk, who expressed concern about Poland's judicial reforms, saying that it could inadvertently lead to something potentially more dangerous. The true quotation:

"For me it doesn't matter whether Jarosław Kaczyński is planning an exit from the EU, or only initiates certain processes that result in this. I have experience with (former British) Prime Minister David Cameron. I worked with him day

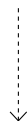
to day to avoid Brexit. He came up with the idea of a referendum and then did everything to keep Britain in the EU, but he led the UK out" – Tusk said to reporters in Poland.

In fact, neither Donald Tusk nor the European Union have spoken about Poland actually leaving the EU. The Law and Justice Party has also never called for Polesxit (although the opposition in Poland argues it could end up in a similar way as in the UK). To sum up, the original quote was not as radical as the interpretation presented.

AN EXAMPLE FROM UKRAINE:

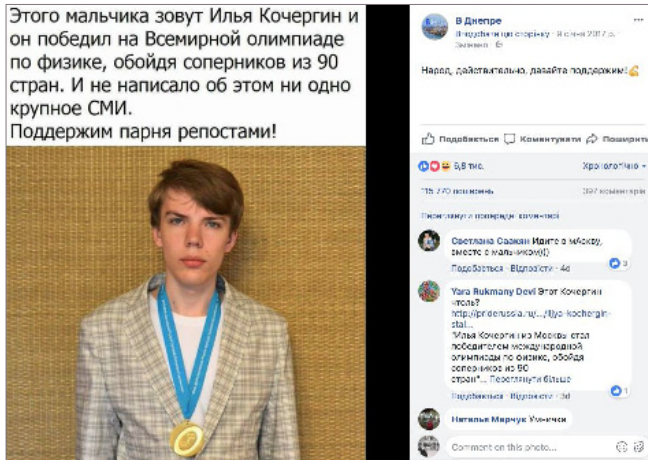
Apart from websites spreading propaganda, the tactic of highly emotional posts with many exclamation marks and poor grammar is also widely spread on Facebook. One of the more popular examples from Russian and Ukrainian-speaking users of social media has included viral posts on students allegedly winning World Physics Contest or World IT Competition among high school students.

Two posts claimed nobody had supported the contestants and blamed the media for not covering such important occasions and asked for reposts. In reality, both students did take part in the competitions but did not win. Despite that, both posts gained almost 250,000 shares online.





NEVER TRUST HEADLINES



The first post says: "This boy won World Physics competition and beat participants from 90 countries. Not a single mainstream media has covered the story. Let's support him with reposts".



Here is the post from one of the boys and also the original source. The fake Facebook post claims the boy won, while in fact he was ranked 29th place.





NEVER TRUST HEADLINES

Ilia Koczergin
23 Sty o 21:07

Пишу это в связи с тем, что посты про меня снова начали появляться в разных пабликах. Я сильно удивлен, что ни один админ не проверил информацию, содержащуюся там. Во-первых, я не стал абсолютным победителем, как написано там, а взял золото, заняв 29 место (на подобных олимпиадах дают более одной медали каждого достоинства). К слову, мой товарищ по команде занял 5 место и взял приз за лучший теоретический тур, но про него почему-то никто не написал, как и про многих других российских школьников, прекрасно выступавших на международных олимпиадах. Во-вторых, я получил от государства премию по поддержке талантливой молодежи (которую отменили в прошлом году), и, кроме того, премию от правительства Москвы. Логичнее было бы подобные посты создавать про школьников из регионов, в которых власти не дают ничего. Да и вряд ли получится что либо поменять постами, появляющимися раз в год, поэтому я подозреваю, что админы просто решили словить хайп на тему грядущих Олимпийских игр. Если вы думаете, что мне от этого приятно, то вы ошибаетесь. I never asked for this.
P.S. На всякий случай, я больше не веду переговоров с журналистами. Лучше пишете про победителей 2017 года.

He explains it in his VK post (social networking service, popular in Russia and Russian-speaking countries).



ВЕСТИ.RU | Новости | Видео | Фотогалерея | Трансляции | Сервисы

Live | Программы "Вести в 20:00"

Новости | Общество | Все видео этой рубрики

27 июля 2018 | 18:35 | Татьяна Милославская

Московские школьники вернулись с международных олимпиад с золотом

It was also claimed that media did not cover the story. This is also not true – here is a screenshot from one of the popular Russian media sites, reporting the case.





NEVER TRUST HEADLINES

AN EXAMPLE FROM CZECHIA:

In 2016, prior to the celebrations of International Students' Day on November 17th, which has a historical significance for Czechs because in 1989 it sparked the Velvet Revolution, bringing about the end of communist rule, the Czech version of the Russian-controlled Sputnik news agency published a story with the headline "The day when the Czech Maidan could flare up".

Based on a commentary from Ivan Kratochvíl, head of the paramilitary group Czechoslovak Soldiers in Reserve for Peace, the article suggested that "November 17th could become the day of a Czech Maidan," which has a direct link with a wave of demonstrations and civil unrest in Ukraine that led to the overthrow of the Yanukovich government.⁵ The article was published on November 3rd.



⁵ "The day when the Czech Maidan can flare up", SputnikCZ (25.11.2018): <https://cz.sputniknews.com/ceskarepublika/201611034063322-Den-vzplanuti-cesky-Majdan/>



NEVER TRUST HEADLINES

ATTENTION!

Use the "News" tab on Google to check if reputable media outlets are running the story. But be careful, it may happen that several main media outlets get it wrong.

AN EXAMPLE FROM CZECHIA:

In September 2018, Czech political debate was focused on the question of whether the government should accept 50 child refugees from Syria. This was suggested by MEP Michaela Šojdrová and blocked by Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, afterwards facing criticism. Babiš's stand was supported by Tatjana Horáková, who claimed to be in charge of an NGO called the International Children's Cross. Her comments on child refugees were mentioned by several main Czech dailies.

However subsequent investigation by journalists demonstrated that the International Children Cross is a fictional organisation and Mrs. Horáková is not known to any NGOs in the given field.⁶

NOVÝ DENÍK
novydenik.cz

“ My jsme se s nimi nikdy nesetkali, kde pomáháme, ani nejsou v koalících a sdruženích, ve kterých se humanitární organizace setkávají v České republice.”
Vedoucí mediálního oddělení Člověka v tísni Tomáš Urban

Babiše se ve sporu o sirotky zastala podezřelá humanitární organizace. Nikdo ji nezná

OSN | 19. 9. 2018 | 19. 9. 2018 | 19. 9. 2018

Europoslankyně Michaela Šojdrová se pleče, premiér Andrej Babiš má ohledně nepřijetí syrských sirotek pravdu. Zhruba v tomto duchu se dnes na serveru Lidovky.cz objevil komentář Tatjany Horákové, ředitelky Mezinárodního dětského kříže. Ta o sobě tvrdí, že ona a její organizace přímo pomáhaly v několika válečných konfliktech. Text následně přebral Parlamentní listy, které v titulku organizaci dokonce zaměnily za "Červený kříž". Článek z Lidovky následně zmizel a stáhly jej posléze i Parlamentní listy. Samu Horákovou ani její organizaci české neziskovky pomáhající uprchlíkům neznají.

"Dětem je potřeba pomoci, to děláme ve válkách už let, ale předtavy paní Šojdrové jsou dost naivní. Bylo by opravdu chodobní, kdyby to přesehala lidem, kteří mají jasno a umí to lépe, mají ucelenou koncepci, postavenou na odborném přístupu, samozřejmě lidském, zohledňujícím jednoznačně a především pouze potřeby těch, kteří pomoc potřebují," uvádí Horáková ve svém komentáři.

Chcete číst další zprávy od Prokopa Vodrážky a Jana Tvrdomě? Staňte se předplatiteli právě teď a pomozte Novému deníku.

Na ten navazuje tvrzením, že několik let jako chirurg se svými kolegy zachraňovala raněné, především děti. Horáková tak sama vystupuje jako lékařka. Je však jasné, že nevykonává lékařskou práci v ČR ani na Slovensku. Není vedena v rejstříku lékařů ani v jedné zemi.

V textu rovněž tvrdila, že bude o situaci s irotkami jednat spolu o Babišem a Šojdrovou. To posléze popřela mluvčí vlády Petra Dolalaková. "Paní Horáková na schůzce podle mých informací nebyla," odpovídá Novému deníku.

⁶ "Babis in conflict over orphans has been defended by suspicious humanitarian organisation. Nobody knows it.": <https://www.facebook.com/notes/nov%C3%BD-den%C3%ADk/babi%C5%A1e-se-ve-sporu-o-sirotky-zastala-podez%C5%99el%C3%A1-humanit%C3%A1rn%C3%AD-organizace-nikdo-ji-n/266550647528085/>



USE GOOGLE REVERSE IMAGE SEARCH

QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- **Is the image original or taken from the web?**
- **Pay attention to details in the picture. Do they correspond with the context (place, language etc).**

This is probably the simplest and the most effective of all techniques regarding images verification.

Verifying pictures by Google Reverse Image Search helps you discover visually similar images from around the web. You may not verify pictures on your computer, but also on your mobile phone by using e.g.: <https://www.labnol.org/internet/mobile-reverse-image-search/29014/>. Try also this plugin developed by the InVID (In Video Veritas) to verify images and videos: <https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/fake-video-news-debunker/mhccpoafgdbhnjfhkcmgkndkeenfhe>.

AN EXAMPLE FROM HUNGARY:

The article suggest that Parisians were shocked by a Muslim migrant peeing in the metro.



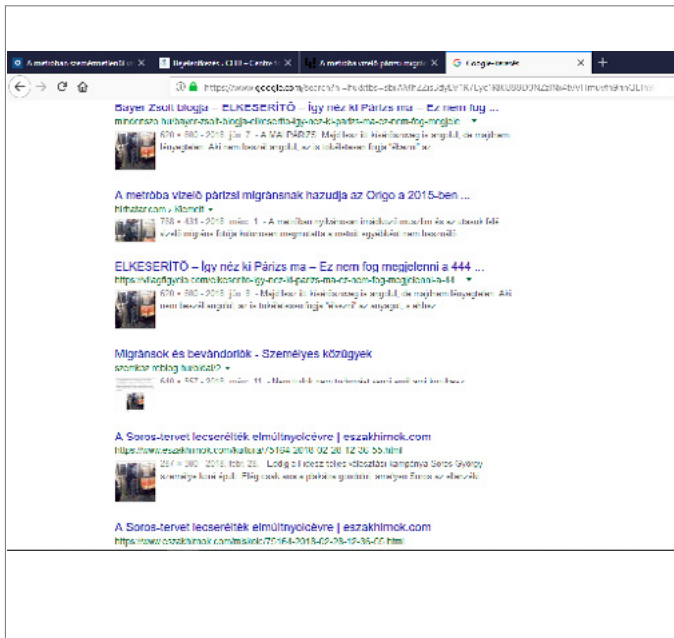
The main goal is:

- to question migration policy and the integration efforts of France,
- undermine the socialist mayor, Anne Hidalgo,
- suggest that people are in the state of fear due to insecurity.

However, if you take a closer look at the article, you will notice that it does not provide any source for the picture, which is highly unusual. Judging from the map on the wall we can assume that it is not Paris – as the city is surrounded by water – but rather New York City. The interior of the cart and the "do not lean against the door" sign also prove that.



USE GOOGLE REVERSE IMAGE SEARCH



The material had a wide outreach as was adopted by far-right media and pro-Kremlin sites.



The results of the Google Reverse Image Search also shows an Italian debunking page, referring to an Italian pro-Kremlin disinformation portal using the picture against the Renzi government, suggesting it was taken in Rome.



CONCLUSIONS

Dealing with all kinds of media requires vigilance every time a reader is confronted with emotional content. Emotions impact a reader's ability to think rationally, so the media consumer should have a self-controlling habit that allows him/her to take a pause before sharing or believing a story. One should not let emotions take over rational reflection and critical thinking.

Another important aspect of critical thinking is the need to distinguish facts from opinions. The latter, often used as way of presenting opinions as news (e.g. on blogs and fringe media), is a very effective tool of propaganda because it is not based on facts but convictions, therefore impossible to debunk.

In terms of images, both regarding false amplifiers (e.g. fake Facebook or Twitter accounts) and those presented to support an article, the most effective and easiest technique of verifying them is Google Reverse Image Search. Although not always effective, due to additional measures which can be applied in the case of a stolen image to hinder finding it online, this technique is certainly worth recommending in checking sources.

Antoni Wierzejski



The Mythbusters

Guide to Critical Thinking

Authors:



Daniel Bartha

| Centre for Euro-
-Atlantic Integration
and Democracy,
Hungary



Jonáš Syrovatka

| Prague Security
Studies Institute,
Czech Republic



Antoni Wierzejski

| Centre
for International
Relations, Poland



Mariia Zhdanova

| Stop Fake,
Ukraine

This text reflects the views only of the authors, and International Visegrad Fund cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Edited by: Antoni Wierzejski | Proofreading: Jo Bryan Harper

Publication coordinator: Agnieszka Ostrowska | Layout & DTP: Katarzyna Zbytniewska

The publication was created in the framework of a project "Mythbusters" co-financed by the Governments of Czechia, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia through Visegrad Grants from the International Visegrad Fund. The mission of the fund is to advance ideas for sustainable regional cooperation in Central Europe.

