

MODULE 4: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND RESPONSIBLE INFORMATION SHARING

MODULE OVERVIEW

This module is designed to raise students' awareness regarding their virtual presence and behavior in both educational and personal involvement with information processing. Living together requires a care and mutual understanding, rational approach towards conflicts solving, and upgrading our strategies in these contexts seems to be an urgent need in the fast-pace developing world.

MODULE OBJECTIVES

Upon completion, students will be equipped to:

- ◆ Promoting respectful and informed online behavior,
- ◆ Fostering responsible digital citizenship,
- ◆ Promoting a more analytical and critical approach to one's processing in the digital sphere.

STRUCTURE OF THE MODULE

4.1: Ethics in information sharing

- ◆ The moral responsibility of sharing information online
- ◆ Legal implications of spreading misinformation
- ◆ Promoting respectful and informed online behavior

4.2: Responsible digital citizenship

- ◆ Encouraging students to become responsible digital citizens
- ◆ Building resilience to manipulation and fostering critical thinking
- ◆ Creating a positive digital footprint



4.1: ETHICS IN INFORMATION SHARING

The moral responsibility of sharing information online

Information has always been considered one of the most powerful resources of humankind. The concept lies at the crossroads of social and exact sciences, on the one hand, with its internal tension between quantitative and qualitative dimensions; on the other hand, it is semantically tightly related to other concepts as ‘knowledge’ and ‘data’ – all of them pivotal in today’s digital world basic vocabulary.

Moreover, information implies the dynamic intercourse between personal and interpersonal level, individual and communal existence, private and public sphere. Socio-culturally and historically regarded information processing and save guarding is a phenomenon of great value and care for the survival of tribes, peoples, empires, modern nation states. The etymological definition of the term reveals the importance of giving ‘form’ to something, shaping, modelling realities, thus revealing the implicit meaning of overcoming chaos and disorder. To summarize, information is a world and a community-generating mechanism and an almost ontological and cosmological power introducing the cardinal parameters of societal existence.

The aforementioned dynamics between personal and interpersonal further foster the moral consideration of information processing and sharing with a special focus on today’s world leading characteristic features. Bearing in mind Aristotle’s coining of the term ethics (from ‘ethos’, ‘ἦθος’ in Ancient Greek) we are aware of the importance of living together in practical terms and according to some shared virtues and rules. However, it is much easier to philosophically state it and speculate it than to implement it in a real-life context. Free wills adjustment and social arrangement is not an easy task at all and a great generation of Enlightenment Europe political and social philosophers invested their minds and intellectual effort into creating the pillars of the modern nation states.



The aforementioned dynamics between personal and interpersonal further foster the moral consideration of information processing and sharing with a special focus on today's world leading characteristic features. Bearing in mind Aristotle's coining of the term ethics (from 'ethos', 'ἦθος' in Ancient Greek) we are aware of the importance of living together in practical terms and according to some shared virtues and rules. The semantic continuation and strong internal bond between the moral and legal realms were among their primary concerns towards the long path of converting the theoretical social contract into a tangible nation state constitution. The common good achieving being the primary concern, on the one hand, and the not rare sovereignty shift from monarch to people in 19th century, on the other, created the urge for reconsidering the principles of living together in a liberal democratic climate. Here to mention one of these great Enlightenment minds, namely John Locke with his major work Two treatises of government (1689). The latter leaves us with the philosophical heritage of the importance of the peaceful and rational free will social adjustment: "Being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions."

Thus, Locke's thought has always been a beacon for the liberal thought and a guiding force for practical decisions. The actual epoch witnesses the human beings' empowerment in the digital sphere, and the extreme testing of the boundaries of information and content sharing via websites, platforms and social media. The rational response of both governments and technocrats seems to gravitate around the far-ranging moral implications of the online behavior and communication. Both the storage and the sharing of information is easier in the digital sphere which further increases the need for ethical assessment and attitude, responsibility being the pivotal concept on the reflective horizon to rise. Is information morally neutral? How do we apply it in different contexts? With what intentions and purposes? How is sensitive information (personal data including passwords, ID cards data, medical files and results, etc.) morally and legally protected? These are some of the most considerable questions to raise.



Legal implications of spreading misinformation

The definitions of '**misinformation**', '**disinformation**', '**mal-information**', and '**fake news**' provided in Module 1, the meaning and semantical content span of the terms are easy to discern. When the educational sphere is addressed the problems with information spread seem to resonate with a bigger emergency and gravity. Contemporary educational policies require a deep and serious reconsideration of almost every aspect of information broadcasting, information-data-knowledge differentiation and management, and textual assignments grading procedures. Democratic-oriented governments worldwide have been gradually building policies in their legal frameworks for spreading misinformation limitation and prohibition. This state of affairs is self-evident in terms of the importance of the problems raised encompassing every private and public sphere. Legislation is the highest form of social contract presence and the most rigorous means of setting a common rational framework of living. In its Code of practice on disinformation (European Commission, 2022) first established in 2018 and further strengthened in 2022, European Union introduces some crucial regulations for trade associations and the advertising sector. The example of the Australian authorities is quite representative as well: "The WA Government has introduced the Privacy and Responsible Information Sharing Bill to Parliament to reform privacy protections for individuals and the accountability of information sharing within government. The proposed legislation will provide Western Australians with more control over their personal information, improve the delivery of government services and create local research and development opportunities." (Department of Education, 2024).

While there is no unified **European legislation** specifically regulating the spread of false information across all EU member states, several countries have implemented or proposed laws to address this issue:

- ◆ Germany: The Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) requires social media platforms to remove clearly illegal content, including obvious misinformation, within specific timeframes.
- ◆ France: The Law Against Information Manipulation allows judges to order the rapid removal of false news during election periods.
- ◆ Spain: While there is no specific law, the country uses its Criminal Code to prosecute serious cases of disinformation that may constitute crimes like hate speech or defamation.



It's important to note that regulating misinformation is complex, involving a balance between freedom of expression and protection against false and harmful information. The European Union is working towards a more coordinated approach through the Action Plan Against Disinformation and the Code of Practice on Disinformation, but there is currently no specific pan-European law on this topic.

The European Union has taken several legal and regulatory steps to combat the spread of disinformation and fake news:

- **Digital Services Act (DSA):** This major law regulates online platforms, including social media, to be more transparent and accountable in tackling disinformation. Large platforms are required to assess and mitigate systemic risks related to the spread of disinformation or harmful content.
- **Code of Practice on Disinformation:** Updated in 2022, this voluntary code requires signatories to strengthen measures against manipulative behavior used to spread disinformation, such as fake accounts and bot-driven amplification
- **European Media Freedom Act (EMFA):** This new law aims to protect media outlets against disinformation while ensuring press independence. It requires EU member states to respect editorial freedom and protects journalists from spyware and prosecution for protecting sources.
- **Sanctions for non-compliance:** Companies failing to comply with DSA rules could face fines of up to 6% of their global turnover and potential service suspension in the EU.
- **Content removal:** Platforms are required to remove illegal content expeditiously, though spreading false or misleading information is not generally illegal in the EU due to freedom of expression protections.
- **Transparency measures:** The DSA and EMFA both emphasize increased transparency in political advertising and media ownership to combat disinformation.
- **Research support:** Platforms are required to provide better access to data for researchers studying disinformation.
- **Fact-checking initiatives:** The Code of Practice on Disinformation aims to extend fact-checking coverage across all EU Member States and languages.

It's important to note that while these measures aim to combat disinformation, they also strive to balance this goal with protecting freedom of expression. The EU's approach focuses on curbing the impact of online lies while preserving free speech, rather than outright banning disinformation.

Promoting respectful and informed online behaviour

Whatever legal policies and regulations the national governments or international organizations release, the personal input, self-awareness and self-control rest the fundamental and primary mechanisms for a healthy online sphere and interaction. A critical reassessment of each person's values and goals alongside with the matching percentage of the latter with the communal ones is inevitably needed in a sphere which boundaries seem to expand in a mind-blowing speed. The ethical term of 'respect' reveals the Latin etymology of reciprocal seeing and observation – an interesting linguistic remark in the contemporary visual-based world. A personal demand for recognition and respect should necessarily meet everybody else's identical demand. Thus, a reevaluation of the importance of community and of individuality-community balance is desperately called for. The online anonymity could be quite misleading in the ethical resonance of the problem – not having the sight of the other in front of you might be considered an opportunity for violating the moral code. Which could be a huge alert and an eye-opener for the humanities and social studies curriculum areas to sharpen their educational tools and strategies for an ethical awareness raising. A real and applicable netiquette is to be taught and implemented.

Here comes the educational strategies equipment of philosophy, psychology, civic education, languages such as discussions and debated, role-play games, drama-based techniques, case-study analysis. If students are ethically aware in the face to face presence and communication so they are expected to be in their digital involvement and online behavior. Moreover, altering the two modes of educating would be the best policy – spending too much time online might result in a lack of emotional sensitivity, empathy, and general psychic disorientation. Encouraging teamwork and oral academic performance instead of written one might keep fresh each person moral compass.

4.2: RESPONSIBLE DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

Encouraging students to become responsible digital citizens

In its crucial document Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 European Union clearly sets ‘the needs for higher levels of digital capacity of education and training systems and institutions.’ EU DigComp framework serves multiple purposes including ‘designing competence assessment tools, creating training courses and materials, and identifying professional digital profiles within the realms of employment, education and training, and social inclusion’ exemplified in DigComp Implementation guide. Being digitally competent is set as a life-long learning task for the 21st-century citizen.

It is important to claim that students are supposed to be taught and well trained in responsible behavior from an early age due to the incredibly fast development and new digital challenges. For instance, exposure to artificial intelligence (AI) might be a useful educational strategy for better understanding of the *diferentia specifica* of humans, and further of what intelligence and emotions are. To summarize, new digital technologies provide us with a chance to raise our self-image, limitations and capacities as a species reconciling both spheres – biological and socio-cultural one. This is precisely what EU DigComp framework ‘communication and collaboration’ item means.

To further reveal the dimensions of responsibility in the educational area teachers should encourage students to carefully read and understand the practical consequences of the legal documents arranging the digital policies. This is to be stressed students prevailing lack of interest in legislative full-length texts given. A more interactive and innovative game-based approaches are needed here applying the learning-through-experience 21st century prevailing educational paradigm.

Here are several effective strategies we can use as teachers to promote digital citizenship among students:

Integrate digital citizenship into the curriculum: Incorporate lessons on online safety, digital ethics, and responsible internet use across various subjects. This approach helps students understand that digital citizenship is an essential life skill, not just a separate topic.

Model responsible online behavior: As an educator, demonstrate proper digital etiquette and responsible use of technology in your own interactions with students and colleagues. Students often learn best by observing and emulating positive examples.

Teach critical thinking skills: Help students develop the ability to evaluate online information critically. Encourage them to question the reliability and authenticity of online sources, promoting digital literacy.

Discuss online reputation management: Emphasize the importance of maintaining a positive digital footprint. Teach students that their online actions can have long-lasting consequences for their personal and professional lives.

Promote online safety: Educate students about potential online risks such as cyberbullying, online predators, and phishing scams. Provide them with strategies to protect themselves and their personal information online.

Encourage ethical online behavior: Discuss the importance of respecting others online, including proper netiquette and the consequences of cyberbullying. Also, address issues like copyright and plagiarism in the digital context.

Foster digital empathy: Help students understand the impact of their online actions on others. Encourage them to consider how their words and actions in digital spaces might affect their peers and the broader online community.

Provide hands-on experience: Create safe, controlled environments where students can practice digital citizenship skills. This could include simulated social media platforms or online collaboration tools within the school's digital ecosystem¹.

Address digital well-being: Discuss the importance of balancing screen time with other activities and maintaining good mental health in the digital age.

Empower student leadership: Encourage students to become digital citizenship ambassadors, allowing them to teach and mentor their peers on responsible online behavior.

By implementing these strategies, you can help your students develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to become responsible digital citizens, ensuring they can navigate the online world safely, ethically, and effectively.

Imagine the internet as a huge, global city. Just like in any city, there are rules, expectations, and ways to behave that keep everyone safe and happy. Being a good digital citizen is like being a good citizen of this online city.

Here's what it means to be a **responsible digital citizen**:



Protect yourself: Just as you'd lock your house door, use strong passwords and be careful about sharing personal information online.



Respect others: Treat people online with kindness, just as you would in person. Remember, there's a real person behind every username.



Think before you post: Whatever you share online can stay there forever. Before posting, ask yourself: "Would I be okay with my grandma or a future employer seeing this?"



Be a fact-checker: Not everything online is true. Always verify information before believing or sharing it.



Stand up against cyberbullying: If you see someone being mistreated online, speak up or tell a trusted adult.



Balance your online and offline life: Remember to spend time in the real world too!



Use your online powers for good: The internet gives you a voice - use it to make positive changes in the world.

Being a good digital citizen isn't just about following rules - it's about making the internet a better place for everyone. You have the power to shape the online world. How will you use it?"

This explanation uses relatable analogies, clear points, and empowering language to help students understand and embrace the concept of digital citizenship.

Building resilience to manipulation and fostering critical thinking

A 21st-century set of tools requires a sharpening of one's media literacy tools and techniques. "We're in an information environment where we're constantly searching as part of our daily experiences", says UNC School of Information and Library Science assistant professor Francesca Tripodi, who studies the social dimensions of search. That environment, and its endless barrage of information, means that even users with the best of intentions may run into problems with the searches they conduct and the information that gets returned (Wicks, 2021). Information spread in the digital era is predominantly dependent on algorithms, a term initially representing "procedures for solving a mathematical problem in a finite number of steps that frequently involves repetition of an operation" according to the Encyclopedia Britannica Company. The renowned social thinker Yuval Hoah Harari explores the relentless nature and essence of algorithms in his recent book 'Nexus'. 'Algorithms don't sleep, they don't need rest', Harari argues, compared to organic entities human beings included" (Amanpour and Company, 2024). In this context the demand for building resilience to manipulation and the development of critical thinking becomes urgent.

Ethically assessed the digital sphere is not neutral and innocent, people transfer in it all types of relations they have created in the analogous reality. Misleading and manipulation for various purposes are stalking which requires vigilance and critical approach. Among the techniques might be:

- ◆◆ Cross-referential check of the information (comparison of several sources content)
- ◆◆ Author name and/or editors/publishing house credentials presence
- ◆◆ Capacity to search and identify proper argumentation components (problem-oriented introduction, arguments-based exposition, logically valid conclusions)
- ◆◆ Acquaintance with the informal fallacies in the argumentation process (e. g. appeal to fear, ad hominem, appeal to ignorance, irrelevant authority, appeal to pity, straw person, complex questions, composition and division, questionable cause)
- ◆◆ Language and style evaluation sensitivity (grammar, syntax, semantics, stylistics, etc.)

To summarize, polyphonic and multitasking approach is needed as well as knowledge in all fundamental social studies areas.

For more digitally based tools for information verification we might use:

- ◆◆ Fact-checking websites (e.g., Snopes, FactCheck.org, PolitiFact)
- ◆◆ Reverse image search tools (e.g., Google Images, TinEye)
- ◆◆ Media bias and reliability checkers (e.g., AllSides, Media Bias/Fact Check)

Creating a positive digital footprint

When students are young long-lasting goals and far-ranging implications are usually not at the focus of their direct interest. Their digital 'joie de vivre' is launched to the highest extent, they want to taste every platform, create an account in as many social media as possible, and thus fruitfully enjoy and take advantage of their youth freedom and light-hearted existence. Digital inclusion creates a new and special aspect of the social inclusion, and further nourishes the new technologies-related vocabulary. A good example of this is the psychological 'FOMO' concept – 'the fear of missing out', of not being present, available, with active status on a social platform.

On the other hand, contemporary young people are delicate and extremely sensitive in terms of their digital presence, content uploaded and virtual image among peers, so to say in terms of their digital footprint. Few would like to intentionally create a negative virtual identity.

Thus, an awareness is needed in several aspects:

- ◆ Social media platform credentials and reputation
- ◆ Social media platform privacy policy and data protection
- ◆ National legislation and policies in the digital field
- ◆ Acquaintance with all digital tools provided by the registration in the platform
- ◆ Content uploading and content deleting options (the right of the person to withdraw from databases).

The significance of this digital footprint increases with the age acceleration and the psychological maturity. When the period for a university application or an employment interview comes, with the portfolio preparation, the virtual presence and the digital footprint are considered an important facet from the whole personal social showcase. Irrelevant, misleading, out-of-date, or fake information for us in the digital realm is supposed to be omitted. This task obviously would require a constant life-long effort the digital technologies gaining further and further territories.

Moreover, the same care for a positive digital footprint should be demonstrated for the others' virtual presence. Unfortunately, it is not a rare practice the virtual revenge between students with the application of disinformation or malinformation. Cyberbullying, uploading humiliating visual content, or deliberately fabricating one using digital instruments, including AI simulations and bricolage, is to be undeniably assessed as morally negative.

To conclude, the role of community/communal will, the common good, the levels of democratic maturity, a really enlightened educational curriculum, and a citizenship cohesion and activity are crucial factors for protecting the ethical standards for both analogous and digital spheres. A critical approach should be implemented towards information reliability status as well as towards digital world presence in human culture and future.

The moral responsibility of sharing information online

Practical Activity 1

(OFFLINE)



Objectives

- Teach students to better understand the anatomy of clickbait headlines
- Familiarize students with fact-checking techniques and tools
- Encourage mindfulness to emotionally charged content
- Building resilience to manipulation and fostering critical thinking

Required Tools and Materials

- Digital Tools (access to computers, tablets, or smartphones with internet connectivity)
- Fact-checking websites (e.g., Snopes, FactCheck.org, PolitiFact)

Printed Materials

- Worksheets for note-taking
- A viral claim/headline (intentionally fabricated) for analysis
- Whiteboard/Project or for group discussions and demonstrations.

Activities

Step 1: Introduction (15 minutes)

- ◆◆ Introduce the concepts of **disinformation** and **malinformation**
- ◆◆ Begin with a brief discussion on what the difference between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation is. Some questions to open the discussion:
 - ◆◆ *What was the most shocking headline you have ever heard?*
 - ◆◆ *What was the most unconventional thing a shocking headline made you do?*

Step 3: Teamwork (20 minutes)

- ◆◆ Divide the class into 3 groups performing different tasks on the visual and textual materials assigned as follows:
 - ◆◆ **Team A task:** Explore the technical quality of the images and make assumptions on their credibility
 - ◆◆ **Team B task:** Investigate the magazine credentials and responsible team
 - ◆◆ **Team C task:** Explore the linguistic features (grammar, syntax, style, punctuation) of the headline

Step 2: Provide the leading visual material (5 minutes)

- ◆◆ Show some hypothetical photos from a funeral of an extremely popular band singer declared deceased by a striking online magazine headline.

Step 4: Group presentations of the investigation tasks (5 minutes per team + a brief 3-minute discussion session after each team presentation; overall: 27 minutes)

Questions to be asked:

- ◆ Are there any visual signs that the photos uploaded by the magazine are technically manipulated or intentionally fabricated by digital tools including AI?
- ◆ What online information could be found on the magazine reputation? Can you identify by their names, images and professional responsibilities the main members of the editorial team?
- ◆ Are there any peculiarities in terms of the verbal presentation of the information? Any grammar mistakes, word order imperfections, style variety?

Step 5: Application of digitally based tools for information verification (10 minutes):

- ◆ Fact-checking websites (e.g., Snopes, FactCheck.org)
- ◆ Reverse image search tools (e.g., Google Images, TinEye)

Additional Information:

- Assessment and Follow-Up
- ◆ Evaluate participation in teamwork and group discussions.
 - ◆ Evaluate the effectiveness of the information verification tools.
 - ◆ Assess the human psyche driving mechanisms in a liminal situation.

Step 6: Evaluation of the verification tools and closing discussion (10 minutes):

- ◆ How would you feel if you knew from a clickbait headline that your favorite band leading singer was tragically deceased?
- ◆ What kind of irrational actions might an emotionally charged content foster?
- ◆ What the psychological and ethical damages from such a content might be?
- ◆ What rational fact-checking steps might we apply as a critical thinking approach to the headline?

Creating a positive digital footprint

Practical Activity 5 (ONLINE)

REFERENCES

MODULE 4: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND RESPONSIBLE INFORMATION SHARING

- **Amanpour and Company (2024).** Yuval Noah Harari: “We Are on the Verge of Destroying Ourselves”. Available on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLP6K8xm0Kc>
- **Centre from European Reform (2022).** Will the digital Services Act save Europe from disinformation? <https://www.cer.eu/insights/will-digital-services-act-save-europe-disinformation>
- **European Commission (n.d.).** Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027). <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/digital-education/action-plan>
- **European Commission (2022).** The Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation. <https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/dae/redirection/document/87585>
- **European Parliament (2023).** Applying EU law to fight the spread of illegal content and disinformation online. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/agenda/briefing/2023-10-16/6/applying-eu-law-to-fight-the-spread-of-illegal-content-and-disinformation-online>
- **Kumari, N., Sachdeva, M., & Verma, K. (2023).** Examining the Need of Digital Citizenship Education for Adolescents in the Current Digital Landscape. *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, 23(11). <https://doi.org/10.33423/jhetp.v23i11.6228>
- **UNESCO (2018).** Journalism, fake news & disinformation: handbook for journalism education and training. Available on: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265552>
- **Wicks, A. (2021).** How to improve your media literacy skills. <https://www.unc.edu/discover/how-to-improve-your-media-literacy-skills/>
- **European Commission (2018).** EU’s Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Life- long Learning. Available on: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/focus-topics/improving-quality/key-competences>
- **Department of Education. Government of Western Australia (2024).** Privacy and Responsible Information Sharing Framework. Available on: <https://www.education.wa.edu.au/web/policies/-/privacy-and-responsible-information-sharing-framework>
- **American Psychological Association (n.d.).** Misinformation and Disinformation. Available on: <https://www.apa.org/topics/journalism-facts/misinformation-disinformation>
- <https://www.mediadefence.org/>

