

# UNDER PRESS URE

The need to increase disinformation resilience among youth to combat polarisation and strengthen democratic values.

**Disinformation, conspiracy theories and fake news: we have become used to these phenomena. When untrustworthy theories feed into hostile stereotypes, as they often do, polarisation and online isolation are lurking. Especially young people, who often spend the majority of their time online, are therefore vulnerable to adopting a hostile attitude towards democratic values. What is at stake? And what can we do to make young people more resilient to disinformation and online isolation? Because these are transnational issues, a European consortium was formed to develop an innovative methodology: Under Pressure. In this article, we share our latest insights concerning disinformation, polarisation and young people, as we did during an interactive stakeholder event in January 2021.**

### What is happening?

“Nowadays, all journalists publish and spread fake news on purpose, so it is better to just ban freedom of speech altogether!” This is what a 15 year old student said, dead serious, during one of the Under Pressure sessions. The classroom was silent, there were some nodding heads, and an individual mumbled her agreement. Both the underlying conspiracy theory and the casual attitude towards expressing undemocratic values are indicative of a larger trend that we see in countries across Europe: young people are growing up in increasing isolation and (often unknowingly) contribute to polarisation in society, online and offline.

Under pressure is a methodology developed by the temporary consortium Peer Education and Gamification against Polarisation (PEGAP), made up by Diversion, DROG, University of Uppsala, AEGEE-Europe, Schwarzkopf Foundation and Fryshuset Foundation. At an online, interactive event in January 2021, we presented Under Pressure to stakeholders from around Europe. Young people, policy makers, researchers, teachers, (social) organisations and (digital) media came together to meet one another and to share recent developments and findings. This article serves as a testament to that event.

“If I don’t like someone’s opinion, I just block them so that I don’t have to deal with it.”

– 16 year old student during an Under Pressure course

We find ourselves at a time when democratic values are continuously targeted by the widespread belief in theories that devalue authorities. Not to mention a pandemic that is making young people especially spend even more time online. The corona crisis is paired with an info-

democratic: our society is currently exposed to an amount of information that is so overwhelming that it becomes difficult to separate fact from fable. Certainly, the unprecedented scope of the 2021 media landscape has advantages. We can assess all kinds of sources from around the world, often free of charge. We can quickly find those messages that interest us. And the fact that a growing number of people has replaced the newspaper or public newscast with Facebook or YouTube, where anyone can be editor-in-chief, makes for a certain democratisation of media. At the same time, this shift has turned news consumers into news producers

as well. News producers who can launch their message with only one click. And this means that disinformation and conspiracy theories can also quickly find their way to large groups of people.

We have found that especially young people, who grow up finding most of their information online, are receptive of undemocratic messaging. These digital natives skillfully spread 'news' without checking the sources, often unaware of the risks of a careless attitude towards media usage. At the same time, we are seeing an increase in the level of distrust young people feel towards mainstream media. **Recent research** in the Netherlands shows that young people (aged 18-24) have significantly lower trust levels in traditional media compared to older generations. This is underscored by what we witness in the Dutch, German and Swedish classrooms where we piloted Under Pressure. More and more frequent, we even speak with students who believe that all journalists are abusing their freedom of speech and consciously try to manipulate their audience with disinformation. This poses a significant threat not only to those professionals working in media, but also to our democratic values and a free and open society at large.

"Nowadays, all journalists publish and spread fake news on purpose, so it is better to just ban freedom of speech altogether!"  
– 15 year old student during an Under Pressure course

As we all know, the shift away from mainstream media goes with a move towards social media. But young people are often unaware of the risks of using social media as a news source when they open the apps on their smartphones. Increasingly smart algorithms contribute to their online isolation: without knowledge about the mechanisms behind their beloved social media platform, they can easily get caught up in the 'rabbit hole' of pre-sorted, one-sided information. In this online isolation, there is only room for one truth. The result is that dissidents are

regarded with increasing hostility, which in turn leads to polarisation. Take the recent and rapid emergence of QAnon in Europe: a wild meta-conspiracy theory which posits that authorities everywhere have major hidden agendas, meanwhile fooling civilians into believing they work for them. A young student who took part in an Under Pressure course casually shared that she is on QAnon fora all the time and urged her fellow students to check out the video's about the government's "real motives behind Covid measures".

"We must provide the necessary tools for people to better understand what content they see online and why in order for them to make their own informed opinions."  
– Daniel Braun, Deputy Head of the Cabinet of Values and Transparency at the European Commission, during the online event of Under Pressure

### A Cross-border issue

Experts often point to the United States when explaining the disruptive power of disinformation on society. But here in Europe 'alternative facts' similarly have very real consequences that are highly disturbing in the offline sphere: Brexit, climate change conspiracies, or the widespread claim that the corona virus is a Jewish conspiracy to obtain wealth and power. In their 2020 European Democracy Action Plan, the European Parliament writes that the past years have shown that "democracy in the EU is facing great challenges ranging from rising extremism, election interference to the spread of manipulative information and threats against journalists – offline and online." In order to reverse this trend, we need to provide young people with the necessary skills to critically assess information and we need to make them aware of their own role in the dynamic media landscape. This way, we can increase young people's sense of (online) democratic citizenship and strengthen our democratic societies at large.

## What can we do about it?

We believe that the way to effectively arm young people against disinformation, and to prevent further polarisation and online isolation, is through education. Fortunately, more and more educators are realising the importance of teaching students about media literacy. And many European countries are making efforts to include a version thereof in the national curriculum. However, believing that young people are sufficiently trained after a couple of media literacy crash courses is naïve. This dismisses a fundamental point: If you only explain to students what certain terms mean and how media work, you are not automatically addressing the possible underlying frustrations that young people experience with traditional media. Nor why they feel more comfortable getting their news from an isolated online channel. And this should be the starting point, if you really want to reach young people and alter their attitude towards the media.

### The Under Pressure methodology

Under Pressure combines two best practices – peer education and gamification – to combat disinformation and polarisation among youth. In order to tackle the shortcomings of the standard media literacy approach, it is essential to relate to the frame of reference of young people. A role model of a similar generation and background will be more successful at conveying the message than the average teacher. Many teachers do not use the same media as their students. Therefore, the teacher is often not seen as a credible voice when it comes to loaded topics such as disinformation and media usage. This is why Under Pressure works with peer educators: young role models who share their own experiences to start the conversation in an accessible way for students. Students also play an exciting online game in which they learn to recognize disinformation by playing the ‘bad guy’ themselves. The game element – gathering as many followers by any means – proves very inviting to young people. At the same time, the game challenges students to reveal those hidden mechanisms that make disinformation so effective.

“A student shared that her family members actively spread conspiracy theories about Covid-19. She told me that she finds it difficult to start a conversation with them about this. It felt good to offer a listening ear and to be able to give her advice on this.”

– peer educator for Under Pressure

Peer educators guide students through the game, reflecting with the students on the consequences of their choices. The Under Pressure game is based on the inoculation theory which poses that people can be vaccinated psychologically against disinformation. Recent **scientific research** based on the game by the University of Cambridge shows that applying gamification in this manner for this aim is successful: in order to resist disinformation, young people need to be enabled to recognize misleading content first.

Strengthening democratic citizenship among youth has to be done bottom-up. This is why we invest in young leadership by training peer educators to become young role models. Especially when it comes to the complex themes of disinformation, polarisation and isolation, youngsters need to feel that their experiences are understood and taken into account. With its innovative methods designed to attract and involve a young target group, Under Pressure is able to have an impact beyond the knowledge transfer central to traditional media literacy education. Just like the young people and the technological developments in media that it explores, Under Pressure is dynamic. By constantly addressing the needs and experiences of the new generation that is growing up online, we are able to instill in young people a deeper understanding of the importance of the institutions that defend our democratic values. Therefore, it is our aim to reach and mobilize as many youngsters as possible with Under Pressure.

## What's next?

The approaching rounding off of the international PEGAP consortium as such certainly does not mean the end of our joint efforts to increase resilience against disinformation and polarisation among European youth. If we learned one thing in the process of developing Under Pressure, it is the importance of combining forces from different fields having to do with disinformation, polarisation and education. It is our ambition to continue impacting young people by making them more resilient on this cross-border issue. The increasing complexity of critically navigating the media landscape – aided by rapid technological developments such as deep fakes – calls for an innovative and dynamic approach. To this end, we gladly share our lessons learned from developing Under Pressure and are open to exploring new partnerships.

For more information about Under Pressure, go to [www.getunderpressure.com](http://www.getunderpressure.com).

For questions or to talk about ways to contribute to our mission, contact

Emma van Toorn at [etoorn@diversion.nl](mailto:etoorn@diversion.nl).

The PEGAP consortium has already reached over a thousand young people in Sweden, Germany, Belgium and The Netherlands. But we intend to apply the Under Pressure methodology in many more classrooms and in many more countries. At the same time, we want to start a movement that can achieve actual change across generations. That is our aim. That we may walk into a random classroom anywhere in Europe. That again a 15 year old student will put up their hand. That they will then expose the mechanisms behind disinformation. That the classroom will nod and mumble in agreement. And that this will give a living example of the importance of a critical attitude towards media and of democratic values like free press and free speech.

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