

Under Pressure Game Manual

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1. Introduction

The Under Pressure game has been developed as part of the Under Pressure teaching programme. In the game, students step into the shoes of a disinformation mongerer. Instead of just warning students of the dangers of spreading (online) news, we flip the script. We challenge them to spread as much fake news and disinformation as possible, collect online followers at all costs, and to be an all-round bad person. By allowing students to do this for themselves in a protected environment, they learn in an active way the different tactics that are regularly used to spread disinformation.

The origin of the Under Pressure game is in social psychology and is based on the principle of inoculation¹. According to this theory, people can build up resistance to misleading and manipulative news reports when they are confronted with a weaker version, comparable to how vaccine works. In this way people will build up resistance and immunity and will become immune more quickly to disinformation that they are confronted with in real life. This is exactly what the game tries to activate in students. By actively working on the spread of disinformation, they will recognise the techniques they learn for doing this more readily in their daily life and maybe even look more closely at their own behaviour. This is what we call *pre-bunking* (pre-emptive debunking) because in this way we can be one step ahead of disinformation: if you learn to look more critically at news reports and not just accept them without thinking, then there is also no need to take action after the event.

2. Theory

By playing the game and working through the chapters, students get to know the various strategies that are often used by those who spread disinformation. By actively exploring these themselves students will be in a position to recognise them faster “in real life”. So it is not that we use the game to tell them what is right and what is not. The aim is that students learn to look critically at what is reported - both on and offline – so that they can determine for themselves what is trustworthy and what is not.²

Depending on the choices that the students make in the game, you as peer educator lead the discussion at the end of each chapter. You do this by asking the students to explain their choices and think together about what consequences their choices would have if this had happened in real life. The game constantly challenges students to cross their ethical boundaries. Are there students that find this difficult, or do they not find this a problem at all?

¹ McGuire, W. J. (1961a). The effectiveness of supportive and refutational defenses in immunizing and restoring beliefs against persuasion. *Sociometry* 24, 184–197.

² The game specifically targets news channels on Instagram. But this is not the only medium for spreading news (consider YouTube, TikTok etc)

The game shows which techniques are often used by those who spread disinformation to spread their message as much as possible. But *why* is this such an enormous risk for society? What is the goal of disinformation?

Of course this can be different for everyone who spreads disinformation. Often people think that disinformation is primarily used to influence opinion for political gain.³ This is indeed often the case but is certainly not the only reason disinformation is such a big problem. What is more important to bear in mind here is that disinformation generates a lot of money. Disinformation has become an industry, and there is a lot of demand for it. It works a bit like entertainment, there are for example many people who buy the gossip magazine *Privé*, which generates a lot of money and as such guarantees its existence. You can compare this to the way you click online. If you click on something, this generates money for the hosting site via advertising income. So your click is worth money and this is one of the reasons that disinformation is so persistent. On top of that algorithms are often used to show you things that you are more likely to click on. If you then click on something a few times that is disinformation – perhaps even by mistake or out of boredom – this is much more likely to be offered to you again. In this way you can find yourself in a filter bubble in which your world view is always confirmed by your clicking behaviour. Therefore it could be that you are more prone to start believing in disinformation and inaccurate reports because you see them more often. (This is also part of what will be talked about in lesson 1)

It is also important to keep in the back of your mind the fact that an individual article is in the end only a very small part of disinformation.⁴ The problem is that in the end all these small articles together form a flood of news which engulfs all media and readers. In this way background noise is created which drowns out all other communication. Through an excess of difficult to interpret reporting, readers begin to doubt everything and can become cynical. Because if it is no longer clear what you should believe, is it then possible to believe in anything? This cynical attitude is what we want to fight against with the game Under Pressure by giving students ways to determine for themselves what is trustworthy reporting and, more importantly, what is not.

3. In practice

Important/requirements:

- Teams must have at least one charged smart phone or tablet per two students
- Wifi
- Digital blackboard

³ Consider for example the US presidential elections in 2016. This is a recent example of disinformation. The practice has been going on for years. See the role of propaganda in World War II for example

⁴ For more information about disinformation see <https://www.aboutbadnews.com/about-fake-news>

3.1 How does it work?

The game consists of two different parts which are used simultaneously. Students play the game as competitors in teams of two on their phone.⁵ The peer educator keeps track of the

teams' progress on the digital blackboard and can pause the game to explain the different chapters, to discuss what is happening in the game and to reflect on the choices the students make. The aim is for the students to attract as many followers as possible to build their own fake news empire. The team that manages to get the most followers and make the best – or indeed the worst – choices wins the game.

The students play the chapters on their phone. The scores of both sides are noted on the digital blackboard so that the peer educator and the students can see who is winning. This is noted live on the board so that you can also urge on the teams and create the feeling of a competition. You can also use the board to see if students accidentally fall out of the game or have stopped playing. The game has a *last seen* function which allows you to see how long a team has not been active. If a team takes too long to make choices in the game, their team name appears in grey letters on the digital board. If this happens, you can, as the leader of the workshop, see what's happening with that team and if necessary reactivate connection to the game by *refreshing* the browser.

3.2 Starting-up procedure:

- To start the game you need a unique URL per workshop. You will receive these URLs in the briefing mail before the workshops.
- When you are ready to start up the game during the class, go to the URL on the digital board. This will open the game's welcome screen. Make the screen *full screen* by pressing on f11
- Ask the students to form pairs with the person next to them. They will play the game together on one phone.
- Once you have started up the game on the digital board, you will be shown the welcome screen. On this screen there will be another URL and this is the URL the students follow on their phone to connect to the game.
- As soon as the students connect to the game you will be able to see this on the digital board. The digital board will keep track of how many teams have been connected. When all the teams are connected, start the game by clicking on 'start' on the digital board and the students can start playing.

⁵ Ideally the students should play in teams of two. Research shows that this delivers the best learning experience. If this is not possible for whatever reason then groups of three students is acceptable.

3.3 Playing the game

During the time the game is being played, you as peer educator take on the role of the *game host*. Encourage the students but don't forget to look to the teams that are doing less well! The digital board automatically scrolls down from time to time so you can see which teams are lower down the list. You can use this information after the chapter to discuss with the students why it did not go so well in the game. When students have finished the game a grey tick appears next to the team's name on the digital board. When everyone is ready, click on the *ready* button on the digital board. Now the report cards will appear on the digital board

so you can discuss them with the whole class⁶. The choices that the teams made are in the report cards. Sometimes a random team choice will be highlighted. You can use this to ask that specific team why they made that choice. Based on this you can start a discussion. Due to time restrictions you will not be able to discuss all the report cards. This is not a problem, just pick out the choices that you find interesting for a discussion. Once you have discussed the chapter with the class, start the next chapter by pressing on the button *continue*.

You can find out exactly how you use the game within the learning programme, what steps you follow and how you can best connect this element to the other parts of the lesson in the peer manual.

4. Game structure

The students play the game together in teams of two on their phone but this does not mean the peer educator can just sit back and relax. Your role is to lead the discussion after every chapter. You do this with the help of report cards which appear on the digital board at the end of each chapter. Using these report cards as a starting point, you ask the students to explain their choices and for example compare them to the choices made by other students. If the class discussion does not get going, you can fall back on the discussion points at the end of each chapter which are set out in this part of the manual. You do not have to work through all the discussion points, keep an eye on the time! In lesson one you have 10 minutes for the game, in lesson two about half an hour for the game and the discussion.

The game is divided into six different chapters which are played over two lessons. The lesson plan and how the game can be used in practical terms is briefly described in the peer manual you have received. The scenario of all the chapters is described in detail below, together with all the possible report cards that you may come across during the discussion as well as possible discussion points. You can use this in advance to pick out some interesting points that you want to discuss in class.

⁶ In this document you will find every sort of report card report clearly ordered in the discussions on the different chapters.

Chapter 1. Make believe

Part of lesson 1 – Assignment 3.1 (peer manual page 36)

Goal of this chapter:

Showing students how easy it is to imitate a credible news site. Just because something looks official it certainly does not mean it is.

During the game:

In the first chapter, students get to know the game and make an account. The theme make believe is the focus of this chapter. It is very easy to make a news channel on Instagram and publish content that looks very real and sounds official. The first chapter in the first lesson is about two issues:

- Show how easy it is to imitate a real person or existing organisation online by, for example, using a slightly different user name.
- Show how easy it is to imitate a legitimate news source or blog without any journalistic experience or corresponding rules of conduct.

To get students used to the game a bit, the game first asks them to make a post about something that frustrates them. They can choose from various options: an angry comment about climate change, the mainstream media or the government. With this comment they attract their first followers. After this they are asked to pretend to be a famous person or company and introduce a *hoax* into the world. The teams can choose between 1. Netflix is forbidden for young people under 21, 2. A warning from the European Space Agency (ESA) of an enormous hurricane, or 3. The announcement of the end of the Erasmus study abroad programme by the European Commission.

These posts attract lots of reactions and the students are shown a few comments from people who have fallen for the make-believe hoax. The posts seem convincing, but the profile names of the organisations and the prime minister are spelt wrong and therefore cannot be real. This disguising technique is often used by those who spread disinformation to get their ideas out into the world.

After this, the game asks the teams if they want to go to work in a professional way. The students can then choose between news channel and a blog. The game automatically leads them to the option for a news channel on Instagram because this is the best way to reach as many people as possible. For their profile, the students can choose between an authentic sounding news source, a blog and a person. This is an important choice: an authentic sounding news source is of course easier to believe than a person. This is something you can discuss with the students.

Report cards:

1. Why did they choose this name?
2. How do you make sure you have a credible alias?

3. Why did they choose a fake screenshot?
4. Who had moral objections?

Discussion points:

- What sort of name is more credible for a news account? A person? A blog? A real sounding news channel? Why did you choose the team name that you did?
- How do you decide whether a news source is trustworthy or not? Do you depend on a credible name or should you look more into the background of a source?
- Who thinks that he/she has come across a fake news account on Instagram or somewhere else at some point? Did you trust it?
- What would the students themselves think if they came across the fake post that they just shared on Instagram? Would they trust it? Why/why not?

Chapter 2. Manipulation

In the second lesson, the students play the rest of the game in the same teams. Now for the first time they put content on their news account which begins with appealing to people's emotions.

Goal of this chapter:

Showing how quickly you can get followers by appealing to people's emotions. Emotional content is more appealing than just "dry facts". This is something many media struggle with: using emotional language has much more of an impact than business-like reporting. Emotional reporting which plugs in to basic emotions such as fear, anger or empathy stay with the public longer.

During the game:

The teams search for a subject about which they can post on their profile. They can choose between climate change or the use of pesticides in agriculture. They are asked to publish their opinion about these subjects: climate change is a hoax or pesticides will lead to the end of the world. With these opinions they will quickly gather followers.

After this the teams are asked how they will tackle this subject: by personally attacking the scientists, by posting an emotional story or by writing about the scientific arguments behind the subjects. The last option leads to a reduction in the number of followers but the students must attract as many followers as possible and they can do this most effectively with reactionary content. Facts do not matter, as long as you appeal to people's emotions, you will win more followers. To achieve this, the teams can choose between placing a meme or sharing an article. For both options the teams have multiple possibilities, one of which will always deliver the least followers. This option is least valued by followers because it is boring or does not get to the real point. The more followers the teams get, the more emotional and angry comments appear under their Instagram posts. The teams have reached their goal.

Report cards:

1. What is the best way to reach your goal? What is your approach? What language do you choose?
2. Why does that work?
3. How does your message go viral?
4. Which team made a meme?
5. Which team wrote an article?
6. Which team leads with the most followers?

Discussion points:

- Who got the most/least followers? What was the reason for this?
- What emotions work the best when it comes to talking to people? Do you recognise this from your own experience?
- Who had trouble with choosing a strong opinion about the subject?
- Do you now realise that actually it does not make any difference how much you know about a certain subject and what exactly your opinion on it is, as long as it just triggers an extreme reaction? What do you think about that? Do you recognise this?

Chapter 3. Polarisation

Goal of this chapter:

Showing that by driving people away from the reasonable middle position and by making sure that everyone is either totally for or totally against a specific subject you can make a story much more important than it really is. In this chapter the students in fact create a storm in a teacup. As well as this it makes the students realise that “fake news” does not have to be fake per se! Often certain elements of issues are massively magnified and other elements ignored.

During the game:

Now that the teams have earned their spurs in the media landscape on Instagram, they are going to polarise the situation. By making the gap between the political left and right bigger, and by driving people away from the reasonable middle position, nuanced discussion disappears.

At the beginning of this chapter the students are asked if they want to publish something real or fake. If the teams choose for fake, they are told that they do not always have to falsify news reports to be picked up. It can also be effective to take a real story and pull this out of its context: after all, the best lies are those that are close to the truth. In this case, the teams can select three local news stories that have been shared at random by the public: a

chemical leak at a factory, the sudden construction of an energy plant whereby the public suspect bribery, or a heavy-handed arrest by the police.

After selecting the scandal, the game asks the students to choose a stance on how they want to approach their subject: from the right or left angle. As a result of the choice the students make here they can pull the discussion to the political left or right with their posts. The game does not have any ideological slant, students can choose for themselves whether they want to be left or right wing. The game only shows that disinformation does not have a political preference and can be used by both the right end left wing. So starting a discussion about political preferences is not the aim here.

Once the students have made a choice about their political approach, the teams are asked to share the story on their Instagram account, but this does not achieve much. The game then asks them to ramp up the number of followers by writing an article or making a meme. This already generates a few more followers and the story is picked up in small groups. After this, the teams are confronted with a choice: do they buy bots so that the story goes viral or

do they stay honest? If they accept the bots, they will get an extra 3000 followers who will circulate their story which means it will continue to get traction. If they refuse, the number of followers will remain the same.

In this chapter you can, as a peer, explain about bots and the buying of likes. The more something is shared, the greater the chance that it will appear in your own feed. So if companies or news sites use bots and buy likes to make their story more visible, it is likely you will see it. So all those likes and shares do not necessarily have to come from real people. Buying bots, likes and followers is also not so expensive, you can buy 1000 likes for around €15.⁷ and this is often done.

Report cards:

1. Who wanted to publish a lie?
2. What is the big advantage of polarisation?
3. What percentage of players chose for Insta-bots? Why?
4. Who is the winner of this chapter?

Discussion points:

- Who finds it hard to be bad and buy in bots? Why?
- Who does not have any problem at all with this?
- Which meme/article was the most effective? And more importantly: why? Do you sometimes come across something like this on your own feed?
- Why did the first article not work in attracting the public?

⁷ <https://www.idigic.net/buy-instagram-likes/>

- Which parts of the story did the students choose to magnify? Why? What did they ignore? Do they recognise this from their own experience?

Chapter 4. Conspiracy theory

Goal of this chapter:

Showing students how easy it is to be manipulated in your world view and as a result lose your trust in society. Social media can play a key role in this.

During the game:

The spread of conspiracy theories can also be a part of online news sources. Conspiracy thinking means that people are convinced that certain events are implemented by a secret and powerful group or organisation. This way of thinking mainly catches on among people who have the feeling they are losing their hold on society or have even already lost their trust in society. By exploiting this and feeding this belief, online news channels can quickly build up a *cult following* of people who see these channels as the bringers of the Real Truth and turn away from the mainstream media (who they believe are part of the conspiracy and only spread lies). This is also what the students need to understand in this chapter.

The students begin this chapter by searching for an interesting conspiracy theory which they can post on their profile. The options from which the teams can choose are however extremely absurd. The students can choose from 1. Alien dinos from space built the pyramids 2. Manufacturers secretly add LSD to fruit juices to brainwash people 3. Schools no longer teach children italic script so that they cannot read the communist manifesto.

These choices are however so strange that their followers do not agree with the theory and the students lose a big number of followers. Some followers even loudly share their displeasure in the comments about the strange theories the teams share.

To rescue their credibility, the game asks the students to share another more likely conspiracy. The teams can choose from: 1. Agenda 21, a UN treaty about sustainable development, or 2. The vaccination conspiracy, the idea that the World Health Organisation (WHO) uses vaccinations to brainwash people. It is not about whether the students know and understand both theories here, the choices are somewhat mysterious and vague on purpose to stir up the feeling that this could be a conspiracy.

The teams get more followers if they succeed in sowing doubt about the official story of the organisation they have selected. The most effective way to push people towards a conspiracy theory is by asking critical questions and also of course by lying a little. In this way they increasingly sow doubt about the honesty and credibility of the organisations. But it must remain plausible, if they go over the top, the number of followers falls. If the students play it well, their followers will react positively this time and the teams are urged to share a serious article about the subject of their choice. If they can hit the right tone, their followers become even more convinced that the news source is right and they become increasingly sceptical of what they see as the “mainstream media”.

Report cards:

1. Why do people believe in conspiracy theories?

2. Which team made sure that their followers no longer believed in the “mainstream media”?
3. Why is this so useful if you spread disinformation?
4. Not a single theory mentioned in this game is made up. Everything can really be found on the internet..
5. Winner

Discussion points:

- Why did you lose so many followers after bringing out the first conspiracy story?
- Why did more followers believe the second conspiracy story?
- Why are conspiracy theories dangerous?

To find out more about how to conduct a discussion on conspiracy theories see page 67 of the general peer manual.

Chapter 5. Reputation destruction

Goal of this chapter:

Students realise that a slander campaign or mud slinging is an often-used tactic by dubious news channels when they are confronted with criticism. If a news channel goes into full attack this often distracts attention from themselves.

During the game:

Attacking opponents is an important aspect in the spread of disinformation. If such news sources are accused of bad journalism, they tend to distract attention from themselves by attacking the source of the criticism or by denying that the problem even exists.

In this chapter the students actively explore this tactic. The teams are confronted by a fact-checker who discredits their conspiracy theory from the previous chapter. They get three options: offer their excuses, do nothing or take revenge. The first option will result in them losing many followers and if they do choose this option it will be explained to them that it is never a good idea to offer an apology. The second option results in a response from a follower who asks why they do not say anything about the fact-checker. Taking revenge leads to a choice between denying the allegations or attacking the fact-checker. These options lead to yet more possibilities from which the teams can choose. Denial and/or a personal attack on the fact-checker results in positive reactions from followers and their reputation remains intact.

Report cards:

1. How do you react to criticism?
2. Why is attack always the best option?
3. Which team offered an apology?

4. Who wanted to take revenge?
5. Winner

Discussion points:

- Who recognises this tactic of vilifying someone? What do you think of it?
- Does this only happen with dubious news channels? Or do you think that this happens more often? Where else would this happen?
- Who chose to attack the fact-checker and who went for denial? Why? (Defence = weakness because then you admit there is a problem, attack = distracts the attention from yourself).

Chapter 6. Trolling

Beware! This chapter could spark a powerful reaction from some students bearing in mind it discusses a plane disaster which could remind people of the MH17 disaster. The teacher is asked in advance whether this topic could be extra sensitive for any of the students. You can find information about this in the briefing. You can always briefly discuss whether anyone found the subject difficult when playing the game.

Goal of this chapter:

Showing students how trolls go to work online. They achieve their goal by exploiting emotions and consciously creating confusion over what is true, and what is not, and that can have dire consequences. The chapter also shows how certain sensitive issues on social media can get out of hand.

During the game:

In this chapter the students combine the techniques handled in the previous chapters. They can now only select one subject. At the beginning of the chapter they are asked to write about one of the following subjects: the 25 most romantic cities in Europe; a crash involving a passenger plane; a newly discovered starfish. Only the second option leads to a complete scenario. One of the other options leads to criticism from the game's moderator, and the students are still asked to write about the plane crash. After this the teams get two options: express support for the victims of the of the plane crash or sow doubt about the cause of the disaster.

The first option leads to reactions from their followers asking why they have not gone into the investigation surrounding the plane crash. Both options eventually lead the teams to ask questions about whether in fact the plane crash was staged to hide something else. Because of the number of followers that the students have gathered in the meantime, the story is picked up by other news sites and the story starts to escalate. Students can pour oil on the fire by pretending to be family of one of the victims or photoshopping "evidence" that the disaster was staged. Both actions lead to emotional reactions from followers.

The mainstream media now also picks up the story. The students are challenged to step up the pressure by bringing the investigation further into doubt or by using an army of Insta-bots

to spread the hashtag #InvestigateNow. Depending on their choice, they can now write an article about the crash or decide to make the choice they did not make earlier (pretend to be family or photoshop evidence).

The Plane Crash Investigation Committee, the agency responsible for the investigation reacts to the controversy on Instagram. The students attack this reaction by calling for the resignation of the Committee's chairman or by using their Insta-bot army again. Furious reactions follow and the position of the Committee can no longer be maintained. The game ends with the sacking of the Plane Crash Investigation Committee chairman as a consequence of the controversy around the investigation.

Report cards:

1. Who preferred not to write about the plane crash?
2. Why is trolling so effective?
3. Which team pretended to be family?
4. Which team created "evidence"?
5. The subject of this chapter is a true-life case study about is a true-life case study on disinformation. Nothing is made up.
6. Congratulations! You are all masters of disinformation.
7. Winner of the game.

Discussion points:

- How was the chaotic situation created that led to the chairman in the game being sacked? (Answer: by sowing doubt).
- Did you find it difficult to sow doubt and in this way make people believe something different?
- Do you think stories are changed in this way more often?
- What do you think about the fact that trolling and sowing doubt online can have consequences in real life?

5. Troubleshooting guide

Because the game is not a plenary activity but is played in teams of two, there is a small risk of technical or practical problems. Below are a list of possible problems and solutions:

- Students are late
It is not a problem for the progress of the game if a student or team is late. If students are late, they can still take part by connecting to the unique URL and choosing a team name. The workshop leader eventually closes the chapter on the digital blackboard. This can be done even if a latecomer is still playing so that the whole class does not have to wait.
- Absenteeism
It is not a problem if a student only joins the class during the second chapter and therefore does not yet have an account. Connect the student to the game in the same way as with the others and select “start new team”. This will allocate the student a random team name and the first chapter will be skipped. The student starts with 0 points so has a small handicap but he/she can take part fully in playing the game.
- No connection
If students cannot connect, ask them to try again, or maybe turn off their wifi and to try again on their 4G network. If it still does not work, they can try on another phone as there is only one phone per team needed.
- Game abandoned by accident
If a team leaves the game by accident, by closing the browser or other reasons, the students can go back to the URL and choose their team to go on with the game. The game continues automatically where they left it. The number of followers they had is also the same. So these sort of inconveniences do not influence the progress of the game, at their worst you lose some time.
- Picking the wrong team by accident
If students click the wrong team after they have closed the game, they must tell the workshop leader. He/she can then disconnect the team by hand on the digital blackboard. You do this by selecting the option “free up team” at the top right-hand side of the digital board and then selecting the relevant team. The team is deleted from the list on the digital board and the students can then select the right team.
- Technical problems
Should unexpected technical problems arise such as a team being automatically thrown out of the game or the game freezing, do not panic! If the problem just involves one team ask that team to try another phone or, if that does not work either, to go and watch another team. Make a phot of the problem and mail it with a description of what went wrong to rivka@badnews.eu.

- Worst case scenario
If you cannot get the game to start at all or none of the students can connect to the game, it is not the end of the world. Using the descriptions of the chapters in this manual, go through the story with the students and ask them to raise their hand so that they can make all the choices offline. You can still use the discussion points as a way to kick off discussions with the class. The chance that this problem occurs is really very small, so do not worry about it too much. But if it does happen, let us know by mailing rivka@badnews.eu and contact Diversion.
- No order = teacher
If students do not cooperate, do not listen and are busy with other things on their phone, the best thing to do is call in the teacher. The teacher knows the class best and will be able to help you. You can also fall back on the tips you were given during the didactic training you have had or check the trouble shooting guide in the general teaching manual (page 63).