



“TRUST ME”

**Discussion Guide on
manipulation and misinformation**

For adult learners

Background Information

About the film

Misinformation is all around us, and it has real-world consequences. In today's information landscape where anyone can publish almost anything, who – and what – can you trust?



“TRUST ME” is a feature-length documentary directed by Oscar-nominated Roko Belic that delves into the topics of manipulation and misinformation by exploring human nature, information technology, and the need for news and media literacy to help people trust one another. The film was produced by the Getting Better Foundation, whose mission is to build trust using the truth. For additional information about the film or its producers, or to get involved, visit <https://www.trustmedocumentary.com>.



The film is available for purchase from New Day Films at <https://www.newday.com/film/trust-me>.

About this guide

This guide was produced by [the News Literacy Project](#) (NLP) and Pamela Brunskill with support from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

The guide is intended for adult learners in all settings, such as colleges, correctional facilities and community forums. Leaders should adapt, adopt and adjust these recommendations and ideas as they see fit.

The discussions we recommend are broken up into three sections: **before viewing**, **during viewing** and **after viewing** to help you establish, and build on, the core concepts in the film and reflect on the questions that result. Extension and further reading opportunities are listed at the end of the guide.

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Manipulation by misinformation

Misinformation is not entirely an abstract concept because it influences the decisions people make and the actions they take. It also has political and social implications: Even if you manage to avoid falling for misinformation about important issues and events, the actions of other people in your community who are influenced by it can have a significant effect on you (for example, if a significant number of voters allow misinformation to determine their votes in an important election).

Therefore, to truly understand how misinformation works, we also need to understand how falsehoods manipulate people.

Most misinformation elicits an emotional response from its audience, tapping into deep-seated fears, beliefs and values that cause people to react more quickly and less rationally than they otherwise might. Many examples of misinformation simply “feel” right to the people who fall for them. They are consistent with the way their audience already sees and understands the world, they affirm people’s fears about how the world may be changing or they give people hope for positive change. Understood this way, misinformation is a form of exploitation – of our desire for justice, our outrage at injustice, our patriotism, our self-interests, our faith – that relies on manipulation to function.

This guide is designed to help you center the underlying concept of manipulation as you examine the core topic of misinformation in today’s information landscape.

Before Viewing

Introduction to manipulation

Preview these essential questions that will be explored in the documentary:



What is manipulation and how does it work?

How does misinformation manipulate people?

What are the consequences of misinformation?

How do you know who (and what) you can trust?

Push your thinking about this subject with purposeful questioning. Have you ever been tricked? What happened? What is your experience with so-called fake news or misinformation? Have you ever manipulated anyone? Can you explain exactly how you did it, and why it worked?

Why does manipulation seem so much clearer to those targeted by it in hindsight? Why are we sometimes blind to it or blindsided by it? What strategies could help people preempt manipulation in the future?

Does your organization have any explicit experience with manipulation? If so, do you think your group is affected more than others? Why or why not?

And finally, as a group, what do you hope to learn from “TRUST ME?”

During Viewing of “TRUST ME”

View “TRUST ME.” Pause periodically to ask one another questions. Feel free to use any or all of the following to guide your discussions (in order of appearance in the film):

Video Segment	Content	Start Time	Run Time	Sample Questions
A	“What’s the Truth?” media literacy song	0:00	1:30	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When should children begin learning news and media literacy?
B	Opening to “TRUST ME” documentary	1:30	1:48	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What does the attribution of this quote tell us?
1	Tech Addiction and Media Business Models	3:15	7:44	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why is social media addicting? Why are social media platforms free? How do they make money? How does this business model affect what you see on social media? How does it affect your family/families?
2	Social Pressure and Bullying	11:10	1:31	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do online bullies and trolls manipulate others? What experiences have family members or friends faced in this area? What should parents and caregivers be aware of?
3	Mis- and Dis-information, Confirmation Bias	12:44	5:07	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What problems can confirmation bias cause? What role do fact-checking organizations such as PolitiFact play in the war on misinformation? Do you think they are effective? Why or why not? What emotions do people spreading misinformation appeal to most? Why? What are your own biases and how might they be exploited by misinformation?
4	Mainstream Media Sharing Misinformation	18:00	3:25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyze the Covington Catholic High School incident involving Nick Sandmann and the Native American elder, or Edgar Welch and the pizza shop. What went wrong? Can you justify your response? How are these examples of misinformation different? What would you have done (or what was your reaction) upon hearing the misinformation described in this part of the film?
5	Citizens Misled by Disinformation	21:35	2:38	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the offline consequences of online activity? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do events spiral out of control? Do you think you would be compelled to act like the parents in this part of the video?
6	Costs of Overprotective Parenting	24:22	4:48	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How are parents being manipulated by misleading or false claims concerning their children’s safety? What should be done to solve this problem? Can you give some examples of negativity bias that you have experienced?
7	Risks of Medical Misinformation	29:30	8:55	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain the disconnect between parents being more afraid than is warranted in reality. What can we learn about the susceptibility to manipulation from the segment describing Dr. Andrew Wakefield’s role in the vaccine story? Why does this continue to be a pressing issue about which there is so much misinformation? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do people fall for misinformation about vaccines? What other examples of medical misinformation are you aware of?

Video Segment	Content	Start Time	Run Time	Sample Questions
8	Erosion of Church and State in Journalism	38:25	2:27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is native advertising? When is it okay and when is it problematic? Why isn't all data equal? How can data be manipulated and used as misinformation?
9	Foreign Interference in Democracy -Russian Trolls -ISIS	41:00 50:56	9:47 3:07	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How did the Internet Research Agency manipulate Americans before and after the 2016 presidential election? What are some vulnerabilities Americans have that can be exploited? What are some vulnerabilities you have that someone publishing misinformation could exploit?
10	Misleading Technologies (Deepfakes)	54:00	2:24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the potential consequences of deepfakes? Are they dangerous?
11	Fatal flaws of Anonymous Messaging	56:37	6:07	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are some of the problems caused by anonymous messaging in apps like Whatsapp? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If anyone uses anonymous messaging, can you describe your experience with it? What are some other anonymous messaging apps?
12	Freedom of Expression Challenges	1:02:51	3:47	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are the legal issues surrounding manipulation and misinformation? Why can't the U.S. government just stop misinformation from spreading?
13	Media Literacy in the Classroom	1:06:47	4:53	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How can people evaluate sources of information to make sure they're credible? Why is it our responsibility to make sure sources of information are credible? Why should individuals be skeptical of what they read, see, and hear online and elsewhere?
14	Solutions to Media "ill-literacy"	1:11:50	8:39	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What does it mean to be news and media literate? How can we help the "good guys"? Whose job is it to teach kids to be news and media literate?
15	The Gap between Perception and Reality	1:20:40	8:45	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What does this quote mean: "The way we see the world depends on the information we receive"? Who said it?* Do you agree or disagree that "[s]haring our stories helps us see how connected all are?" What effect would finding common ground have on the problems of manipulation and misinformation?
—	"We're All in This Thing Together" and credits	1:29:29	3:45	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What do you find powerful about the message in this song? Can music bring people together on important issues?
—	Petition for media literacy school funding	1:33:15	:07	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why is a student-led campaign for news and media literacy so powerful?

**This quote was shown several times in "TRUST ME." The film's director, Roko Belic, made up the quote to express the theme of the film. The changing bylines show how the meaning of the quote changes depending on attribution — Leonardo Da Vinci versus Rosa Parks, for example — and they plant doubt about the trustworthiness of the attribution. Just because someone puts quotes around a statement and credits it to a well-known person doesn't mean they actually ever said it.

After Viewing

Manipulation by misinformation

Revisit the essential questions:



What is manipulation and how does it work?

How does misinformation manipulate people?

What are the consequences of misinformation?

How do you know who (and what) you can trust?

Dig deeper into these questions by expanding on your initial answers with evidence from the documentary. Try to incorporate some of the vocabulary and concepts described: *manipulation, addiction, virtual, media, polarization, brain hacking, misinformation, confirmation bias, negativity bias, manipulation, and/or deepfakes.*

Challenge each other to complete additional research to verify your responses.

TAKE ACTION!

- Make a plan, either as an individual or as a group to fight being manipulated by misinformation.
- Research issues you care about (e.g. using <https://ourworldindata.org/> or <https://www.gettingbetterfoundation.org/>).
- Start an impact campaign: start a hashtag, student led video, artwork, or social media campaign?
- Sign the Getting Better Foundation petition in support of media literacy education: <https://www.change.org/p/department-of-education-let-s-get-media-literacy-education-in-schools>
- Get others involved in this issue.

Extensions

To explore manipulation and misinformation further, check out these resources:

- The News Literacy Project's [resource collection](#), including its [Checkology® virtual classroom](#) (<https://checkology.org/>), a no-cost e-learning hub with 13 interactive lessons hosted by real-world subject matter experts.
- NLP's mobile app, Informable® (for [Android](#) and [iPhone](#)).
- NLP's podcast at <https://newslit.org/podcast/>.
- NLP's "How to know what to trust" infographic at <https://newslit.org/educators/resources/how-to-know-what-to-trust/>.
- First Draft's [online training](#) collection <https://firstdraftnews.org/training/>.
- "[Spot the Troll](#)," an interactive website from the Media Forensics Hub at Clemson University at <https://spotthetroll.org/>.

Further Reading

For a deeper understanding of manipulation and misinformation, consider these texts:

Bouygues, Helen Lee. (2020, September). *Is There A Fake News Generation?* Retrieved from <https://reboot-foundation.org/is-there-a-fake-news-generation/>

Glassner, Barry. (1999). *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things*. New York: Hachette Book Group.

Otis, Cindy L. (2020). *True or False: A CIA Analyst's Guide to Spotting Fake News*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Group.

Pinker, Steven. (2018). *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason*. New York: Penguin Random House.

Ridley, Matt. (2010). *The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

The psychology of misinformation. (2020, September 18). Retrieved from <https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/the-psychology-of-misinformation/>

Shermer, Michael. (2020). *Giving the Devil his Due: Reflections of a Scientific Humanist*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Silverman, C. (2015, February 15). Lies, Damn Lies, and Viral Content. Retrieved from https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/craig_silverman_lies_damn_lies_viral_content.php

Zak, Paul. (2017). *Trust Factor: The Science of Creating High-Performance Companies*. New York: AMACOM.