



Navigating Mis- and  
Disinformation at an Older Age

# Disinformation, Propaganda and Thinking Errors

How Psychological Mechanisms  
Distort Reality



Nordplus



JYVÄSKYLÄN  
KESÄYLIOPISTO



Vanhustyön keskusliitto  
CENTRALFÖRBUNDET FÖR DE GAMLAS VÄL RY



MEDARDO ČOBOTO  
TREČIOJO AMŽIAUS UNIVERSITETAS





## Information for the lecturer :

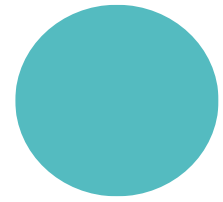
**To prepare for the lecture, it is recommended that you read:**

- <https://kam.lt/leidiniai/ricardas-savukynas-kaip-nugaleti-propaganda-trumpamastymo-klaidu-apzvalga-2/>

**Additionally:**

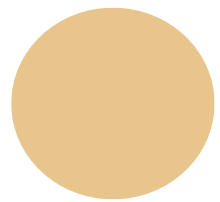
- <https://cri.lt/publications/disinformation-tool-kit/>
- <https://cri.lt/publications/propagandos-amzius-kovos-su-dezinformacija-priemoniu-rinkinys-2/>

At the end of the presentation, there are questions that can be used to facilitate discussion.



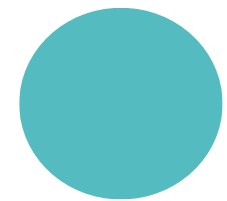
**Do you think:**

- that you are always right?
- that all your judgments are correct?

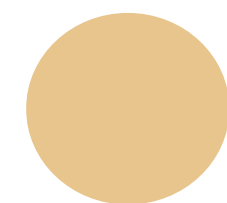


**Have you ever asked yourself:**

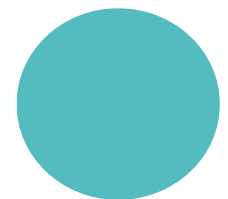
- why do I have such an opinion?
- am I smarter than everyone around me?



**Propaganda and disinformation try to change your mind.**



**The main goal is to make you think differently, which will change your behavior.**



**What is the difference between propaganda and disinformation?**



# What is Disinformation?

- **Main objective:** To mislead, to deceive
- **Form:** Lies, fabricated news, manipulated photos or statistics.
- **Context:** Used in various fields (politics, business, wartime, social media).
- **Key feature:** Deceitfulness is a central characteristic.

Disinformation is a **tool**.



# What is Propaganda?

- **Main objective:** To convince others and legitimize a particular ideology, authority, or course of action.
- **Format:** A coherent messaging system—slogans, recurring narratives, and emotional highlights.
- **Context:** Long-term and strategically planned; historically characteristic of political systems, wars, and ideological movements
- **Key feature:** Focus and persuasion, not just lies

Propaganda is a **strategy**.

# Disinformation vs. Propaganda

- Disinformation is **a tool**
- Propaganda is **a strategy**
- Propaganda may use disinformation
- But propaganda does not rely on lies alone
- Propaganda primarily targets **how people think**, not only **what they know**

# The Psychological Dimension

## Propaganda works effectively because it:

- Exploits natural human thinking patterns
- Uses predictable psychological shortcuts
- Encourages thinking errors
- Reduces critical analysis

# Propaganda and thinking errors

- Propaganda systematically uses thinking errors
- When these errors are removed, propaganda texts collapse
- Errors are inserted deliberately, not accidentally
- They are subtle and highly effective

# What are thinking errors?

- Systematic distortions of reasoning
- Automatic and often unconscious
- Emotionally convincing but logically flawed
- Capable of shaping perception of reality

They are especially effective tools in propaganda.

# Why is it important to recognize thinking errors?

- Propaganda deliberately implants thinking errors
- Thinking errors harm quality of life even without propaganda
- Fighting propaganda starts with critical thinking
- Correcting thinking errors leads to clearer perception and greater well-being

# Real-World Propaganda Examples

- Propaganda rarely looks like an obvious lie.
- It usually appears as emotionally convincing, simplified narratives built on thinking errors.

The following examples illustrate how thinking errors are used in real-world propaganda messaging (media, political communication, social networks).

# Thinking Error: Mind Reading

## Mind Reading

- Assuming we know what others think, want, or intend
- Attributing hidden motives without evidence

## Example:

- “They want to destroy our country.”

## Why it is dangerous:

- Removes the need for proof
- Creates suspicion and hostility
- Simplifies complex intentions into threats

# Thinking Error: Emotional Evaluation



## Emotional Evaluation (Emotional Reasoning)

- Judging reality based on feelings rather than facts

### Example:

- “I feel afraid, therefore the threat is real”

### Why it is effective:

- Emotions feel convincing
- Fear and anger override logic
- Rational analysis is bypassed

# Examples of Thinking Errors in Messaging



**Common propaganda-style messages include:**

- “Everyone is against us” (overgeneralization)
- “If this failed, everything failed” (all-or-nothing thinking)
- “They are traitors” (labeling)
- “This small event proves total collapse” (magnification)

Each example simplifies reality and pushes emotional conclusions.

# Why Thinking Errors Work

## Thinking errors:

- Reduce cognitive effort
- Provide simple explanations
- Offer emotional certainty
- Create a sense of belonging or moral clarity

Propaganda amplifies these effects deliberately.

# Correcting Thinking Errors

## How to fix thinking errors:

- Take your time - **don't make decisions automatically**
- Always try to **separate facts from interpretation**
- Always **ask for evidence**
- Ask **what the alternatives are**

It's not intuitive - it has to be learned.

# Practical Questions for Critical Thinking



## When encountering a message, ask:

- What facts are actually presented?
- What emotions does this message provoke?
- What information is missing?
- Which thinking error might be used here?

# Practical Questions for Critical Thinking



- The next time you want to say "**of course, he did it for...**", stop and ask: "**How do I know that?**„
- The next time you **feel a strong emotional impulse** due to a news or political statement, stop. Ask yourself: **Does what I feel mean it's true?**

**Disinformation deceives through false content.  
Propaganda deceives through distorted thinking.**

The most effective defense is not only fact-checking,  
but the ability to recognize and correct thinking errors.

Propaganda is most effective **not because people lack intelligence,  
but because thinking errors are human and automatic.**

Recognizing these errors restores agency, clarity, and resistance.

**Critical thinking is not scepticism toward everything –it is the discipline of thinking clearly despite emotions, pressure, and manipulation.**



**Based on Richard Savukynas –  
A Brief Overview of Thinking Errors, Lithuanian Army,  
2020**

**Some specific thinking errors and discussion questions**

# Example 1 – All-or-Nothing Thinking

## Message:

“If reforms did not immediately improve living standards, then the entire reform process has failed.”

## Why it works:

- Ignores partial progress
- Eliminates nuance
- Pushes audiences toward extreme conclusions

## Discussion question:

What alternative explanations are ignored?

# Example 2 – Overgeneralization

## Message:

“One corrupt official proves that the entire state system is corrupt.”

## Why it works:

- Ignores partial progress
- Eliminates nuance
- Pushes audiences toward extreme conclusions

## Discussion question:

Does one example justify a universal conclusion?

# Example 3 – Mental Filter & Disqualifying the Positive

## Message:

“Yes, the economy is growing, but ordinary people feel no benefits — so the growth means nothing.”

## Why it works:

- Ignores partial progress
- Eliminates nuance
- Pushes audiences toward extreme conclusions

## Discussion question:

Which facts are excluded from the narrative?

# Example 4 – Mind Reading & Predicting the Future

## Message:

“The West wants to weaken our country and will inevitably betray us.”

## Why it works:

- Ignores partial progress
- Eliminates nuance
- Pushes audiences toward extreme conclusions

## Discussion question:

What evidence is actually presented?

# Example 5 – Magnification

## Message:

“A single protest represents total chaos and the collapse of public order.”

## Why it works:

- Isolated events are exaggerated
- Creates a sense of crisis
- Justifies extreme countermeasures

## Discussion question:

How representative is the event?

# Example 6 – Emotional Reasoning Message:

## Message:

“We feel threatened, therefore the threat is real.”

## Why it works:

- Emotions replace evidence
- Fear overrides critical analysis
- Creates immediate emotional alignment

## Discussion question:

What facts support the emotional claim?