# “Troll Factory” turns disinformation campaigns into teaching game

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Half of the battle against disinformation campaigns is educating people about how they work. And that’s why the Finnish public broadcasting company Yle—Finland’s equivalent of the BBC—has created a game called Troll Factory. The game, which recently won the European Journalism Centre and Google News Initiative’s Global Youth and News Media Prize for promoting media literacy, puts the player in the role of a disinformation operative working for an Internet Research Agency-like organization with an anti-immigrant agenda.

The gamification of education on disinformation campaigns has been shown to help build up a resistance to fake news in the past. The University of Cambridge conducted a study in 2018 using a browser game called “Bad News” and found that completing the 15-minute game increased “psychological resistance” to fake news on social media, reducing the perceived credibility of fake news headlines by an average of 21 percent across 15,000 participants.

Troll Factory takes Bad News’ approach a step further by using real samples of memes, conspiracy theories, and fake news

articles used in such campaigns that infect social media and heighten the polarization of public discourse around the world—and in the US and Western Europe in particular. With the increasing reliance on social media for news, Yle's interactive team sought to create more awareness of how weaponized social media has become and more understanding among social media users of how they could be drawn into unintentionally spreading false information.

- Welcome to the disinformation grind.
- Real memes are presented as options for emotional attacks on social media.
- As your lies spread, your network effect grows.
- Let's make some bots! (Hint: don't overdo it.)
- Fake news time—how many people can you convince to share (and believe) this tidbit?

"We did deep background research on different social media platforms to understand different forms of information operations," Jarno M. Koponen, head of AI and Personalization at Yle, told Ars. "The example content is pulled from Instagram, Twitter, and other social networks, as well as from different online fake news sites based on a journalistic evaluation," he explained.

Yle conducted research on a number of different topics related to information operations, including anti-vaccination, climate change, and anti-immigration. While the samples were not drawn from a specific identified disinformation campaign, they came from what Koponen said were "organized activities related to anti-immigration in Europe and US."

The real-world social media content in the game is, to say the least, extremely offensive. "Journalistically, we had deep discussions about using or not using genuine real-life examples," Koponen explained. "But at the end of the day, those real world examples are needed to educate people about

the reality of information operations, and indeed, they are the very gist of the whole experience.”

The result can be somewhat eye-opening for those who haven’t tracked disinformation campaigns. “People have described Troll Factory experience to be ‘scary awful’ but informative and enlightening,” Koponen said, “something that’s needed in order to illustrate the reality, motives, intentions and potential effects, of different forms of information operations.”

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