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Executive Summary

In February 2016, Vesalius College students from across four different majors were selected to participate in the P2P Challenge as one of only two Belgian-based universities. After several rounds of brainstorming and consultation with experts and professors, the project team decided to create the agency Stratcom VeCo and our campaign Newsworthy, which aims at challenging extremist narratives through the application of and education on source-verification and investigative journalism and creating a positive counter-narrative to biased and extremist media content.

The bedrock of the Newsworthy campaign are the techniques of source-verification and fact-checking. The online community is becoming more critical of information that is being spread online. This is widely seen through online discussions questioning the source, context and interpretation. Today, even memes are being critically evaluated by the online community and counter-memes go viral after finding the original source. Based on this need for source verification, it became apparent to our team that to challenge extremism, we would need to foster this trend. This would focus on fact checking extremist statements and stories in the media, transforming opinions and creating knowledge.

Over the duration of the campaign since the launching of Newsworthy, the project team has written numerous articles that have focused on verifying extremist statements targeting a range of different issues.

Most prominently, demystifying common misconceptions about Islam and the fact-checking of Islam-related articles has come out as an issue prominent not only to the audience in our own environment, but in different geographical locations in Asia, America and the Middle East.

The spectrum of Newsworthy has developed as two-fold. Firstly, a research team consisting of International Affairs and International Law students of Vesalius College, as well as volunteers that later joined the team, has been continuously monitoring extremist websites and producing source-verified and fact-checked articles. Secondly, Newsworthy has developed and introduced a workbook that aimed at educating our target audience about media practices, source-verification and the techniques of investigative journalism. These two components have been supported by active engagement with the target audience through various social and online media channels, most prominently Facebook and the press.

The social media reach of Newsworthy has shown to be very fastly and steadily growing as well as incredibly geographically diverse. At this point, Newsworthy has almost 16 400 likes on Facebook, with over 950 000 of total user reach. Our most popular originally source-verified article, *Faith and the Qur'an, a common misconception, has* attained over 160 000 likes, more than 600 comments and 2.000 shares. Spreading over the top five global locations, Pakistan, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and United Arab Emirates, Newsworthy has, as a Brussels-based campaign, acquired a truly global character.

Origin Story

This year has raised the concern of disinformation campaigns, which threatens global unity and encourages discontent. ISIS aims at portraying certain images of Europe, thereby creating a war on 'truth' between Europe and ISIS – an information war. The breakdown of the community base, leaves people, especially young people, searching for community in the wrong place. The question is, how can we channel this search towards something positive before extremism grabs hold? We believe a large part of the answer is providing a narrative of purpose that appeals to their core needs in finding a sense of self and community.

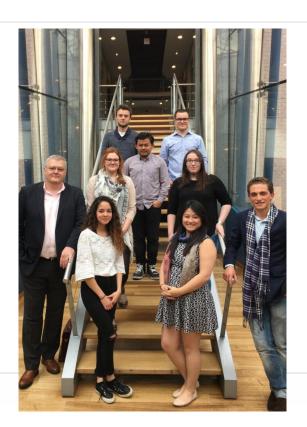
That's why we've created **Newsworthy**.

We believe that with the right tools in hand, everyone can play a role in combatting extremism. The website was conceived as a means to resolve the problem of the dangerous expansion of extremism from its very core: wherever there is violence, there is an underlying unsolved conflict to be cured.

In the present case, this constitutes of radicalization and extremism: 'radicalization [of any type] should be explained, the narrative demystified and this society cancer should be fought' stated S. Stroobants, the academic advisor for the Newsworthy project. Newsworthy.eu wishes to directly and indirectly impact the vulnerability of individual members of society by enabling them to think critically, independently and from a basis of knowledge rather than sentiment. Only by strengthening young people's way of independent thinking and providing a positive alternative to extreme narratives can we truly challenge extremism and prevent radicalization in all its shapes and forms. By providing source verified news articles, addressing amalgams and prejudices, training information on source verification and outreach programs designed to teach source verification skills to youth we have endeavored to 'bring the light of knowledge into the darkness of radicalization'(Serge Stroobants).

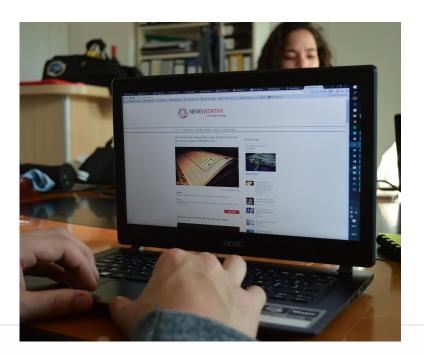
Stratcom VeCo

Stratcom VeCo was founded by a group of students from Vesalius College, a small liberal-arts inspired university in Brussels. The name of Vesalius College originates from Andreas Vesalius, a Belgian anatomist and one of the most prominent Renaissance freethinkers, who questioned centuries-old beliefs and challenged established theories. This tradition of liberal inquiry, "unfettered by prejudice deriving from religion, race, gender, or political ideology" is continuously fostered by the university as well as its multi-cultural character and multidisciplinary approach to teaching has allowed for the support of numerous interdisciplinary students-led projects addressing some of the most challenging issues of today's world. Newsworthy has brought together a project team which is composed of students from four different majors, International Affairs, Business, Communications and International and European Law, allowing us to approach the topic and development of the project from several different perspectives and applying various skills inherent to each of the majors.





Source Verification



Source verification can be used to verify the validity of statements, news content, visual or audiovisual material that is circulating in the media. In recent years, source verification has become an inherent part of investigative journalism as well as any research that involves public information. Source verification does not only contribute to research and fact-based journalism, but also helps to demystify media content and the broad variety of narratives that can be found on the internet today.

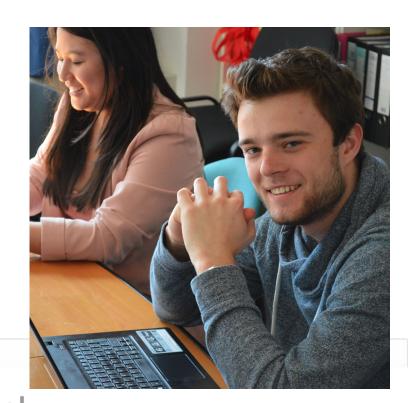
Due to fact that extremist websites often tend to distort facts or take facts out of context, highlighting these practices through the techniques of source-verification and fact-checking, as well as educating about the importance of source-verification was for us the key to develop our product and challenge extremist narratives in the media. Our aim was not only to stress and educate about the significance of source-verification, but to provide source-verified articles that are based on the principles of fact-checking and investigative journalism.

Target Audience

On entering into the project, we decided that the best way to develop a target market related to extremism would be to study the recruitment methods used by ISIS and other extremist groups. Interestingly, these groups divide their appeals linguistically (meaning the appeal on the French website is different from the appeal on the Arabic site). Keeping this in mind, our first focusing of the market was to English language speakers. Our sentiment in this was to tackle the growing extremism within our own communities, especially what we witness every day in Brussels. However, due in part to the diversity of our team, we decided to include Indonesia in our original set because of the number of academic English speakers who interact with the Muslim community on a daily basis.

This slight deviation turned out to be one of the smartest strategic decisions made throughout this campaign. We not only reached the Indonesian audience, but it rapidly grew to make up the core of our audience interactions. In light of such significant data, we decided to reevaluate our target market in response. What we ended up with was two countries in the context of the Asian Muslim community: Indonesia and Pakistan. Through this we began to adapt our content and style, in order to evolve and engage our growing audience.

WWW.NEWSWOTTO.



Target Audience: Categories

Budding Intellectual

At Risk Youth

Using the authority of a teacher, who will be given the workbook for guidance, a class session exploring how to critically analyse a source and overall fallibility of the media that students encounter. The teacher will convey this message in a controlled way, allowing for a safe and comfortable environment where the audience can contemplate its current world view and build a critical skill set.

Involved Intellectual Elite

Civic Minded Individuals

The Involved Intellectual Elite will act as the core of our target market. These individuals are already more civic-minded and already understand rhetoric in the media. By targeting this group, we are working to create disseminators of our brand.

Young Professionals

Uncommitted Populations

Young professionals constitute the uncommitted population as they have less of a desire to be civic-minded and a tendency to be less involved in political and civic matters. Our goal will be to raise an interest in the website through our social media campaign in order to attract the attention and interest of this group.

Occupied Intellectual Elite

Silent Majority

The Occupied Intellectual Elite are considered a part of the silent majority. As we consider this category to be made up of graduate level students or graduates, the individuals are well informed yet inactive. To target this group, partnership opportunities, such as teaching to Budding Intellectuals, and the social media campaign will be used.

Indonesia

Indonesia is inhabited by the biggest Islamic community in the world. This is why the country is an ideal target market for our site. Its capital is inhabited by the largest online twitter community on earth (29 million). As a side note, it is important to mention that the cultural and religious habits engrained into the population are quite conservative. In a survey conducted by the International Republican Institute, more than 2700 people were interviewed face -to- face on the issues the country faced and the online habits of the population. Interestingly in one of the top 10 priorities figures Terrorism. Although, it could be seen as a quite liberal and open country in the area of the internet, however Indonesia has been known recently to increase its censorship of anti Islamic content. This could present a problem for our site due to for example reactions or simply statements that might shed light on Koran Verses and could be seen as anti Islamic. Our team has categorized this as a threat and has come up with a possible solution. In order to enter the Indonesian market, we might just concentrate on the education of the population to verify sources accordingly. Indonesia is a country that has only recently started to digitalize. Their online community grows substantially every year, but its online community does still not exceed 50% of the whole population of Indonesia. Therefore, looking at the online Indonesian community as might be less limiting for statistics.

Gender: male and female ratio that uses the internet is an approximate 45% of women and 55% of men.

Media usage:

general internet: 30-35% social media: 29-34% Facebook: 27-32%

Twitter: 23-28%

1. Products used to access the internet:

Smartphone; 50-55%

Tablet:4-9%

Computer: 45-50%

Active internet users: 72.2-80 million

2.Major websites visited:

Google (.co.id and .com)

Facebook.com

Youtube.com

Detik.com Yahoo.com

Tribunnews.com

Tribuilliews.com

Liputan6.com

Kaskus.co.id Kapanlagi.com

1.(Source: Media Use in Indonesia, Gallup, Broadcasting Board of Governors, October 16, 2012)/ 2.(Source: alexa.com)

Pakistan

Internet usage has not broken through thoroughly yet. Only an approximate 17% of the population has taken on this trend. Pakistan, however, is one of our biggest audiences. This is a result from several factors. The first is the fact that English is a national Language. This is due to the influence of its British colonizers. Secondly, Islam is its major religion. Finally, Pakistan is part of the top 5 most affected countries by terrorism (Global Terrorism Index, 2015, Institute for Economics and Peace). One factor that might be worrying is censorship; in this case the same strategy as Indonesia would be applied.

1. Internet users: 34,342,400	4. Top 10 visited sites:
Гotal population: 192,826,502	Facebook.com
	C 1 1

As a percentage of population: Google.com.pk

17.8% youtube.com google.com

2. Official languages: English, Urdu yahoo.com live.com

3. Youth literacy rate: dailymotion.com

male 79.1% alibaba.com

Female 61.5% extratorrent.cc twitter.com

1. http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users- by-country/ 2. http://www.ethnologue.com/country/PK 3. Unicef 4. https://www.similarweb.com/country/pakistan







'whoever slays a soul [...] it shall be as if he had slain mankind altogether' (Al-

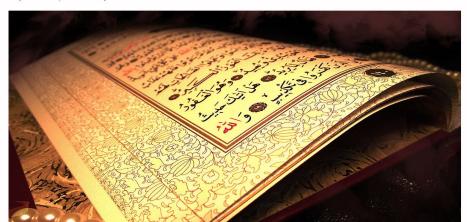
Website



HOME | COMPETITION | BECOME A VERIFIER | ABOUT | JOIN THE TEAM

Faith and the Qur'an: 'whoever slays a soul [...] it shall be as if he had slain mankind altogether' (Al-Ma'idah, 5: 32)

May 3, 2016 | Newsworthy



Popular Posts

What lies behind Belgium's growing numbers of radicalization and violent extremism?

April 16, 2016



Recent Posts



Faith and the Qur'an:
'whoever slays a soul [...] it
shall be as if he had slain

Videos

Recently, a considerable literature has grown up around the theme of extremism. In the case of the present subject, or any other subject matter, it is, in this day and age, critical for us to build solid source verification skills. Indeed, considering the incredible amount of information- should the news stories be accurate or not- that we receive on a daily basis through the internet, it has become hard to ignore the importance of critically evaluating the online content we are provided for and assessing whether the media provides us with the most unbiased factuality or with either manipulated or under--documented information. Furthermore, with the rise of globalization it has become necessary to develop intercultural communication skills.

That being, it is essential to engage in the online community ensuring that we have taken the necessary safety measures, preventing bad--intentioned actors to track us, recruit us, or to threaten us. Finally, the ability to enrich our speech with the tropes and figures of rhetoric will also enable us to become aware of the rhetoric that is being used – on a daily basis- in order to influence us. In this sense, the present section of the website comprehends different videos on source verification, intercultural communications, online safety and rhetoric.

Videos

Want to learn more about source verification or do you have an interest in intercultural communications or rhetoric? Watch the video series below and become a verifier yourself!

Source verification







Competition

The website, in its 'competition' section, comprehends three different types of competitions people can engage in. The premise for the creation of these contests is to provide different platforms filled with various contexts for different minds to meet. Each week, the website is fed with fresh statements from diverse media platforms, which are meant to be analyzed, threw light on or substantiated. The specific purpose our team of experienced researchers is aiming at is to systematically and consistently review and evaluate each analysis submission, and to further post the accurate and successful submissions on the website's front page.

First Competition: Do you want to become a tracker?

This platform frequently provides the website's visitors with assertions both newly stated and controversial. For instance, the competition which submission deadline was set on the May 6th 2016, was presented in the form of a video on the following subject matter: 'Ex-Muslim shows correlations between Islamic State and Muhammad'. Visitors are invited to submit their personal and researched assessment of the source's veracity, to evaluate its accuracy, or to bring its illegitimacy to light. Accurate submissions will be published on the website.

Second Competition: Learn the ropes if being a scout!

This second platform comprehends the same parameters as the first competition notwithstanding a slight increase in the level of difficulty [of analysis] of the statements provided. For instance, the following statement has been the subject of a competition: 'Ted Cruz: Donald Trump might have partly caused the Brussels attacks. http://www.newsworthy.eu/#!scout/er3r5

Third competition: Master the ways of a pathfinder!

This final platform -based on the same concept as the two previous ones- provides visitors with increasingly challenging statements to analyze. For example, the following claim has been the subject matter of a contest: 'Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi: the Saudi led coalition involved in the Yemeni conflict claims to be an Islamic coalition; the coalition; the coalition cannot be Islamic, it does not defend the appropriate cause'.

http://www.newsworthy.eu/#!scout/er3r5

http://www.newsworthy.eu/#!tracker/yim05

Workbook

One of the major areas of concern, when discussing radicalization, is the largely young demographic of radicals. As a team, we wanted to address this age group but there were concerns about using the website as our main platform for outreach due to the lack of active guidance. We decided that the best way to tackle this issue would be to reach out to students, ages 16-18, in one of their most familiar and comfortable environments: the classroom. To accomplish this on a large and sustainable scale, the best possible format was a workbook. In this book we included three exercises that are designed to not only create an educational experience but to inspire the roots of critical media skills and tolerant values within the students.

To test the effectiveness of the workbook and to provide another metric for attitude change, we went through lesson 1 with a group of 17 students. From this we confirmed not only the applicability of the workbook to this audience, but the effectiveness as well. This is seen through the questionnaire data which showed that 100% of the students felt they would be more critical about the news they digest after working.

Core Lessons

Lesson 1: Knowing the Source

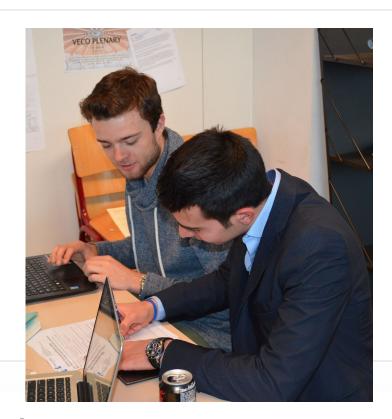
Introduction: This lesson will utilize a debate on the role of intellectual pluralism within society to help students understand the importance of knowing their source.

Goal of Lesson:

- Understanding bias
- · Appreciating the importance of sources

Join the Team

Within the scope of the project, Newsworthy aimed at recruiting volunteers to join our research team that has been source-verifying and fact-checking media content and writing original articles for the website. During the recruitment process, the project team reached out to students at our university and other Brussels-based institutions, and engaged in social media recruitment via Facebook groups and official Newsworthy channels. Apart from students from Vesalius College that then decided to participate, volunteers from the United States, South Africa and the United Kingdom reached out to the project team with the wish to contribute to our articles, each with a unique personal background and research interests.





Platforms

Twitter

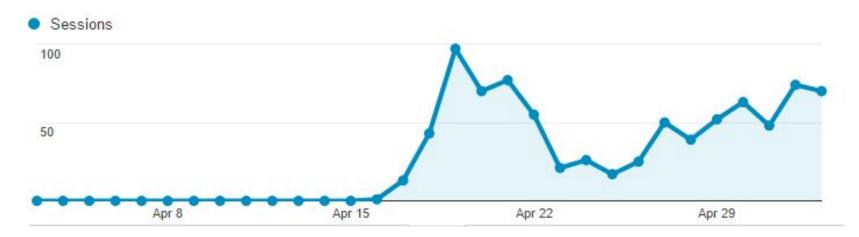
Shortly after launching our social media platforms, Brussels was hit by the terror attacks of March 22nd. Due to a prolonged period of absence of some team members and the situation at the university, our team did not have the resources to sufficiently and consistently promote our Twitter channel and therefore decided to combine our efforts into our Facebook page. Nevertheless, we connected with various networks and users while promoting our articles, verification material and retweeting relevant content, as well as participating in the SecurityJam2016 on Twitter.

Facebook

Ever since its launch, our Newsworthy Facebook page was met with tremendous success. Publishing our articles was met with varying, high levels of receptiveness among our target audience, spiraling our like count up to 16.300 in a mere six weeks. Alongside our articles, we also posted educational material on source verification, online media sources and case studies. Moreover, our posts frequently sparked an open debate among readers in our comment section. One specific article went viral, reaching 160.000 likes, over 600 comments and 2 000 shares in a single week. Overall, we have reached almost one million people through our Facebook page.

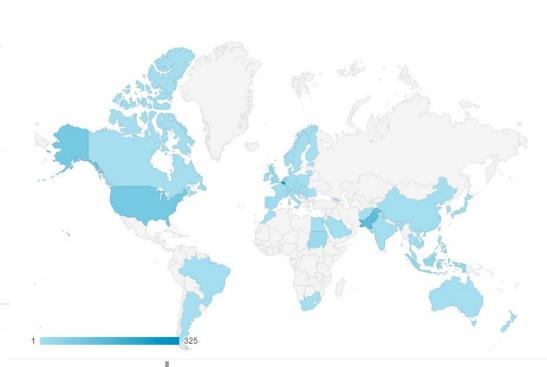
Short Term Metrics

• Upon launch, our daily sessions peaked significantly, yet decreased in absolute numbers after initial roll-out. However, a steady climb in average daily sessions on the website can be seen over the duration of the past few weeks.

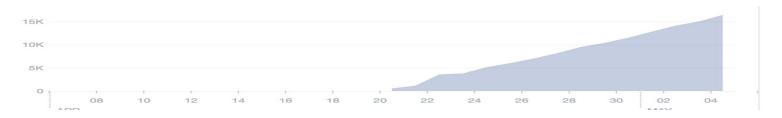


• At least 23.5% of our website's visitors are returning users. This shows that we have built a base of loyal users reading our content, all the while maintaining a steady influx of new users.

- Geographically, we reached out to communities around the world. A significant 16.17% of our website visitors were based in Pakistan, 4.04% in Indonesia and almost 3% in Sudan.
- Our focus on youth and involved intellectual elite is reflected by the date on the age of our visitors. A significant combined 83.57% of our website visitors were aged between 18 and 34 years old.
- On our website, the balance between female and male has been relatively stable. During the last two weeks of April, 42.3% of our website audience was female, 57.7% was male.



Long Term Metrics



- Steady growth up to 16 300 likes on May 4th, after an initial drop in growth after launch.
- In total, we have reached nearly a million Facebook users with our posts at a total people reach of 957 141 individuals. Of these individuals reached, 22% engaged with our posts through either likes, shares, comments or clickthroughs to the post content (e.g. our website).
- Our article debunking the connection between Islam and the promotion of violence, *Faith and the Qur'an, a common misconception,* attained over 160K likes, more than 600 comments and 2 000 shares.
- Of our total outreach, the top five locations of our audience have been Pakistan (630K, 65%), Indonesia (255K, 26%), Saudia Arabia (17K, 1,7%), Malaysia (14K, 1,46%) and United Arab Emirates (7K, 0,73%)
- Newsworthy has been featured on New Europe: Featured on New Europe: "Honors students at Vesalius College launch website to combat misconceptions in news media", published on TheOddyseyOnline: "Are Online Media Sources Lying To-You?: Why Fact Verification Is The New Normal" and mentioned on Politico EU Playbook: "Teaching young people to verify sources of information:"



User Response



Only one day after Newsworthy was officially launched on social media, a UK- based volunteer contacted Newsworthy with the interest of joining the research team. Although existing Newsworthy research focused on Islamic or anti-I-slamic extremism, the volunteer expressed the wish to sourceverify and fact-check statements related to the upcoming UK EU referendum.



A volunteer from South Africa reach out to the project team within the first week since the launching of Newsworthy. The different origins of volunteers that contacted Newsworthy as well as the variety of subjects they were interested in researching demonstrated the multifaceted nature of extremism that countries all around the world are facing today.



Since Newsworthy was launched a few students from our university expressed interest in writing or contributing to source-verifying and fact-checking articles. Given the big success of our articles related to myths surrounding Islam, consultation from one of our Muslim colleagues from the university proved as a much desired help in advising our researchers on Islam--related issues.



Outreach of Newsworthy among our American friends and colleagues proved very successful. Several showed interest in contributing to our research and outreach related to topics more relevant to our audience in the United States.

User Response

-Raising awareness and encouraging others to do so:

Newsworthy was featured in an article in Odyssey Online, a social platform focusing on the expression and representation of millennial ideas and perspectives, describing the importance of fact--checking and source verification in the contemporary era of a colossal amount of information being circulated and shared on social and online media. The author mentioned Newsworthy as an example of a platform that educates the public on the techniques of source--verification and fact-checking and provides source--verified information to foster a narrative of unbiased factuality.



Conclusion



Sustainability, Scalability and Replicability

Sustainability

Given the low costs of the project and of the campaign that have been mostly spent on the maintenance of the website and the campaign promotion, the financial sustainability of Newsworthy is independent of the growth of the project, specifically relating to the recruitment of volunteers that would join the research team. Furthermore, due to the fact that the project team has been coordinating outreach primarily on social media, and that we have limited our research for both the verifying and educational aspects of our campaign to publicly and freely available sources, the costs involved in our work have been maintained at steadily low levels.

Scalability

The Newsworthy project has always aimed to focus its project on the long term. To work in the field of extremism and radicalization requires time and dedication to be effective. The goal of the project is deradicalization and we can not expect attitudes and ideas to change in a couple of months.

Replicability

When focusing on replicability, we looked at the feasibility of repeating our project in different contexts to be able to access different target markets. Two areas we explored was translating the website in different languages, and creating a website targeted specifically to younger children.

Moving away from the English-speaking community allows access to a new market and conveys new users that we cared enough to offer the website in the target's own language. For many cultures there is also an issue of trust when the country is not proficient in English, therefore being culturally sensitive to their plight and allowing them to comfortably navigate, understand and interact with the website.

Prospective Expansion

The essence of the Newsworthy experience relies on a sense of community, education and information. The core values we try and pass on to our fellow researchers are a sense of hard work, passion and dedication; this we try and reflect through our articles and our activity on the internet.

We have been, we will continue to be and we'll always be looking for one thing and one thing only: unbiased factuality. We hope our future to be grand, but with that growth that sense of community and interconnectedness will stay our priority. Therefore our projections will promote the strengthening of our online community and partners.

Verification Lounge

Our team's aspiration is to expand our site with a forum that will provide the opportunity to create an online community that interactively discusses pictures and statements. Knowledge is having the right answer; intelligence is asking the right question. This will further strengthen the mere sense of community and will motivate its participants accordingly.

Webinars

Our team is planning on reaching out to specialists to share their knowledge with our online community. This is very important as it will create an informed and strong community.

Languages

Potentially the project could expand to become a multilingual website, where the content is written in more languages such as French and Arabic. The information displayed would remain the same, however, the different languages would be tailored to their specific audiences, allowing for an expansion of the target market capturing new users, building with new clients and giving our brand an international outlook.

Prospective Expansion

Creating an Online Certified MOOC

We intend to create MOOC's on source verification, rhetoric, intercultural communication and online safety. These officially recognized courses are for the personal and professional development of the person and will educate and lead our audience for the competitions. The courses will be composed of videos and text and will be awarded a certificate upon completion.

Connecting Knowledge Forum

This is a page on our website that will show the successes other groups/partners have had in CVE projects. We hope this to motivate our community by making them feel part of real change.

Integrate Workbook into Educational Plan

We hope to also broaden the project of in-class lectures. We believe that compulsory competence classes could encompass source verification. This tool may be useful for the younger generation in order for us to prevent them to be swayed by eventual extremist dialogue they may encounter. These efforts will push our community to be more informed, more interactive and therefore more effective. The future of our project is explained by our logo. The logo's circle represents the globe. The lines crossing this globe are connections. It represents people connecting other people around the world with information. This is our aim; to create a worldwide community of verifiers helping to fight misinformation. We want to encourage and give our audience flexibility to think beyond the information flow. Our future is now.

Press

The Odyssey Online

http://theodysseyonline.com/salem-college/online-media-sources-lying/441803

New Europe

https://www.neweurope.eu/article/challenging-extremism-source-verification/

Politico Playbook (Brussels)

 $\underline{http://www.politico.eu/newsletter/playbook/politico-brussels-playbook-spain-to-re-vote-mogherini-reshuffle-cruzdrops-out/}$

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