Finland is winning the war on fake news. What it's learned may be crucial to Western democracy

Helsinki, Finland (CNN) – On a recent afternoon in Helsinki, a group of students gathered to hear a lecture on a subject that is far from a staple in most community college curriculums.

Standing in front of the classroom at Espoo Adult Education Centre, Jussi Toivanen worked his way through his PowerPoint presentation. A slide titled "Have you been hit by the Russian troll army?" included a checklist of methods used to deceive readers on social media: image and video manipulations, half-truths, intimidation and false profiles.

Another slide, featuring a diagram of a Twitter profile page, explained how to identify bots: look for stock photos, assess the volume of posts per day, check for inconsistent translations and a lack of personal information.

The lesson wrapped with a popular "deepfake" — highly realistic manipulated video or audio — of Barack Obama to highlight the challenges of the information war ahead.

The course is part of an anti-fake news initiative launched by Finland's government in 2014 – two years before Russia meddled in the US elections – aimed at teaching residents, students, journalists and politicians how to counter false information designed to sow division.

Jussi Toivanen teaching students how to spot fake news at Espoo Adult Education Centre.

The initiative is just one layer of a multi-pronged, cross-sector approach the country is taking to prepare citizens of all ages for the complex digital landscape of today – and tomorrow. The Nordic country, which shares an 832-mile border with Russia, is acutely aware of what's at stake if it doesn't.

Finland has faced down Kremlin-backed propaganda campaigns ever since it declared independence from Russia 101 years ago. But in 2014, after Moscow annexed Crimea and backed rebels in eastern Ukraine, it became obvious that the battlefield had shifted: information warfare was moving online.

Toivanen, the chief communications specialist for the prime minister's office, said it is difficult to pinpoint the exact number of misinformation operations to have targeted the country in recent

years, but most play on issues like immigration, the European Union, or whether Finland should become a full member of NATO (Russia is not a fan).

As the trolling ramped up in 2015, President Sauli Niinisto called on every Finn to take responsibility for the fight against false information. A year later, Finland brought in American experts to advise officials on how to recognize fake news, understand why it goes viral and develop strategies to fight it. The education system was also reformed to emphasize critical thinking.

30

Montenegro

28

Bosnia

25

Albania

22

Turkey

16

Macedonia

10

Source: European Policies Initiative, Open Society Institute - Sofia, March 2018

Graphic: Henrik Pettersson, CNN

Although it's difficult to measure the results in real-time, the approach appears to be working, and now other countries are looking to Finland as an example of how to win the war on misinformation.

"It's not just a government problem, the whole society has been targeted. We are doing our part, but it's everyone's task to protect the Finnish democracy," Toivanen said, before adding: "The first line of defense is the kindergarten teacher."

At the French-Finnish School of Helsinki, a bilingual state-run K-12 institution, that ethos is taken seriously.

In Valentina Uitto's social studies class, a group of 10th-graders were locked in debate over what the key issues will be in next week's EU elections. Brexit, immigration, security and the economy were mentioned with a flurry of raised hands before the students were asked to choose a theme to analyze.

"They've gathered what they think they know about the EU election … now let's see if they can sort fact from fiction," Uitto said with a smirk.

The students broke off into groups, grabbing laptops and cell phones to investigate their chosen topics – the idea is to inspire them to become digital detectives, like a rebooted version of Sherlock Holmes for the post-Millennial generation.

Her class is the embodiment of Finland's critical thinking curriculum, which was revised in 2016 to prioritize the skills students need to spot the sort of disinformation that has clouded recent election campaigns in the US and across Europe.

Students in Valentina Uitto's social studies class research the issues at play in the upcoming EU elections as part of their critical thinking curriculum.

The school recently partnered with Finnish fact-checking agency Faktabaari (FactBar) to develop a digital literacy "toolkit" for elementary to high school students learning about the EU elections. It was presented to the bloc's expert group on media literacy and has been shared among member states.

The exercises include examining claims found in YouTube videos and social media posts, comparing media bias in an array of different "clickbait" articles, probing how misinformation preys on readers' emotions, and even getting students to try their hand at writing fake news stories themselves.

"What we want our students to do is … before they like or share in the social media they think twice – who has written this? Where has it been published? Can I find the same information from another source?" Kari Kivinen, director of Helsinki French-Finnish School and former secretary-general of the European Schools, told CNN.

He cautioned that it is a balancing act trying to make sure skepticism doesn't give way to cynicism in students.

"It's very annoying having to fact check everything, not being able to trust anything … or anyone on the internet," said 15-year-old Tatu Tukiainen, one of the students in Uitto's class. "I think we should try to put a stop to that."

Gabrielle Bagula (left), 18, and Alexander Shemeikka (right), 17, in the Helsinki French-Finnish School library.

In the school library, Alexander Shemeikka, 17, and Gabrielle Bagula, 18, are watching YouTube videos together on an iPhone and chatting about other social platforms where they get their news: Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit and Twitter but, notably, not Facebook – "that's for old people."

"The word 'fake news' is thrown around very often," Shemeikka said, explaining that when their friends share dubious memes or far-fetched articles online he always asks for the source. "You can never be too sure," Bagula agreed.

That's exactly the type of conversation that Kivinen hopes to cultivate outside of the classroom.

Students aged 5 to 8 gather in the library to read paperbacks and scroll through social media feeds.

"What we have been developing here – combining fact-checking with the critical thinking and voter literacy – is something we have seen that there is an interest in outside Finland," Kivinen said.

But Kivinen isn't sure that this approach could serve as a template for schools elsewhere. "In the end … it's difficult to export democracy," he added.

It may be difficult to export democracy, but it is easy to import experts, which is precisely what Finland did in 2016 to combat what it saw as a rise in disinformation emanating from accounts linked to its neighbor to the east.

"They knew that the Kremlin was messing with Finnish politics, but they didn't have a context with which to interpret that. They were wondering if this meant they [Russia] would invade, was this war?" Jed Willard, director of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Center for Global Engagement at Harvard University, who was hired by Finland to train state officials to spot and then hit back at fake news, told CNN.

Russia maintains that it has not and does not interfere in the domestic politics of other countries.

Behind closed doors, Willard's workshops largely focused on one thing: developing a strong national narrative, rather than trying to debunk false claims.

"The Finns have a very unique and special strength in that they know who they are. And who they are is directly rooted in human rights and the rule of law, in a lot of things that Russia, right now, is not," Willard said. "There is a strong sense of what it means to be Finnish … that is a super power."

Not all nations have the type of narrative to fall back on that Finland does.

World Economic Forum

World Happiness Report 2019

The small and largely homogenous country consistently ranks at or near the top of almost every index – happiness, press freedom, gender equality, social justice, transparency and education – making it difficult for external actors to find fissures within society to crowbar open and exploit.

Finland also has long tradition of reading – its 5.5 million people borrow close to 68 million books a year and it just spent $110 million on a state-of-the-art library, referred to lovingly as "Helsinki's living room." Finland has the highest PISA score for reading performance in the EU.

On the Oodi library's ethereal third-floor, Finns browse the internet and leaf through national daily newspaper Helsingin Sanomat.

And as trust in the media has flagged in other parts of the globe, Finland has maintained a strong regional press and public broadcaster. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2018, Finland tops the charts for media trust, which means its citizens are less likely to turn to alternative sources for news.

But some argue that simply teaching media literacy and critical thinking isn't enough — more must be done on the part of social media companies to stop the spread of disinformation.

"Facebook, Twitter, Google/YouTube … who are enablers of Russian trolls … they really should be regulated," said Jessikka Aro, a journalist with Finland's public broadcaster YLE, who has faced a barrage of abuse for her work investigating Russian interference, long before it was linked to the 2016 US elections.

"Just like any polluting companies or factories should be and are already regulated, for polluting the air and the forests, the waters, these companies are polluting the minds of people. So, they also have to pay for it and take responsibility for it."

Facebook, Twitter and Google, which are all signatories to the European Commission's code of

practice against disinformation, told CNN that they have taken steps ahead of the EU elections to increase transparency on their platforms, including making EU-specific political advertisement libraries publicly available, working with third-party fact-checkers to identify misleading election-related content, and cracking down on fake accounts.

Jessikka Aro scrolls through her Twitter mentions, pointing out the type of trolling and abuse she has faced online as a result of her investigations.

Aro's first open-source investigation back in 2014 looked at how Russia-linked disinformation campaigns impacted Finns.

"Many Finns told me that they have witnessed these activities, but that it was only merely new digital technology for the old fashioned, old school Soviet Union propaganda, which has always existed and that Finns have been aware of," Aro said. "So, they could avoid the trolls."

The probe also made her the target of a relentless smear campaign, accused of being a CIA operative, a secret assistant to NATO, a drug dealer and deranged Russophobe.

Aro received some respite when, last year, the Helsinki District Court handed harsh sentences to two pro-Putin activists on charges of defamation – Ilja Janitskin, a Finn of Russian descent who ran the anti-immigrant, pro-Russia website MV-Lehti, and Johan Backman, a self-declared "human rights activist" and frequent guest on the Russian state-run news outlet RT.

It was the first time that an EU country had convicted those responsible for disinformation campaigns, drawing a line in the sand between extreme hate speech and the pretense of free speech.

Perhaps the biggest sign that Finland is winning the war on fake news is the fact that other countries are seeking to copy its blueprint. Representatives from a slew of EU states, along with Singapore, have come to learn from Finland's approach to the problem.

The scene outside the Prime Minister's Office in Helsinki. Since 2016, government officials have trained over 10,000 Finns how to spot fake news.

The race is on to figure out a fix after authorities linked Russian groups to misinformation campaigns targeting Catalonia's independence referendum and Brexit, as well as recent votes in France and Germany. Germany has already put a law in place to fine tech platforms that fail to remove "obviously illegal" hate speech, while France passed a law last year that bans fake news on the internet during election campaigns. Some critics have argued that both pieces of legislation jeopardize free speech. Russia denied interference in all of these instances.

Finland's strategy was on public display ahead of last month's national elections, in an advertising campaign that ran under the slogan "Finland has the world's best elections – think about why" and encouraged citizens to think about fake news.

Officials didn't see any evidence of Russian interference in the vote, which Toivanen says may be a sign that trolls have stopped thinking of the Finnish electorate as a soft target.

Jussi Toivanen, who has traveled the country to train Finns, at his office in Helsinki.

"A couple of years ago, one of my colleagues said that he thought Finland has won the first round countering foreign-led hostile information activities. But even though Finland has been quite successful, I don't think that there are any first, second or third rounds, instead, this is an ongoing game," Toivanen said.

"It's going to be much more challenging for us to counter these kinds of activities in the future. And we need to be ready for that."