

How Finland Is Teaching a Generation to Spot Misinformation

The Nordic country is testing new ways to teach students about propaganda. Here's what other countries can learn from its success.



By Jenny Gross

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A typical lesson that Saara Martikka, a teacher in Hameenlinna, Finland, gives her students goes like this: She presents her eighth graders with news articles. Together, they discuss: What's the purpose of the article? How and when was it written? What are the author's central claims?

"Just because it's a good thing or it's a nice thing doesn't mean it's true or it's valid," she said. In a class last month, she showed students three TikTok videos, and they discussed the creators' motivations and the effect that the videos had on them.

Her goal, like that of teachers around Finland, is to help students learn to identify false information.

Finland ranked No. 1 of 41 European countries on resilience against misinformation for the fifth time in a row in a survey published in October by the Open Society Institute in Sofia, Bulgaria. Officials say Finland's success is not just the result of its strong education system, which is one of the best in the world, but also because of a concerted effort to teach students about fake news. Media literacy is part of the national core curriculum starting in preschool.



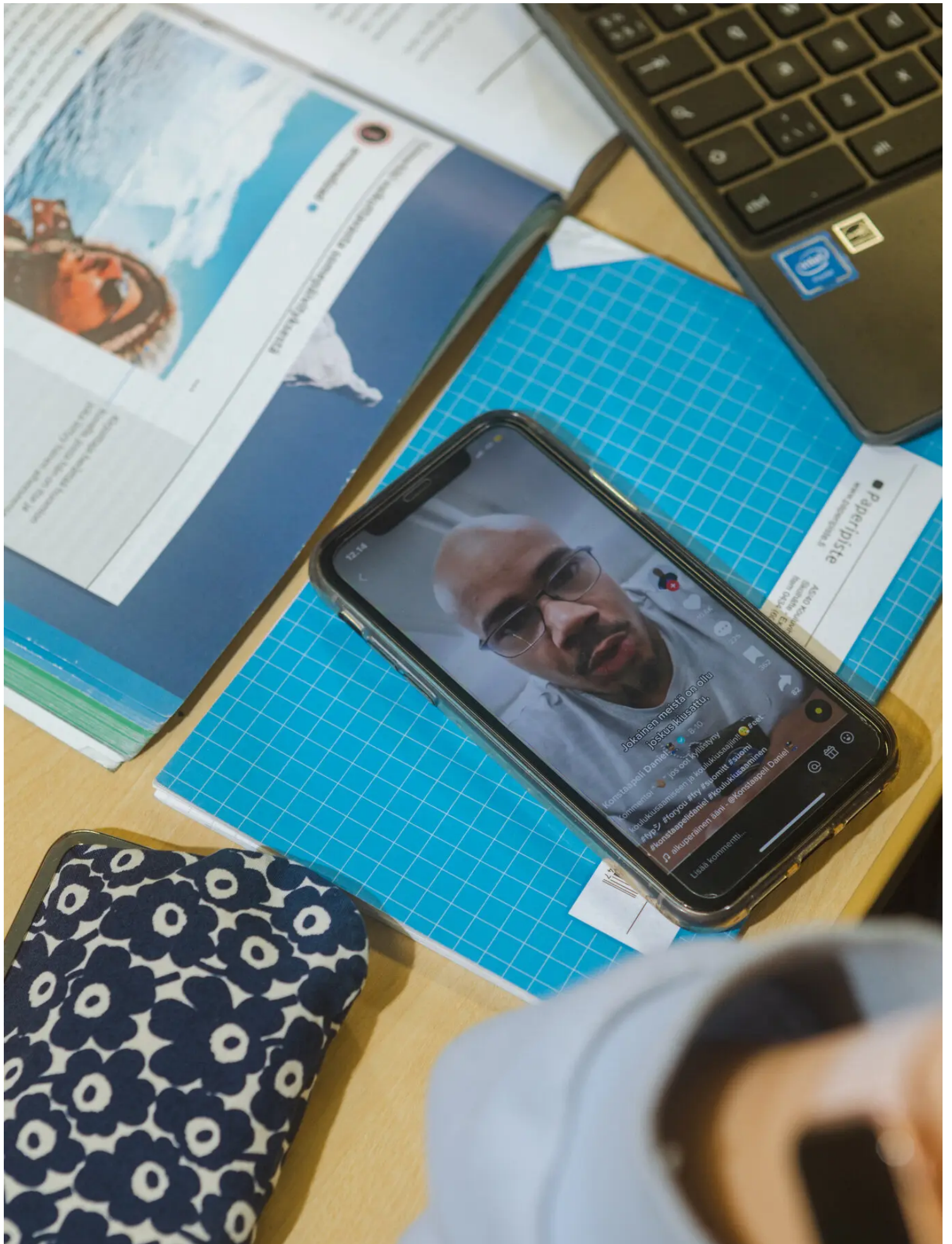
Saara Martikka taught students about misinformation at the school. Vesa Laitinen for The New York Times

"No matter what the teacher is teaching, whether it's physical education or mathematics or language, you have to think, 'OK, how do I include these elements in my work with children and young people?'" said Leo Pekkala, the director of Finland's National Audiovisual Institute, which oversees media education.

After Finland, the European countries that ranked highest for resilience to misinformation in the Open Society Institute survey were Norway, Denmark, Estonia, Ireland and Sweden. The countries that were the most vulnerable to misinformation were Georgia, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania. The survey results were calculated based on scores for press freedom, the level of trust in society and scores in reading, science and math.

The United States was not included in the survey, but other polls show that misinformation and disinformation have become more prevalent since 2016 and that Americans' trust in the news media is near a record low. A survey by Gallup, published in October, found that just 34 percent of Americans trusted the mass media to report the news fully, accurately and fairly, slightly higher than the lowest number that the organization recorded, in 2016. In Finland, 76 percent of Finns consider print and digital newspapers to be reliable, according to an August survey commissioned by a trade group representing Finnish newspapers that was conducted by IRO Research, a market research company.

Finland has advantages in countering misinformation. Its public school system is among the best in the world. College is free. There is high trust in the government, and Finland was one of the European countries least affected by the pandemic. Teachers are highly respected.



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that in recent months, during the war in Ukraine, they had used Russian news sites and memes as the basis for a discussion about the effects of state-sponsored propaganda.

Finland, which shares an 833-mile border with Russia, developed its national goals for media education in 2013 and accelerated its campaign to teach students to spot misinformation in the following years. Paivi Leppanen, a project coordinator at the Finnish National Agency for Education, a government agency, said the threat of Russian misinformation on topics such as Finland's bid to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization "hasn't changed the basics of what we do, but it has shown us that this is the time for what we have been preparing."

Even though today's teenagers have grown up with social media, that does not mean that they know how to identify and guard against manipulated videos of politicians or news articles on TikTok. In fact, a study published last year in the *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* found that adolescence could be a peak time for conspiracy theorizing. A contributing factor could be social media, with its influence over young people's beliefs about the world, the study's authors wrote.

Still, the Finnish government says students are among the easiest group to reach. Now that programs are in place for young people, the government is using libraries as centers for teaching older people to identify online information that is intended to mislead, Mr. Pekkala said.

Mrs. Martikka and her students. Media literacy is taught in Finland starting in preschool. Vesa Laitinen for The New York Times

For teachers of any age group, coming up with effective lessons can be challenging. "It's so much easier to talk about literature, which we have been studying for hundreds of years," said Mari Uusitalo, a middle and high school teacher in Helsinki.

She starts with the basics — by teaching students about the difference between what they see on Instagram and TikTok versus what they read in Finnish newspapers. “They really can’t understand fake news or misinformation or anything if they don’t understand the relationship between social media and journalism,” she said.

During Ms. Uusitalo’s 16 years as a teacher, she has noticed a clear decline in reading comprehension skills, a trend she attributes to students’ spending less time with books and more time with games and watching videos. With poorer reading skills and shorter attention spans, students are more vulnerable to believing fake news or not having enough knowledge about topics to identify misleading or wrong information, she said.

When her students were talking this summer about leaked videos that showed Finland’s prime minister, Sanna Marin, dancing and singing at a party, Ms. Uusitalo moderated a discussion about how news stories can originate from videos circulating on social media. Some of her students had believed Ms. Marin was using drugs at the party after watching videos on TikTok and Twitter that suggested that. Ms. Marin denied having taken drugs, and a test later came back negative.

Ms. Uusitalo said her goal was to teach students methods they could use to distinguish between truth and fiction. “I can’t make them think just like me,” she said. “I just have to give them the tools to make up their own opinions.”

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