



Baltic Engagement
Centre for Combating
Information Disorders

D4.2 PHYSICAL MIL INTERVENTION GUIDE ON ELECTIONS

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Introduction

Elections have become a time of immense stress on our information spheres. Traditionally, it is a time of heavily increased political communication, advertisements, face-to-face campaigning, publishing opinion pieces in newspapers, and social media communication. We have grown accustomed to politicians, parties, and their supporters rallying around core issues, repeating slogans and trying to win over the “movable middle” of voters. Regular and accepted part of political communication, right? Not quite.

Contemporary political communication research (e.g. Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Ernst et al, 2017, Bliuc et al, 2026) has proven not merely that populism exists, but that many democracies have experienced a substantial increase in populist styles of political communication. Often, this is characterized by anti-elite rhetoric, emotional appeals, oversimplification of complex issues, personalization, and, in some cases, forms of demagoguery and manipulation. A recent systematic review of empirical studies (Bliuc et al, 2026) found consistent evidence that populist actors strategically employ anger, resentment, fear, nostalgia, blame attribution, and identity-based appeals to mobilize supporters. "Digital platforms have become central infrastructures of contemporary populism" with most studies linking these cases with polarisation, misinformation and declining institutional trust (Yilmaz et al, 2026).

Compared to pre-social media times, such political communication is now with us 24/7. From the moment we wake up and do the morning scroll on our preferred digital platforms to the last hours awake - we are living in media, we are media (Deuze, 2012). Social media platforms have played an immense role in the success, visibility, and amplification of populist politics (Engesser et al, 2017). Platform architectures, algorithmic recommendation systems, influencer networks, and weak gatekeeping can create highly favorable conditions for populist communication, dis/misinformation, and FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference).

Examples are plentiful. Brexit, Trump, Orban, etc. Romania has become one of the most cited recent cases of possible interaction between social media, populist mobilization, and foreign information interference. In late 2024, nationalist candidate Călin Georgescu unexpectedly came first in the first round of Romania's presidential election. Romanian intelligence assessments and subsequent investigations raised concerns about coordinated manipulation campaigns involving TikTok, influencer networks, bot amplification, and foreign-linked information operations. These concerns became so serious that Romania's Constitutional Court annulled the election results (Gkritsi, 2024). Radu (2025) has argued that Romania became a "stress test" for European digital democracy because electoral integrity was affected not through ballot manipulation but through online information environments.

We see that digital media and information literacies are needed more than ever, especially the skills, knowledge, values, and attitudes that help increase individual

psychological resilience. In other words, the general knowledge that encourages deeper reflection on the information that is aimed at nudging or violently pushing our opinions towards deceptive political messaging. How to increase awareness of the techniques of “dirty” politics, to help citizens navigate and recognize manipulations?

One option is peripheral learning, a concept from educational psychology and language learning that refers to learning that occurs indirectly, without focused attention or deliberate study (Lozanov, 1978). Learners acquire knowledge from information present in their environment while their attention is directed elsewhere. We absorb information from our surroundings, such as posters, visuals, music, or repeated exposure to language, even when we are not consciously trying to memorize it.

Below we will describe one such effort to enable peripheral learning via playful attention-grabbing Propawheel, located in various memory institutions.

Memory institutions come to the rescue

Interviews conducted in the autumn of 2025 by students from the University of Tartu's Institute of Social Studies with 54 employees of memory institutions showed that librarians, in particular, must find more time and clever ways, alongside their core activities, to support visitors in seeking, consuming, and creating information. It is not possible to address elderly people who have fallen into the digital divide, young people living in various information spaces, and working adults with the same solutions. Interviewees found that creating materials is complicated by information overload, making it difficult to make selections; by the time they are finally ready, the information may already be outdated.

Despite resource scarcity, memory institutions have adopted formats such as exhibitions and learning events from each other's practices to reach the widest possible audience simultaneously, since “media literacy training” does not appeal to people. One interviewee highlighted a popular illusions workshop as a positive example, where visual critical thinking was taught without using the term “media literacy.” During the training, images were examined and people were encouraged to reflect on the extent to which they reflect reality. Similarly, workshops have used old propaganda materials, as well as fresh caricatures and memes, to help participants understand the process of shaping public opinion. Adults have also enjoyed myth-busting programs, where fact-checking is learned under the guise of a specific topic (e.g., alcohol, road safety). In small communities, however, the key is personal contact. Instead of formal training sessions, news and social topics are discussed together, which is a natural way to develop critical thinking without the label of formal training.

PROPAWHEEL

To tackle the spread of election-related mis-, dis-, and malinformation during the Estonian local government elections in October 2025, we created a physical MIL intervention called the **Propawheel**. **The installation invited visitors to spin a wheel** featuring eight common manipulation techniques used in political communication, including fear-mongering, labelling, personal attacks, demagoguery, and “us vs them” narratives. Each technique was explained next to the installation alongside real-world examples based on research conducted by BECID experts and materials developed within EDMO. Visitors could also nominate politicians they believed used manipulative communication and describe the techniques they had observed in election campaigning.

We piloted the Propawheel at the University of Tartu Library. As young people in Estonia are eligible to vote in local elections from the age of 16, we saw the library as an ideal physical space for reaching one of the most important target groups: youth who are just beginning their independent lives and developing their own decision-making practices. Additionally, the 2025 Estonian local elections sparked **wider discussions around the use of social media as a campaigning platform**, which further motivated us to focus the intervention on young audiences. The collected feedback (analysed in detail within **BECID Autumn 2025 Quarterly Brief**) highlighted growing public concern over polarising and emotionally charged rhetoric in Estonian politics, including scapegoating, name-calling, populism, statistical manipulation, and performative social media communication.

Even after the election period, the Propawheel has proven to be adaptable across different GLAM institutions and settings. At the end of 2025, the installation was relocated to the **AHHAA Science Centre**, where its focus shifted from local elections to manipulation techniques in broader (social) media communication. **The wheel was also used at The Game in Tartu** and at Pärnu Koidula Gymnasium, where young people could spin the Propawheel during breaks at the student conference "SOME on suur asi!" (Social Media is a Big Deal!) These youth centre-organised events demonstrated that the intervention can successfully support activities beyond election-focused contexts, particularly when addressing challenges related to AI-generated content and audiovisual misinformation.



Practical guide: How to make your own Propawheel

Building a Propawheel for your library, museum, or classroom doesn't require a large budget. This smaller, "tabletop" version is perfect for interactive corners and pop-up events.

You Will Need:

- **Base Material:** Sturdy cardboard, foam board, or a thin plywood circle (approx. 40–60 cm in diameter).
- **Spinning Mechanism:** A simple bolt and nut, a lazy susan swivel, or even a repurposed fidget spinner.
- **Graphics:** The 8 manipulation techniques printed on adhesive paper or cardstock (see the list below!).
- **A Pointer:** A piece of flexible plastic or a stiff piece of cardboard to indicate the result.
- **Tools:** Glue, scissors/cutter, a drill (if using wood), and colourful markers for decoration.

Time Required:

- **Preparation:** 30–45 minutes (printing and cutting the content).
- **Assembly:** 1–1.5 hours.
- **Total:** Roughly 2 hours to have it ready for the public.

Step-by-Step Construction

1. **Step 1: Preparing the Base.** Cut your base material into a perfect circle. If using cardboard, you can use two layers glued together for extra durability.
2. **Step 2: Apply the Content Divide your circle into 8 equal wedges.** Glue the printed manipulation techniques and their corresponding icons onto each segment. Make sure the colours are vibrant to attract attention!
3. **Step 3: Installing the Spin.** Find the exact center of your wheel. Attach your chosen spinning mechanism to the back. If using a bolt, ensure it's not too tight so the wheel can spin freely.
4. **Step 4: The Final Touch – The Pointer.** Attach a "clicker" or a pointer to the stand or the wall behind the wheel. This produces a satisfying sound and clearly indicates which technique the user has selected.

What Information Should You Put on the Propawheel?

1. **Attacking the Person Instead of the Idea.** Example: "That person can't be right – just look how stupid they look!"

Sometimes people stop talking about the actual topic and start attacking the person instead: their looks, age, background, voice, or personality. Instead of discussing what is being said, attention is shifted to who is saying it. You might see this in comment

sections, arguments at school, online videos or streams. It's a common trick to distract from the real issue.

2. Labelling. Example: "All countryside kids are like that!"

Labelling means putting a simplified and often negative tag on a whole group of people. Such as "nerds", "weirdos", "rich kids", "country kids". Once a label spreads, people start believing it without questioning. It creates a strong "us vs them" feeling and stops us from seeing people as individuals.

3. The "I'm Just a Regular Person" Trick. Example: "I don't use fancy words – I just say it like it is!"

This technique is used to convey an ordinary, trustworthy, and down-to-earth impression. The speaker avoids complicated explanations and presents themselves as "one of us". Experts and specialists may be made to look unnecessary or suspicious. You'll often see this in influencer videos, in product reviews, in motivational talks.

4. Borrowing Fame. Example: "Even famous musicians use this product!"

Here, popularity is borrowed from celebrities, influencers, and even national symbols. The idea is simple: if you like the famous person, you might like the product or message too. You see this a lot in advertising, social media, sponsorships, and brand collaborations.

5. The "It's Just a Joke!" Trick. Example: "Relax, it was only a joke!"

Someone says something insulting, hurtful or extreme, and when others react, they claim it was just humour. This allows the person to say almost anything, avoid responsibility, and still send a signal to people who agree. These "jokes" spread especially fast online because angry reactions create clicks and views.

6. The Bandwagon Effect. Example: "Everyone already uses this – 80% of people have it!"

People naturally want to belong, fit in, and feel safe with the group. The herd effect works by making it seem like "everyone else has already chosen this". You encounter this in advertising, trends, viral challenges, and app and game promotions.

7. "Us vs Them". Example: "We care about you. They want to use you!"

This technique divides the world into the "good side" and the "bad side". It strengthens group identity but also makes it easier to exaggerate differences, create fear, and turn people against each other. You can see it in online fandoms, brand rivalries (Android vs iPhone), and internet debates and memes.

8. **The Big Lie.** Example: “I never said that” – even when the evidence exists.

With today’s technology, it is easier than ever to create fake images and videos, deny real evidence, and claim that everything is “AI-made”. The “Big Lie” works by repeating something so boldly that people start doubting their own eyes. This makes critical thinking and fact-checking more important than ever.

10 Ideas for Using the Propawheel Across Memory Institutions

Art Galleries

. **Decoding Visual Framing**

Visitors spin the wheel to land on a persuasive rhetoric or technique and then analyze the gallery's collection through that lens. They identify how artists historically or currently use visual composition, color choices, and artistic framing to evoke targeted emotional reactions, essentially applying the wheel's techniques to visual literacy.

. **Interactive Exhibition Tagging**

Visitors spin the wheel to receive a manipulation technique, such as *"Us vs. Them"* or *"Borrowing Fame"*. Armed with color-coded sticky notes, tags, or a digital gallery app, they walk through the exhibition to label artworks, portraits, or curated pieces that leverage that specific visual framing technique, creating a collective, crowd-sourced analysis of the collection.

Libraries

. **Literary Detective**

Spin the wheel! If the pointer stops at a specific category, such as *"Us vs. Them"*, visitors or students must locate a book on the library shelves or within recommended [reading lists compiled by the National Library of Estonia](#) that demonstrates this specific manipulation technique.

. **Verbal Manipulation Workshop**

Participants spin the wheel to select a specific manipulation technique, such as ad hominem attacks, demagoguery, or loaded slang. They are then tasked with searching through historical headlines or modern news articles to find a real-world example that matches the technique selected by the wheel.

Museums

. **Mirroring Historical Eras**

The wheel serves as an interactive guide within permanent museum exhibitions, particularly those covering propaganda-heavy periods. Visitors spin the wheel to land on a manipulation technique and must then locate an exhibit in the gallery, such as a poster,

newspaper clipping, or official speech, that demonstrates that exact historical technique in practice.

- **Artifact Narrative and "Life Hacks"**

Participants spin the wheel to receive a specific persuasive strategy, such as the "Plain Folks" trick or "Borrowing Fame". Using objects from the museum collection, they examine how that selected technique was historically used to market items like miracle cures or to draw audiences to public events a century ago.

Archives

- **"Old Object, New Meme" with the Propawheel**

Students spin the wheel to receive a designated manipulation technique, such as *"It's Just a Joke"*. They search digital museum databases for a suitable photograph and transform it into a modern meme or short TikTok-style video that deliberately applies the technique assigned by the wheel.

- **Centennial Scandal (DIGAR Newspaper Archive)**

Students start by spinning the wheel to lock in a specific manipulation method. They then search digitized historic newspaper databases for a historical scandal. Finally, they adapt the archival story into a contemporary social media format, such as an Instagram Story or Snapchat, engineered around the assigned manipulation technique.

- **"If Koidula Were on Instagram" (Cult of Personality and Propaganda)**

Participants create a fictional social media profile for a historical figure. The Propawheel determines the exact persuasive or manipulative technique the figure must incorporate into their next post, prompting students to blend historical facts with targeted propaganda methods.

- **Archival Letters and the Evolution of Slang**

This task involves translating historical letters and archaic vocabulary into contemporary conversational language. The wheel assigns an emotional framing or rhetoric type, such as the *"Bandwagon Effect"* or *"Labeling"*, which students must convey using modern slang and emojis.

Additional educational activities and task templates can be found at <https://meedia.ut.ee/muuseumipedagoogile/>.

Digital Propawheel adaptation (Latvia and Lithuania)

To complement the physical Propawheel intervention, we are developing a digital adaptation in Latvia in cooperation with Latvian Public Media (LSM) and Re:Baltica. While the physical installation successfully engages visitors in libraries, museums, and other public spaces, the digital intervention aims to extend its reach beyond these settings

and engage a substantially broader audience. Partnering with the Latvian public service media ensures that the content is disseminated through trusted, high-visibility communication channels, increasing both accessibility and the potential societal impact of the intervention. The collaboration also enables the materials to remain freely available to the public and to benefit from the editorial expertise of professional journalists and fact-checkers.

Re:Baltica will prepare educational content on eight common information manipulation techniques, illustrated with authentic examples drawn from contemporary political communication. LSM will be responsible for the technical implementation, visual design, and publication of the content. Rather than publishing all materials simultaneously, the eight manipulation techniques will be released as a series between mid-August and mid-September 2026, strategically timed in the run-up to the Latvian parliamentary (Saeima) elections on 3 October 2026. This phased publication approach is intended to maintain public engagement throughout the election campaign while providing citizens with practical tools for recognising manipulation techniques before casting their vote. Following the publication campaign, all materials will be brought together in a dedicated digital repository, allowing users to explore the techniques in one place, compare examples, and vote for the manipulation methods they encounter most frequently in their everyday information environment.

To further increase engagement, the repository will be presented in an interactive game/quiz format that encourages active learning rather than passive content consumption. The intervention will be supported by a dedicated social media campaign designed to direct audiences to the platform and stimulate broader public discussion about manipulation techniques in political communication. The Latvian implementation will serve as a pilot for further adaptation of the concept in Lithuania in advance of the 2027 local elections, taking into account the local electoral context and communication environment.