EX POST PAPER

Dealing with fake news, conspiracy theories and propaganda in the classroom

Introduction

The rapidly evolving media and information landscape is increasingly creating challenges for teachers in the classroom. Pupils are targeted by extremist groups through propaganda, while fake news and conspiracy theories challenge the curriculum. Teachers are confronted with issues on a wider scale, and many find it difficult to catch up on this shift of the digitally infused socio-cultural reality of their pupils. Could media literacy be a solution for teachers and play a role in the prevention of radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism? Which media literacy training activities or projects are the most promising? Where are the synergies? How can we use this change in the education landscape as an opportunity for educators to confront violent extremism and boost democracy?

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About this paper

This is the ex post paper written after the meeting of the RAN working group on education (RAN EDU) in Budapest on 29 and 30 November 2017. At this event, a group of educators met with a large group of excellent practitioners in the field of media literacy. The participants' ambition was to help schools foster media literacy to strengthen the resilience of children and boost democracy and fundamental values, as a contribution to the prevention of radicalisation leading to violent extremism and terrorism (PVE).

The aim, though this paper, is to provide guidance to developers of media literacy projects who are striving to contribute to PVE through their work. At the end of this document, we present a number of practical suggestions for promising PVE media literacy projects, and for their implementation and evaluation. This advice was put forward at the meeting by mixed teams of educators and media literacy experts.

A closer look at the interplay between online activity, radicalisation and education

This section sets out some of the key challenges for the education sector in relation to the processes of radicalisation and describes how developments in the online world have compounded these challenges.

This can be done best by looking at the 'engine' of radicalisation. Why do people radicalise and how? As mentioned in the RAN issue paper 'Root causes of violent extremism'[1], there is no single root cause. Instead, there is **a kaleidoscope of factors:**

"The radicalisation mechanisms are a product of interplay between push- and pull-factors within individuals. It is important to recognise that there are different degrees and speeds of radicalisation.

The push-factors involve: social, political and economic grievances; a sense of injustice and discrimination; personal crisis and tragedies; frustration; alienation; a fascination with violence; searching for answers to the meaning of life; an identity crisis; social exclusion; alienation; marginalisation; disappointment with democratic processes; polarisation, etc.

The pull-factors are: a personal quest; a sense of belonging to a cause, ideology or social network; power and control; a sense of loyalty and commitment; a sense of excitement and adventure; a romanticised view of ideology and cause; the possibility of heroism, personal redemption, etc."

The internet offers opportunities for recruiters and others producing and disseminating extremist propaganda to tap into most of the factors outlined above. Regarding social media, the RAN Issue paper 'Root causes of violent extremism' states:

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[1] https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/issue_paper_root-causes_jan2016_en.pdf

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"Social media, which provides connectivity, virtual participation and an echo-chamber for likeminded extremist views. The internet 'reaches otherwise unreachable individuals'; it accelerates the process of radicalisation; and increases opportunities for self-radicalisation."

According to the experts at the Budapest meeting, deciding to focus on propaganda, out of the broad field of media literacy topics, could prove to be the most effective way to challenge extremism. It should be approached in combination with the related topics of dealing with mis-information, dis-information, fake news and conspiracies. Propaganda — communication that is intentionally manipulative and motivated by (extremist) political ideas — is the leverage point between media literacy and the prevention of violent extremism.

Mis- or dis-information through propaganda is one of the greatest tools in the hands of those who benefit from polarisation in modern societies. Polarisation creates a fertile breeding ground for radicalisation and extremism both within and outside schools.

Critical thinking (media literacy) is the weapon that we should arm everyone with, so that they can avoid the forces that lure so many into polarisation. The media as catalysts of polarisation in the classroom and throughout the school were pinpointed at several RAN meetings. Media literacy skills for teachers could help significantly in dealing with the push and pull factors for radicalisation and holding difficult conversations in the classroom, for instance around polarising events[2, 3]. Nonetheless, it is important to stress that media literacy is not a solution in itself, but that it adds to a range of existing strategies and practical methods in the classroom.

Another aspect of relevance to PVE is the use of communication, engaging with groups or individuals, tapping into the sense of belonging and the need to be seen and heard. This grooming of groups and individuals and the radicalising and mobilising effect of propaganda are key.

This paper considers media literacy skills from two angles. Firstly, it highlights the importance of pupils understanding the need for media literacy and critical thinking. Secondly, it addresses the need to empower teachers. In addition, it presents insights from the RAN EDU Budapest meeting as to how teachers can convey and foster these skills, as well as advice from the participating experts on suitable materials, activities and projects.

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[2] See the RAN Polarisation Management Manual –https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/ran_polarisation_management_manual_amsterdam_06072017_en.pdf)

[3] See (Council of Europe, 2016). 'Living with controversy. Teaching controversial issues through education for democratic citizenship and human rights (EDC/HRE): Training pack for teachers' (Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing) – http://pjp-eu.coe.int/en/web/charter-edc-hre-pilot-projects/teaching-controversial-issues-developing-effective-training-for-teachers-and-school-leaders

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Understanding the world of the pupils, and why media literacy is important for them

In a democratic society, education must prepare students to become active citizens able to navigate the news and stay informed. New media can support democratic agency, but they can also undermine it by spreading digital misinformation in disconnected digital communities.

Digitalisation and the explosive use of smartphones are creating a scattered media landscape where rumours, citizen journalism and traditional news coverage, conspiracy theories and propaganda, hype and opinions are nicely lined up in the smartphones of pupils who are always eager to share and feed their peers with the messages that resonate with them. This content is leveraged through algorithms from social media companies, suppressing content diversity and thereby generating echo chambers.

Measuring and understanding the environment that shapes pupils' lives and the way they communicate amongst each other therefore becomes crucial to better apprehend the dynamics in the school. Another major aspect is the blending of realities, by which pupils pick and choose information, constructing a reality of their own. The tendency to so is often referred to as 'confirmation bias'. It is a phenomenon that creates a false narrative, a skewed interpretation of the world that is problematic in its own right, but which in this case may also involve a dispiriting portrayal of their (the pupils') prospects. Push factors might drive pupils into a feeling of exclusion rather than a sense of belonging.

Thus, one thing all pupils have in common is the internet. The problem is that they don't understand how the internet works, where information comes from, and with what intent this information might be spread. Possibly even worse, we as adults often don't understand that young people use social media applications differently. If we wish to help pupils to become critical and constructive citizens, we must let young people contribute their own knowledge by involving them in the development of answers. If we don't, there is danger risk that students will conclude that all news is (potentially) fake, and therefore unreliable.

Empowering teachers with and for media literacy

Conspiracy theories, propaganda and fake news create three main challenges for teachers:

1. They undermine the curriculum. The mainstream representation of history and other parts of the curriculum are not accepted.

2. They create a situation that can destabilise teachers in their role. This challenge arises from the nature of the false narrative put forward by the mis- or disinformation, and from the insecurity and distrust it generates. Many teachers don't know how to deal with these issues or with the topic itself — and even if they did, some would not necessarily attempt it.

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3. Conspiracy theories are obscure in nature. Teachers may not even be aware of the ones that are holding their pupils' interest, and therefore unable to recognise and deal with them.

These challenges open up opportunities for meaningful lessons and reinforcement of the role of the teacher. But these opportunities are not always seized. Teachers deserve training and support, to hone the skills they need to handle difficult conversations, develop greater confidence in their ability to do so, and refine their understanding of the modern media landscape.

What is the role for teachers in prevention of radicalisation leading to violent extremism, and how can media literacy serve them in this role? The RAN EDU meeting provided practical insights on ways to empower teachers:

- **Basic knowledge on media literacy is needed** for every teacher. A sustainable model would be to change the teacher curricula. In most countries, the education system has not integrated the development of basic media and digital literacy. Just talking about additional skills doesn't work.
- **There are potential synergies to exploit** between formal, non-formal and informal learning. Media literacy trainers could brief teachers.
- **There is a need for support on holding challenging conversations on difficult topics**. Difficult topics coming from the media are often ignored by teachers, because they are considered taboo or because the teacher feels ill equipped or insufficiently informed to tackle them. RAN EDU notably addressed this aspect in its 'Guide on training programmes'[4].
- **Teachers' workloads must be taken into account**. Due to the increased demands and pressure on teachers, they face a lack of time in adopting or acquiring new media literacy teaching skills. Hence, there is a need for a ready-to-use practical methodology that is based on interactive approaches and also involves families. Ideally, this methodology should be transferable to different countries, regions, levels, schools and age groups.
- **Teachers must be aware of their own biases**. Children are not the only ones who may be motivated by their personal biases. Teachers themselves must comprehend how media and information reach them. They should be made aware of their own information bubble.
- **Humans are emotional beings**. As noted by one of the RAN YOUNG participants, it is important to focus on tools that appeal to the emotions – e.g. music, stories or narratives – to highlight these mechanisms. People's attitudes are shaped by their beliefs and their peers more than by what they know. Propaganda uses extreme, over-simplified messages to trigger powerful emotions and then extreme action. Awareness of the underlying techniques and their goals should provide insight into radical and extreme media messages and thinking. Being able to put propagandistic messages into a context should enable the targeted individuals to stop and think before reacting.

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[4] https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-edu/docs/ran_edu_guide_training_programmes_helsinki_01-02_03_2017_en.pdf

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- **Don't embarrass or lose students**. Keep in mind that it's not only about facts. Emotions are just as important. By expressing disapproval of students' views or focusing on factual errors, teachers run the risk of causing embarrassment and losing the connection with the students. This risk is especially high concerning perceived 'facts' related to identity, and strong grievances and feelings of injustice.
- **Foster a sense of belonging** for young people to prevent radicalisation. Participating in media literacy activities and engaging with others in the process is in itself a beneficial inclusive exercise.
- **Know what the students are facing.** This requires the teacher to enter the conversation in an open manner and by involving the pupils.
- **Differentiate.** Be aware of the differences between ages, groups, regions, schools and levels. Some media literacy practices and tools might not be useful for a particular group of pupils, and existing material may have to be adapted accordingly.
- **Use journalists** to explain why they write what they write. Bring them into the classroom.

> *Inspiring practice: The Roadshow Press Freedom[5]*
>
> *The aim of this initiative is to reduce the distance between young people and the media. By educating young people about the sense of press freedom and organising a debate between their representatives and representatives of the media, developers hope to make young people aware that they can also participate in the media and have their voice heard democratically. More knowledge about the concept of freedom of the press makes it easier for young people to understand how the media work, how they can take part, and how they can make use of the media more actively. They also learn to assess the reliability of news better. This indirectly contributes to the prevention of radicalisation, as experienced retardation and a sense of unfair treatment can make adolescents sensitive to extremist messages. It is important to make young people aware of democratic ways in which they can express themselves and provide them with tools to put news in a better perspective.*

How can education access and use media literacy material? What's available?

Experts agree on the need to challenge (violent) extremism by fostering media literacy and raising awareness of the online content and online strategies of extremist propaganda. While material is available, there are problems with regard to its dissemination, funding and evaluation. It would be helpful to collect what has proved to work.

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[5] See: http://www.roadshowpersvrijheid.nl/index.php

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Furthermore, very few schools engage with the existing educational resources. There is a role to play for academics, universities, media literacy project leaders, schools and teachers to evaluate the actual impact of media literacy projects. The meeting offered several insights:

- **What works? We need more evaluation.** There are many inspiring, entertaining and trendy media literacy projects. However, due to the lack of evaluation, it is hard to say which of these fulfil the learning goals and which really contribute to PVE. There was support for the suggestion that projects should not be funded unless there is some form of evaluation. At the same time evaluation leads to lots of extra work for teachers. The next section presents practical solutions.

- **Using online media to engage students with alternative narratives.** We need 'alternative messages' that convey a different view of potentially contentious social, political and religious issues. The aim of such messages, when used in an educational setting, is not primarily to challenge extremist claims or to deconstruct their premises; instead, they aim at providing 'new' narratives to inspire critical thinking without imposing specific views and convictions (in contrast to 'counter-narratives').[6]

> **Inspiring practice: Was postest du?**
> *This project is developing civic education approaches online to engage young Muslims in social media and encourage debate and reflection on questions of identity, religion and belonging.[7]*

- **Create access to content.** Dissemination and funding problems currently limit the access to useful existing material. A website could be created to provide a platform for the publication of learning materials, teaching guides and other information for teachers.

> **Inspiring practice: Mind over Media**
> *"Activities are suitable for learners ages 13 to adults in both formal and informal learning environments. Because users can upload their own examples, they help to create a robust, fresh dialogue about contemporary propaganda. Because propaganda addresses all aspects of culture, Mind over Media provides opportunities for authentic inquiry about a variety of topics, including business and the economy, health care, global issues, science and technology, politics and government, crime and law enforcement, education, the environment, and issues of faith and values."[8]*

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[6] https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/ran-papers/docs/role_education_preventing_radicalisation_12122016_en.pdf

[7] See: http://www.ufuq.de/was-postest-du-politische-bildung-mit-jungen-muslim_innen-online/

[8] See http://propaganda.mediaeducationlab.com/teachers/

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- **Consider the scope for minimum transferability**. The above-mentioned platform 'Mind over Media' could be adapted. There is a need for adoptable and transferable methodologies and resources. The local contexts can cause issues, but there might nonetheless be opportunities to use materials in other countries as well.
- **Pay attention to lower levels of education**. There are some indications that the success rate of media literacy practises is lower in lower level education. Not only are these students the biggest group, there might also be an extra vulnerability to the negative effects due to a lack of digital and media literacy.
- **Teachers need practical tools**. To put it simply: there is so much asked of teachers and so little time; they need tangible projects.

Inspiring practice: Extreme Dialogue

*This project **approach** involves a series of open-access online educational resources and highly engaging short films that foster critical thinking and digital literacy skills. Extreme Dialogue encourages safe, constructive discussions around extremism and radicalisation in educational or community settings in the UK, Canada, Germany and Hungary.*

"Short documentary films tell the personal stories of Canadians and Europeans profoundly affected by extremism; a former member of the extreme far-right in Canada, a mother from Calgary whose son was killed fighting for ISIS in Syria, a youth worker and former refugee from Somalia, a former member of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) whose father was killed by the IRA, a former member of the now banned UK Islamist group al-Muhajiroun, a Syrian refugee now living in Berlin, and a member of a Roma community in Hungary targeted by far-right demonstrations." (Included in the RAN Collection[9])

Practical, applicable suggestions from the meeting

The meeting included several break-out sessions where participants applied their expertise to the production of formats for lessons or methodologies. Practical, applicable suggestions from the meeting include:

1. Lessons and methodology for different age groups. Suggestions intended for the following age groups were developed:
   1.1 Primary education (ages 4-8).
   1.2 Primary education (ages 8-12).
   1.3 Lower secondary education (ages 12-15).
   1.4 Higher secondary education (ages 15-18).
2. Teacher training.
3. Evaluation.

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[9] https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/node/11683_en and http://extremedialogue.org

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1.1 Primary education – pupils aged 4 to 8

At this age, the focus should be more on general resilience and safeguarding, making sure children are not confronted with harmful content. The parents are crucial, because they are the providers and gatekeepers to tablets, phones and new media. Parents can play a role in providing explanations, context and reassurance.

1.2 Primary education – pupils aged 8 to 12

For this age group, it is crucial to keep up with the equipment they are using. Most children in this age group use tablets and smartphones, and many have the access codes for their parents' accounts. It is important to find out what they do. Older sisters and brothers play a role. YouTube and online games are important.

Experience with peer-to-peer work involving children aged 9 to 10 was shared, for example with regard to workshops on values, tolerance and democracy. It emerged that this age group struggles with the abstract concept of democracy and the role of relevant institutions. Translating it to everyday democracy at school proves to be working. Similar results had previously been observed in the Peaceful School project (see RAN Collection[10]).

Draw pupils' attention to various types of extreme behaviour observable online* (from bullying to hate speech). It may be preferable to avoid focusing specifically on extremist groups and content. However, there is a need to talk about this specific issue, and teachers are advised not to shy away from it, to link the topic to PVE, and thereby sow the seeds of critical thinking*. Children in this age group are aware of terrorist attacks and intolerant ideologies.

The suggestion is to work more with visual and practical type of material than the more abstract textual kind of material. Activities should foster "learning by doing", for example by starting an online campaign against hate speech, which would also offer opportunities to get the parents involved (and thereby get the message across parents).

1.3 Lower secondary education – pupils aged 12 to 15

Teachers are encouraged to confront children in this age group with the observation that there are different and even conflicting facts and opinions, and that truth is a messy, complicated subject. Pupils should be made aware that sometimes, there are grey scales. Media literacy activities for this age group can focus more specifically on extremist ideologies, group pressure and group think.

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[10] https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/node/7498_en

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Teachers can work from pupils' own experiences and make this very generic and transferable. They can highlight a range of potentially contradictory opinions to students and invite discussion around four questions:

1. Whom do you believe?
2. Why?
3. Are all the underlying facts correct?
4. How can we check? Suggestions for ways to address this particular question included turning fact-checking into a (interactive) game by presenting different ways to check facts (e.g. playing "fake news bingo"[11])

As an optional twist, teachers could introduce a fake opinion. However, there is a risk that their eventual revelation of the fake might create difficulties in the student-teacher relationship.

Pupils should be encouraged to build their own fact-checking list.

1.4 Higher secondary education – pupils aged 15 to 18

The goals for this age group were determined as:

1. Identifying propaganda (the role of emotion/provocation/othering/manipulation)
2. Critically analysing and creating multi-perspective content (classical media vs user-generated content/who is providing information and why/manipulation of facts)

Three modules were suggested, along with a number of assignments.

Module (I): Rules of totalitarian propaganda

Assignments:

1. Please collect examples of propaganda online (visuals and language-related propaganda from history).
2. Please analyse material found online. What marks it as propaganda? Define the criteria of propaganda!
3. Please look online for current propaganda and compare it to propaganda in history!

Module (II): Creating content today; chances and obstacles of online research

Assignments:

1. Please write a piece on a hot topic (e.g. refugees, Islam, women's rights).
2. Present your article in front of the class. Discuss what problems you were facing while collecting information online!

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[11] See: https://www.stopfake.org/en/stopfake-bingo-game/

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Module (III): Practical guide

Remark: It is assumed that the students will report difficulties in differentiating between true and false information, the trustworthiness of the source, the lack of access to information. This feedback opens up opportunities to introduce relevant open source techniques.

2. **Teacher training for media literacy**

Teacher training should follow or even anticipate the sustainable development of the curriculum of pupils. The curriculum should include all media and information literacy competences.

These competences are featured in the 'tree' that was drawn by the subgroup. They cluster in the following branches:

- embedding a context and culture of source checking;
- holding healthy discussions;
- protecting and engaging the agent;
- shared responsibilities (including peer-to-peer, teachers, school management).
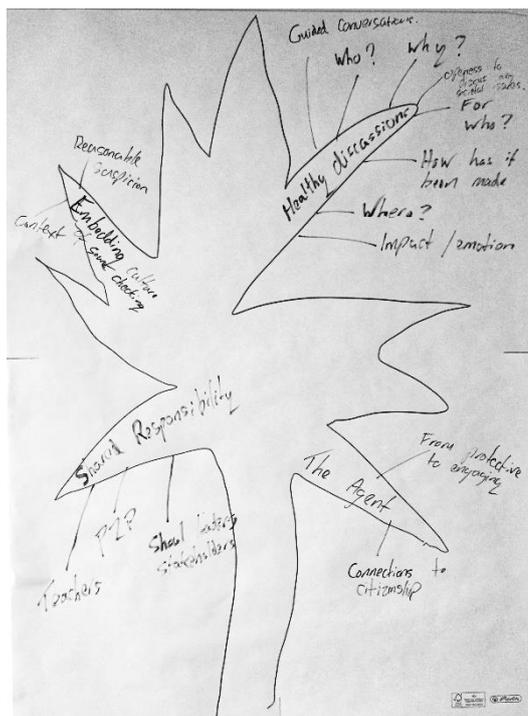
The challenges of dealing with a rapidly changing and occasionally inflammatory and confusing media landscape makes it necessary for teachers to be guided in a new role. This is a role in which they are the authority in the classroom, but not an authority that has all the answers. Particular skills needed in this context are those required to hold challenging conversations

3. **Evaluation**

The meeting highlighted the need for more evaluation. If time and money is spent on an important topic, it is crucial to know what works. A small break-out group therefore attempted to develop a set of evaluations with different levels of ambition.

Evaluation is intended as a complementary action that helps implementers to refine their approach. It should not be perceived as a fault-finding mission designed to pinpoint the weaknesses of their projects.

- Teachers find reassurance that they are on the right path and can show their management that 'what they do' makes a difference.
- Connect universities, research labs and professional evaluator and civil society organisations.
- Making investments in evaluation tools would be helpful to mainstream 'what works' and 'what doesn't work.

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- Without impact evaluations, it is not really possible to pursue high-level policy-making.
- Evaluation takes a lot of money and energy – the EU should issue separate calls specifically for this purpose.
- Care should be taken not to discourage civil society organisations by requiring professional evaluation.
- Criteria for the organisation of evaluations should be established. The administrative and financial burden of these evaluations should be borne by the funding agency or sponsor

In addition, the group outlined three levels of evaluation:

Basic: DATA COLLECTION (by *the* teacher) - AFTER the intervention	Standard: DATA ANALYSIS - questionnaire BEFORE and AFTER the intervention	'Ultimate': EXTERNAL IMPACT EVALUATION
• Simple questionnaire • Teachers can *handle the task* on their own • *Feedback to be collected at* the end of the project	• Quantitative scale and qualitative testing data	• Before, during and after the intervention • Application of control groups • Measuring the long-term impact • Experimental; quasi-experimental • Focus group discussions

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Annex

Fact-checking resources suggested for learners

For picture and videos

- fotoforensics.com
- images.google.com
- tineye.com

Where?

- google.com/maps
- unitar.org/unosat
- flashearth.com
- openstreetmap.org
- wikimapia.org
- digitalglobe.com
- google.com/earth

Who?

- linkedin.com
- webmii.com
- geosocialfootprint.com
- pipl.com
- jelled.com/instagram

Which website?

- jelled.com/instagram
- gandi.net
- spyonweb.com

Searching for smaller details

- Ask a question about the weather or other details: wolframalpha.com
- free-ocr.com
- youtube.github.io/geo-search-tool
- suncalc.org
- EXIF tool: www.sno.phy.queensu.ca/~phil/exiftool/
- sonicvisualiser.org
- audacityteam.org