

# M6 Worksheet “Fake news: Examples from Germany”

**Social networks such as Facebook frequently act as a channel for fabricated ‘reports’ which spread quickly and widely through ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ and gain considerable attention.**

Time after time, the internet, email and social networks act as channels for fabricated ‘reports’ and warnings which users pass on to large numbers of their contacts, often without thinking. These are called ‘hoaxes’, ‘urban myths’ or ‘fake news’. One particular type of fake news, which has been doing the rounds for years in various forms and gathering large numbers of ‘likes’ and shares, relates to alleged child abductions by a putative human organ-trafficking ‘mafia’.

There are two fundamental variations on this theme, each of which is updated and ‘adapted’ to new localities time and again. The first of these consists in a warning of child abductions by a ‘Bulgarian and Romanian organ-trafficking mafia’ with the purpose of harvesting and selling the victims’ organs. The stories generally feature warnings around ‘foreign car number plates’ and ‘gypsies’.

The second type involves warnings of ‘gypsies’, ‘Romanian women’ or ‘Eastern Europeans’ who allegedly loiter in a branch of a major clothing chain (different shops are named depending on locality), drug children, and shave their heads in the shop changing room in order to escape with them unapprehended. The purpose of the ‘abductions’ in this case is likewise said to be organ harvesting.

The police find themselves obliged at regular intervals to deal with the consequences of these stories; for instance, they had calls from worried mothers asking for information about the threat after they or their children had received the following e-mail warning of Bulgarian child abductors:

‘Keep a close eye on your children!!! There are two men about in Bad Nauheim and Friedberg in a white delivery van with a BG (Bulgarian) number plate who are trying to abduct children! They are thought to be part of the organ [trading] mafia! In Butzbach, as well, the police have been searching [for them] all day. Don’t let your children go out alone!’

These messages had been shared many times and forwarded to other users with corresponding comments. Eventually, this ‘warning’ was circulating throughout Germany, with a range of different towns and cities referenced. Similar stories had been doing the rounds previously. While it is always sensible to reserve judgement, this story is a confirmed hoax with no basis in fact. Various sources claim it originated from the fictitious plot of an episode of a popular television detective drama (*Tatort*) broadcast in 2011, as the first stories of this kind appeared after its transmission. The danger of such invented stories is the number of people who believe them.

The police in the German town of Gütersloh was forced on 20 January 2014 to issue the following press release in response to a post based on the ‘drugged and shaved child’ version of the myth:

‘For some months now, rumours have been circulating on the internet, specifically on Facebook, that a child has been abducted from a large supermarket (sometimes the story cites home furnishings superstores or department stores instead) in Gütersloh. The rumours claim that the child was taken to the toilet by a Romanian couple and its head shaved so it could be abducted for organ trafficking. The Gütersloh district police wish to make it clear here that such an event NEVER happened. These are simply scare stories circulating on the internet and have NO basis WHATSOEVER in fact.’

## **Sources:**

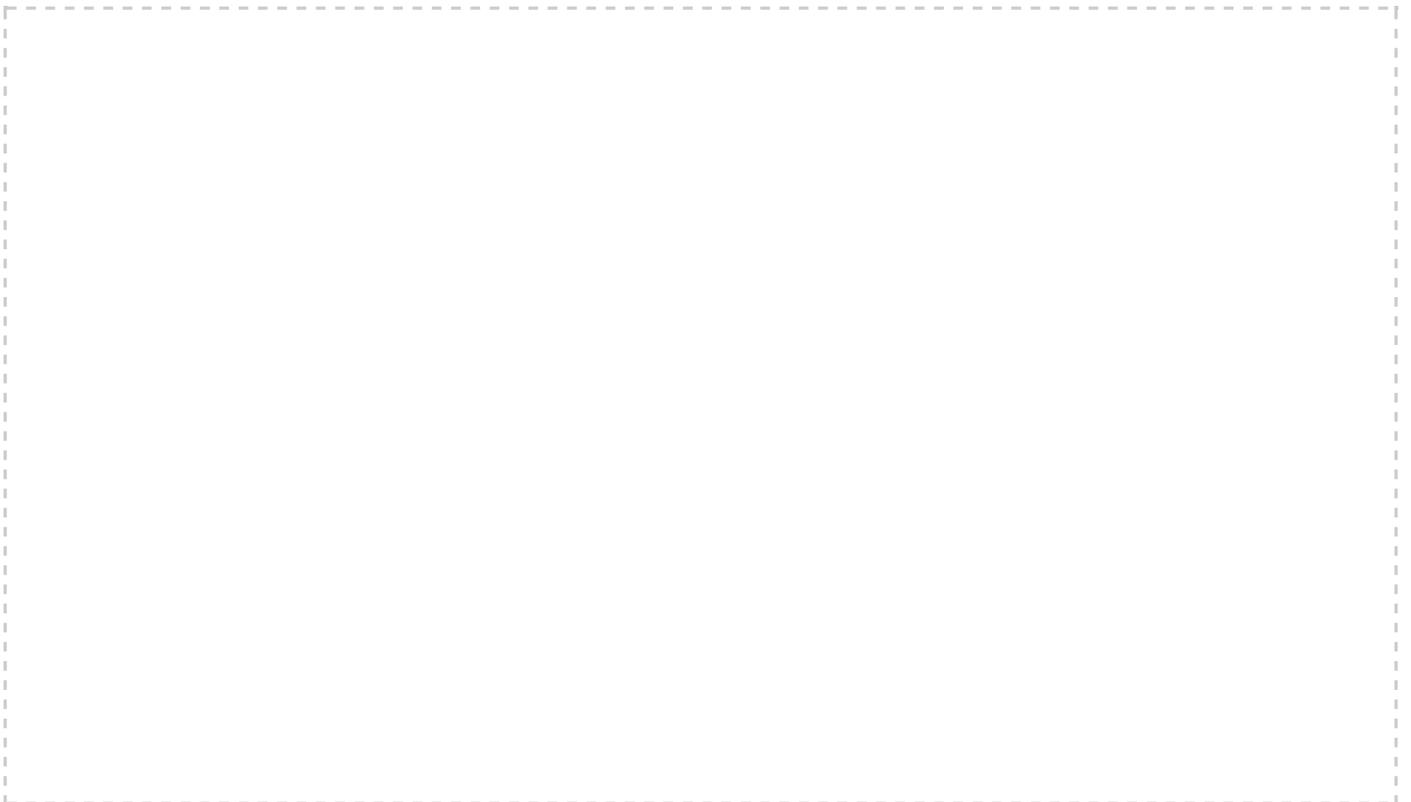
Facebook contributions from the years 2014 and 2012, documented from Mimikama.at  
<http://www.mimikama.at/allgemein/die-organmafia-in-essen-und-duisburg-ein-fake-verbreitet-angst/#up6>  
<http://www.mimikama.at/allgemein/vom-einbrecher-zum-chirurgen-so-etwas-geht-nur-auf-facebook/>

# Tasks

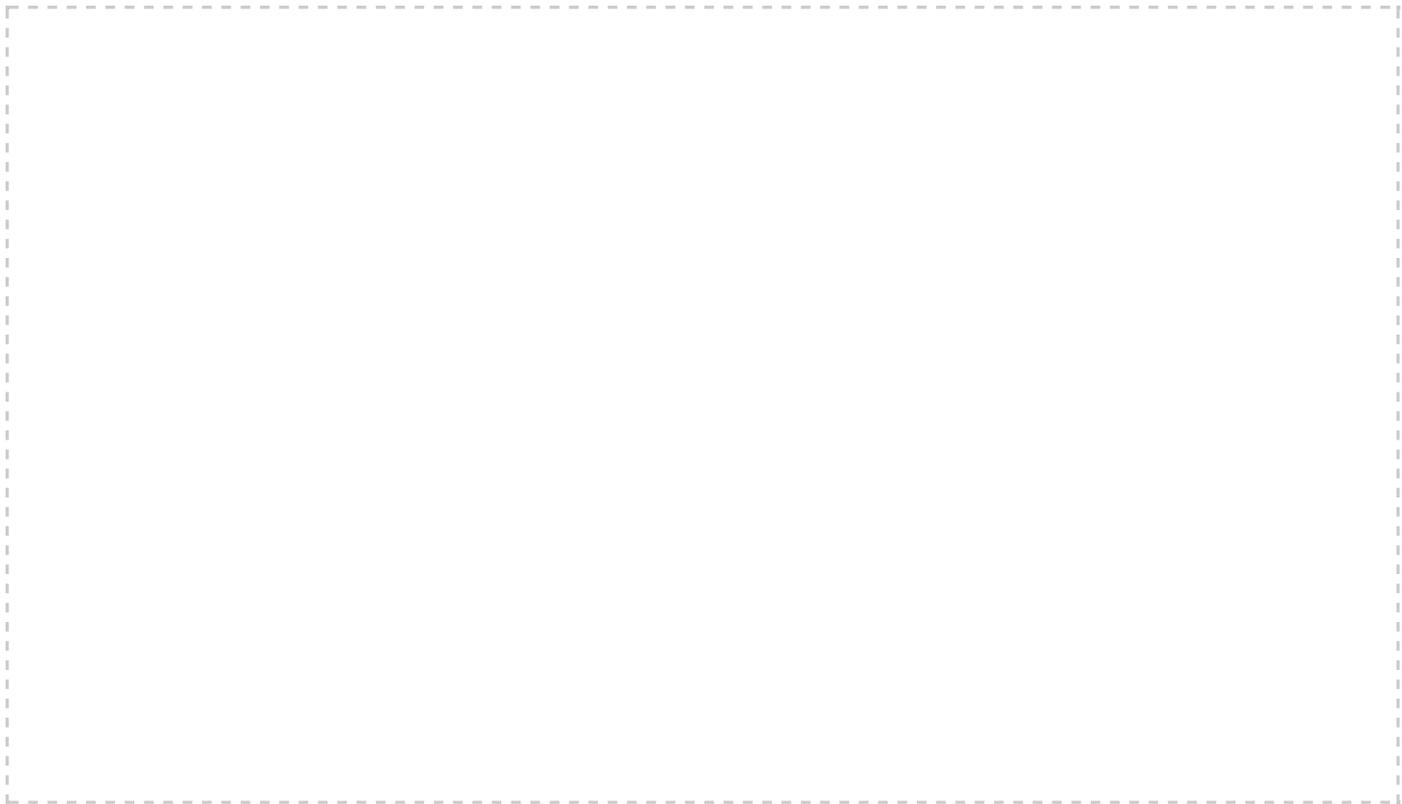
1. Describe the shared fears driving the fake news stories.



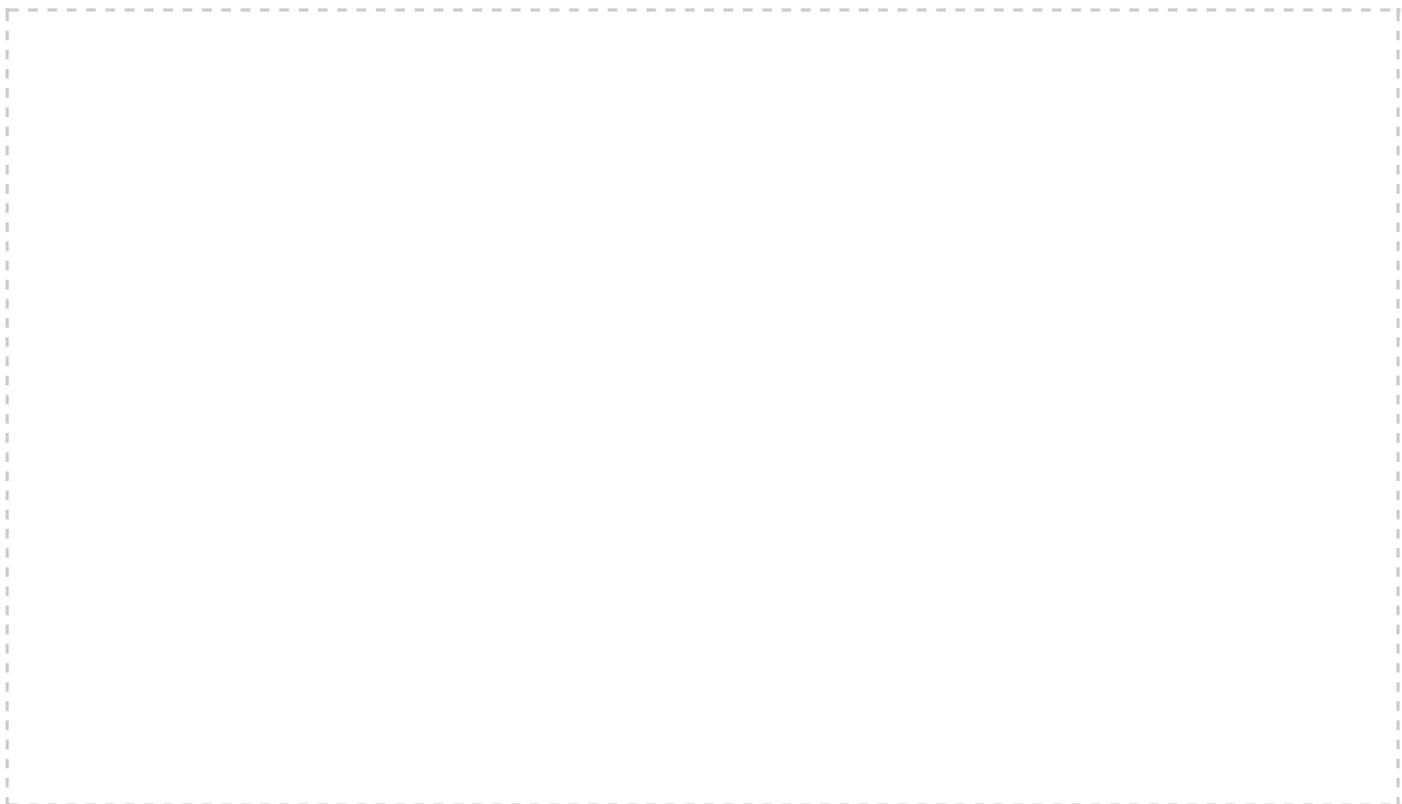
2. The stories use various terms to describe the alleged criminals. Discuss whether, and to what extent, the terms 'gypsies', 'Eastern Europeans', 'Bulgarian' and 'Romanian' are applied to different groups of people and whether they might in fact refer back to the same negative stereotype.



3. Are you aware of similar fake news about your own country shared in social media? Please give details.



4. Do you think there is a connection between this hoax and the reporting around 'Maria'? Explain your view.



5. Give and explain your view on the following statement: 'These fake news stories are just modern variations on the old prejudice of "gypsies" abducting children.'

A large, empty rectangular box with a dashed border, intended for the student to write their response to the question above. The box occupies most of the page below the question.



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