

PUNCHLINES AGAINST PROPAGANDA

How Ukrainian Teenagers Are Turning Disinformation into Stand-Up Comedy



Svitlana Nemonezhyna



Yana Babak

A viral meme, a fake news headline, a joke about the war back home: for Ukrainian teenagers in Germany, disinformation has become a punchline. What happens when trauma, propaganda, and everyday online chaos are turned into stand-up material? Where is the line between coping and trivializing, resistance and denial? And can humor really teach media literacy better than fact-checking ever could?

We put these questions to Yana Babak, media literacy researcher and trainer, and Svitlana Nemonezhyna, Ukrainian stand-up comedian and coach – on mentoring Ukrainian youth as they turn disinformation, cybersecurity, and mental health into stand-up comedy.

You're both mentoring young Ukrainians in Berlin as they turn disinformation, cybersecurity and mental health into stand-up material. What made you say yes to this project?

Babak: What drew me in was the innovative format. Media literacy is often taught as a set of rules and checklists. Here, young people gain knowledge, turn it into their own creative voice through stand-up, and use humor to reflect on their experiences of navigating today's information space. It makes media literacy part of their identity, not just a skill.

Nemonezhyna: Nothing pretentious: I love teenagers; they are ideal people for stand-up. They are full of aggression, total skepticism, and sharp questions for the world. Because they don't yet have rigid social boundaries and are constantly testing the limits, teenagers are, at their core, true inventors. They find such wild, unexpected angles and paradoxes that an adult brain simply wouldn't think of. And since I love exploring comedy very seriously, I have a purely professional interest in these fresh comedic inventions – it is fascinating to watch how their chaos breaks old forms and creates new humor. And a salary in euros :)

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As a stand-up comedian, how do you help a teenager turn something as serious as a fake news story or a cyberattack into a joke that actually lands, without making light of the danger it represents?

Nemonezhyna: Comedy works with truth, not with correct answers. Stand-up is a genre where it is a matter of principle to share your vision of the world, so it is a reason to personally ask yourself: “How do I act when I encounter propaganda?”, to share your personal experience, thereby relating yourself to the topic and taking ownership of this experience on the internet. Your question inspired me to come up with a task for the kids within the stand-up framework: to invent their own fraudulent scheme for an internet scam. Tell me, does a creative approach like this evoke an emotion? And knowledge cemented by emotions is fixed in the memory much more reliably. Teenagers love breaking the rules, so why not support them in this exploration of boundaries?

You analyze memes for a living, spotting what's organic and what's manufactured. What's one disinformation tactic you specifically want these teenagers to be able to recognize by the end of this project?

Babak: I want them to recognize how “it's just a joke” can make propaganda harder to detect. Memes often come from anonymous or unclear sources, while humor creates a sense that no one is really responsible for the message.

At the same time, a short, familiar and funny message can slip past our critical filters before we even start questioning it. Even once recognized as manipulation, the idea may already feel more familiar or acceptable. Memes can therefore help normalize narratives, for instance, by dehumanizing Ukrainians or making aggression seem legitimate. I want them to ask “Who made me laugh, and what are they making me accept?”.

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In our interview “Wenn Lachen zur Waffe wird: Humor als Widerstand in der Ukraine” ([Link](#)), historian Dr Kateryna Yermieieva has spoken about how humor became a form of resistance during the war. How do you see that playing out with this generation – processing anxiety about disinformation or online safety through comedy, rather than being paralysed by it?

Babak: I think it is difficult to live in today's world if we take everything happening around us seriously and literally. That can be a fast track to losing perspective. Humor creates distance: it helps young people process anxiety, question what they see online, and regain a sense of agency. Instead of being paralyzed by disinformation or fear, they can turn their experience into something they can understand, discuss and even laugh at. That, to me, is a form of resilience.

Nemonezhyna: Ukrainians are going through various states: sometimes it is paralysis, and that is normal, because no one knows the right way to act in such wrong times. Everyone's psyche defends itself in its own way, and there is no single right way. Our goal is rather, through the tools of comedy, to allow ourselves all these emotions, to examine them, and to understand what we think and feel. Ultimately, comedy is a safe space for conversations about difficult topics. The project helps bring focus to disinformation and provides tools on how to deal with it. The first such tool is honesty: to notice the problem and acknowledge your feelings, even if they seem “shameful”. The second is decatastrophizing: using humor to reduce the scale of the problem within the zone of your own feelings, by noticing the absurdity, illogic, and injustice of reality.

These teenagers will perform live in Berlin in October, but many will also be part of shaping Ukraine's future. What do you hope they carry forward from this project, beyond the stage?

Nemonezhyna: The most valuable thing we give a young person in this project is space for qualitative research of their thoughts and validation of their feelings. We Ukrainians experience a palette of complex, contradictory emotions: grief, losses, detachment from home, adaptation in a new world, feelings of guilt (“Am I doing enough?”, “Is it okay that I’m not at home?”, “Am I a good enough citizen?”) and constant fear (“Will the next rocket hit my home?”). Every day we live with a sense of injustice that no one in the world can stop a large-scale, terrible, brutal war. We are forced to be witnesses and participants of a reality that does not yield to explanations and the values of kindness, friendliness, and justice on which we were raised. And none of us knows how to process with the brain or heart the entire spectrum of thoughts and feelings that arises. And in the “Humor vs. Fakes” stand-up project, we give space and the right for young people in their community to reflect on these complex contradictory feelings and build reasoning regarding how to be with this. And the framework of comedy gives us the opportunity to reflect on this less traumatically. A thought spoken supposedly as a “joke” allows us to place more truth. Without thoughts of “Am I a good enough Ukrainian if I believed a fake news story?”.

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Babak: I hope they leave with more than a set of fact-checking or cybersecurity rules, important as these skills are. I want them to see media literacy as agency: the confidence to question what they encounter, form their own perspective, and choose how they engage with the information around them. And, hopefully, the courage to use their own voice to shape that environment.



About Svitlana Nemonezhyna and Yana Babak

Svitlana Nemonezhyna is a Ukrainian stand-up comedian, writer, and stand-up coach. She has been performing stand-up since 2014, and since 2024, she has been teaching courses for adults and teenagers. In her work, she explores how humor works, what tools comedy consists of, and whether it can be learned. She also works with podcasts and video formats, and loves combining humor with visual and performative forms.

Yana Babak is a trainer, researcher, and expert in media literacy and youth participation. She spent seven years at UA PBC (2016–2023), progressing from a radio editor to a creative producer. From 2023 to 2026, she coordinated the regional youth network of U-Report by UNICEF Ukraine, a digital platform conducting youth opinion research and engaging more than 168,000 respondents. Her work with DW Akademie focuses on developing and delivering media and information literacy training for young people, covering topics such as hate speech, information operations, manipulation, and propaganda, with a particular focus on memes and humor as tools of influence. In 2025, she conducted research on digital well-being and the emotional experiences of Ukrainian adolescents. She currently works at SOS Children’s Villages Ukraine, contributing to initiatives that improve digital well-being and safety for vulnerable children and their caregivers, while promoting meaningful child participation. Babak holds a Master’s degree in Political Science.

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About Humor vs. Fakes

This interview was co-produced between the German Platform for the Reconstruction of Ukraine and DW Akademie as part of the project *Humor vs. Fakes*. It shows why humor is far more than distraction: it is an instrument of solidarity, of meaning-making, and possibly of psychological recovery after war. *Humor vs. Fakes* explores media, disinformation, and digital safety with a stage, a mic, and plenty of laughs. Ukrainian youth get the chance to develop their own stand-up comedy program under professional guidance and perform it live in Berlin.