Media Literacy for Democracy

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Italian Federation for Human Rights

Fundación
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Introduction to the MLFD project

Media Literacy for Democracy is a project implemented under the EU's Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) programme. It is focused on the promotion of an effective media literacy strategy based on a multidisciplinary approach and cross-sector cooperation with the aim of tackling disinformation, empowering citizens to make informed decisions, and protecting democratic values. The activities, implemented by the consortium composed of CSOs and universities from five EU countries (IT, IE, ES, BG, PL) in the period from October 2022 to March 2024, included ten events carried out in collaboration with different stakeholders across the participating partners' countries.

The target groups were essentially composed of students and young professionals, coming from all backgrounds, including the most marginalised, and all the activities have been supported by a well-established partners' network at institutional and civil society levels, as well as at national and European levels, which stimulated further action and synergies in the field beyond the project's activities. Through the local focus groups and the international workshops, the participants gained a comprehensive understanding of the impact of harmful disinformation and misinformation on democratic societies, with a particular focus on how these narratives disproportionately affect women and marginalized groups. By equipping participants with the necessary tools and knowledge, the project offered an opportunity to foster and promote a more inclusive and resilient media literacy strategy capable of combating disinformation and protecting democracy and the EU values.

Overview on disinformation and media literacy

In an era dominated by digital media and social networks, the proliferation of misinformation and disinformation has reached unprecedented levels, posing significant challenges to our societies. Such phenomena have always existed, however, both the quantity and its effects have multiplied in recent decades with the emergence of social networks and other digital media. Due to the convenient and constant accessibility of these networks through mobile phones, the daily influx of messages received by citizens has significantly increased. Among these messages, many are false, stemming either from the inadvertent circulation of inaccurate content (misinformation) or the deliberate propagation of misleading messages (disinformation). Both phenomena have become a key problem for contemporary societies undermining the very foundations of our democracies and putting lives at risk.

The harms of misinformation and disinformation are multifaceted, ranging from undermining democratic processes to posing threats to public health. During crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, false information about the virus, treatments, and preventive measures has fuelled vaccine hesitancy and compromised public safety. Additionally, disinformation campaigns have been used to manipulate electoral processes, exacerbate social divisions, and perpetuate xenophobia.

Furthermore, the current Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas conflict show that disinformation is playing an active role both in the conflicts and in the right of citizens to access accurate information. Be the incentives political, financial or societal, the spread of disinformation on the war is impacting society and decision makers and producing an information disorder around the conflict.

Among the major concerns around the disinformation phenomena:

Weaponization of disinformation

- Disinformation is used to fabricate false narratives, manipulate public opinion, and advance specific agendas.
- Disinformation is weaponized to dehumanize individuals or groups, exacerbate societal divisions, and incite hatred and conflict.
- Disinformation tactics are employed in conflicts and wars to mislead and manipulate adversaries, undermining peace and stability.

Erosion of Democracy and Human Rights:

- Disinformation undermines democratic processes by spreading false information to manipulate electoral outcomes and undermine public trust in democratic institutions.
- Disinformation campaigns often target marginalized communities, promoting xenophobia, discrimination, and societal divisions that threaten human rights and social cohesion.
- Proliferation of disinformation erodes trust in democratic institutions, media organizations, and authoritative sources of information, weakening the foundation of democracy and human rights protections.

Health and Safety Concerns:

- Disinformation about health-related topics, such as COVID-19 and vaccines, contributed to public confusion, vaccine hesitancy, and undermined efforts to combat the pandemic.
- False information spread through disinformation campaigns can pose direct threats to public safety, leading to misinformation-driven behaviours and actions that endanger individuals and communities.

As stated by the EEAS task force EU vs Disinfo, disinformation as part of foreign information manipulation and interference poses a security threat affecting the safety of the European Union and its Member States. [1]

Consequently, the dissemination of false narratives has eroded trust in traditional media sources, leading to increased scepticism and disengagement from public affairs. The cause has been largely attributed by experts to the collapse of traditional media and the advent of social media as disruptors. Social media has emerged as one of the main vehicles for disinformation and misinformation. Another important tool to stimulate the spread of fake news and misleading media content is AI. Social media users appear to have lost the notion of deep reading by adopting a posture of deep monitoring and when they see a catchy headline the default is to share. Circumstances as the above mentioned are part of a wider context that has been increasingly demanding attention, regulation and active monitoring: how digital content is spread by the major parties involved in sustaining how the information is presented and shared among people over the internet, including search engines and social networking platforms[2].

Also the UN General Assembly has expressed concern over the proliferation of disinformation phenomenon and has welcomed the efforts of the Secretary-General to promote international

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[1] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/learn/.

[2] Figueira and Oliveira, 2017.

cooperation in countering disinformation through his report *Countering disinformation for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms*[3].

To address these pressing challenges, efforts to combat mis- and disinformation are underway at various levels, including governmental initiatives, supranational organizations, and civil society groups. However, despite these efforts, it is impossible to completely eradicate fake news or guarantee the veracity of all information that reaches citizens.

In addition, such phenomena should be addressed by always keeping in mind the need to balance the right to free expression of thought, the right to be informed, and the protection of democracy and the rule of law from disrupting the public debate.[4]

Therefore, media literacy education emerges as a critical tool in empowering individuals to navigate the digital landscape effectively. By enhancing critical thinking skills, promoting source evaluation, and fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders, media literacy initiatives aim to equip citizens with the skills needed to discern truth from falsehood and engage responsibly with media content. While the term "media literacy" lacks a single, universally accepted definition and may vary depending on contextual factors, for the purpose of this work, the European Commission's definition is adopted: "Media literacy is an umbrella expression that includes all the technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow a citizen to access, have a critical understanding of the media and interact with it. These capacities allow the citizen to participate in the economic, social and cultural aspects of society as well as to play an active role in the democratic process. It refers to all kinds of media (television, radio, press), through all kinds of channels (traditional, internet, social media) and to all ages. Media literacy means different things for different countries and stakeholders. It is also a dynamic concept that evolves at the same time as technology and society. However, a key stone in all possible definitions of media literacy is the development of critical thinking by the user."[5]

In this framework, media literacy includes the ability to think critically about the information consumed and created, distinguish fact from opinion, and understand how media can be used to influence perceptions and behaviours. Media literacy programs seek to raise awareness of the various forms of media messages encountered in daily life, including programs, films, images, texts, sounds, and web pages disseminated through different communication channels. By promoting media literacy across all segments of society, stakeholders can mitigate the spread of false information and uphold the principles of truth, integrity, and democratic participation in the digital age.

In short, media literacy is crucial to equip citizens with the basic skills necessary to become informed and critical thinkers in a world where technology and media are ubiquitous, helping to immunize people against undue persuasion and false information.

However, media literacy is still a young teaching subject, mostly included in the teaching hours reserved for civic education (digital citizenship). It is therefore natural that there is not yet a consolidated literature on the subject, even if there are numerous and meritorious initiatives developed at an academic level and by qualified associations of teachers and trainers to promote and spread digital culture and media literacy on the national territory, within the framework of actions for digital citizenship [6].

Building upon this comprehensive definition, this work intends to help formulate an inclusive media literacy strategy by providing recommendations based across several dimensions:

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[3] UN General Assembly, 12 August 2022, Countering disinformation for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

[4] Giuseppe Morgese, Focus Group in Rome, February 2023.

[5] Media literacy expert group (E02541) - CNECT - DG Communications Networks, Content and Technology.

[6] IDMO (2023), Digital Media Literacy Gaps and Needs

cross-sectoral cooperation and networking, evaluation of media literacy activities, sustainability and funding, and media involvement.

General findings (based on the focus groups held in the participating countries)[7]

In response to the escalating challenges posed by disinformation and misinformation, there is a growing consensus across the EU on the urgent need for a comprehensive and tailored approach to media literacy. However, progress toward this goal has been uneven, with each country advancing at its own pace. Common obstacles include the absence of a cohesive vision, insufficient evidence-based strategies, limited institutional coordination, resource constraints, and wavering political commitment to safeguarding vulnerable populations, including minorities. Cross-sectoral cooperation and multidisciplinary and tailored approaches remain crucial to ensuring equitable access and impact. However, efforts to update curricula, develop teacher training programmes, and ensure alignment with evolving media landscapes, including emerging trends like the Generative AI, are still underway.

Italy

The Italian national media authority AGCOM initiated a self-regulation work aimed to monitor and combat online disinformation, along with civil society and universities, mostly committed to the development of educational training in the field of media literacy. Italy has accepted the EU definition contained in the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens - DigComp 2.0, which places digital competence among the key competences for lifelong learning, launching a series of initiatives and proposals to improve the safe and responsible use of digital technologies for learning, work and participation in social life. However, the Italian situation sees the presence of digital inequalities that accentuate situations of educational poverty and are fuelled by both a difficulty in accessing the Internet and a low capacity to use it. According to Eurostat's indicator for monitoring citizens' digital skills[8], Italy has a low share of 16-19 year olds with an adequate command of digital tools.

Informal and non-formal learning contexts can play an important role in developing and enhancing media literacy in Italy, along with the creativity and innovation potential of all the members of society, especially young people from different backgrounds, who can play an important role by transferring these skills to their communities.

In this sense, Rai is playing a decisive role in the country's literacy process, promoting social cohesion, and consolidating a free educational offer on its networks (particularly throughout RAI Cultura and Rai Ragazzi) developing partnerships with the school world and realizing audio-visuals products capable of attracting different types of audiences[9].

However, the findings from the focus group implemented in February 2023 emphasises a strong call for increased education in schools about the phenomenon of disinformation and its

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[7] https://fidu.it/language/en/media-literacy-for-democracy-cerv-programme/

[8] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/interactive-publications/digitalisation-2023#digital-skills

[9] https://www.idmo.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/IDMO-Digital-Media-Literacy-Gaps-and-Needs_EN_final_compressed.pdf

associated risks, alongside the promotion of media literacy concepts for all young citizens. Developing fact-checking skills among citizens is also highlighted as essential. Secondly, fostering collaboration among institutions, media, and civil society is seen as crucial, with a particular emphasis on raising public awareness about the negative impacts of disinformation and the importance of media literacy education in schools. Additionally, facilitating access to more accurate information for everyone is deemed necessary, along with promoting pre-bunking strategies to prevent the spread of dis- and misinformation. Targeted action and tools for community building are also advocated for, to create specific action plans tailored to different community groups. Lastly, strengthening the presence of the European Union and promoting a better understanding of its policies, especially in rural areas, is emphasized as a means to tackle distrust in institutions and reduce vulnerability to disinformation.

Ireland

There are limited regulatory mechanisms to tackle disinformation in Ireland, although there are some existing policies relating to media literacy as well as planned responses directly addressing disinformation. Media Literacy programmes are acknowledged as essential to tackle disinformation in tandem with developing national and supranational regulatory mechanisms. Media literacy education seeks to advance media literacy competencies, and it is intended to promote awareness of media influence and create an active stance towards both consuming and creating media, from primary school through to university level, further, adult, and informal education.

The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) launched a media literacy policy[10] in 2016 and as part of this policy, it facilitates Media Literacy Ireland (MLI)[11] which was established in 2018. MLI is an informal and voluntary alliance of organisations and individuals that aims to promote media literacy across the country. In 2022 MLI reached 250 members representing different sectors of society, such as academia, education, public service broadcasting, and media companies. The network designs and delivers webinars and training sessions and has been responsible for important national awareness campaigns to tackle disinformation such as the Be Media Smart campaign[12], which aimed to "help people tell the difference between reliable and accurate information and deliberately false or misleading information"[13]. This campaign was distributed "across TV, radio, online and the press supported by free airtime, editorial, online ad-credit, social media activity and events from a very wide range of MLI members"[14]. In a presentation to an Oireachtas (Parliamentary) committee discussing Online Disinformation and Media Literacy, Media Literacy Ireland described its work as "a vital contribution to the empowerment of citizens and enables them to be better able to judge the accuracy and reliability of information they encounter and consume"[15].

According to the OECD PIAAC survey of adult learning, 55 per cent of the Irish population have low or basic digital skills. Over one-third of the adult population (36 per cent) has low

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[10] https://www.bai.ie/media/sites/2/dlm_uploads/2016/12/BAI_media_literacy_policy_EN1.pdf

[11] www.medialiteracyireland.ie

[12] https://www.bemediasmart.ie

[13] https://www.bemediasmart.ie/tips/

[14] https://www.medialiteracyireland.ie/mli-participates-in-joint-oireachtas-committee-meeting-on-disinformation-and-media-literacy/

[15] https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_tourism_culture_arts_sport_and_media/submissions/2022/2022-02-02_openingstatement-professor-brian-o-neill-et-al-co-chair-media-literacy-ireland_en.pdf

digital skills, well above the EU average (28 per cent). Only one-fifth of the population have basic digital skills. In addition, according to a report by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in 2022, around 22% of households in rural areas had no internet access, compared to just 4% in urban areas. This gap in access to technology can hinder the development of media literacy skills, particularly among disadvantaged communities.

Across the focus group held in Ireland in March 2023, participants consistently highlighted key strategies to combat the spread of misinformation and disinformation. They emphasized the importance of accessible education in media literacy, journalistic integrity, and regulatory measures for social media and tech companies. Younger individuals face unique challenges due to their consumption habits on online platforms, yet they also exhibit heightened awareness of fake news owing to their critical engagement with digital media. Participants advocated for EU involvement in providing comprehensive information to support informed decision-making. They stressed the need for collaborative efforts involving national governments, media outlets, and social media platforms to curb the spread of misinformation and disinformation. Recommendations included:

- Implementing media literacy courses in secondary education to foster critical media engagement from a young age.
- Shifting journalistic focus from profit-driven models to prioritizing quality, potentially through funding and grants.
- Establishing a peer review system for journalism to ensure accuracy.
- Regulating data and tech companies, particularly regarding data tracking and privacy.
- Enhancing access to and usability of databases, especially those vulnerable to manipulation for disinformation.
- Adjusting algorithms to prioritize quality content over revenue.
- Integrating the reduction of fake news spread into the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Poland

Disinformation in Poland was once a relatively unknown phenomenon, with both the political establishment and the public largely disregarding its significance, despite its potential to influence political sentiments[16]. However, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic shed light on the dangers of false information, revealing Poland's susceptibility to misinformation and its adverse effects on public health efforts, such as vaccination campaigns. This vulnerability was further exacerbated by the government's ineffective pro-vaccination policies, which faced legal challenges and failed to address widespread reluctance to adhere to public health measures, contributing to a high COVID-19 mortality rate. Additionally, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia underscored the potency of Kremlin propaganda in Poland, initially resulting in a shift towards anti-Ukrainian content on social media. However, Polish society initially resisted Russian propaganda, demonstrating support for Ukraine and refugees. This resistance was bolstered by heightened public awareness of disinformation, which only partially immunized Poles against propaganda. Along with these examples, other disinformation talking points have been analysed during the focus group held in Poland in May 2023:

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[16] https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/disinformation-landscape-in-poland/

- The allegedly authoritarian and unjust actions of the European Union against Poland in connection with the need to restore the rule of law in Poland
- The European Union's allegedly authoritarian and unjust actions toward Poland in connection with its obligation to accept migrants
- Disinformation surrounding the last 8 years of rule by right-wing parties in Poland
- Disinformation around the 5 G network
- Disinformation around the problem on the Polish-Belarusian border

The findings underscore the critical need to cultivate discernment when dealing with the flood of information coming from different media sources. Participants stressed the imperative of evaluating sources for credibility and utility, weighing factors like objectivity, timeliness, accessibility, and clarity. Moreover, they emphasized the importance of scrutinizing information reliability, considering factors such as author expertise and the inclusion of diverse viewpoints. Their familiarity with modern media has sharpened their ability to think critically, enabling them to navigate through the sea of false information and identify reliable sources. Addressing the unique needs of marginalized communities was a focal point, with suggestions ranging from grassroots initiatives like community meetings and educational workshops to targeted outreach efforts like distributing informational booklets and incorporating interactive learning methods. Recognizing the diverse preferences of different demographics, including generational disparities and accessibility challenges, underscored the necessity of adaptable and engaging media literacy approaches. Civil society organizations were identified as key stakeholders in advancing media literacy, with recommendations for leveraging information campaigns, social advertisements, and educational resources to foster public awareness and combat disinformation. Emphasizing the importance of integrating media literacy education into academic settings, participants advocated for increased collaboration between civil society organizations and educational institutions to broaden access to critical media literacy skills. Echoing the call for critical thinking, participants advocated for interactive learning tools, teacher training initiatives, and the establishment of independent verification agencies to fortify media literacy efforts. Proposals for revamped curricula aimed at instilling the value of sourcing information from diverse outlets and nurturing analytical thinking underscored the broader imperative of equipping individuals with the tools to navigate the complex media landscape adeptly.

Spain

Spain, like many other countries, faces several major challenges when it comes to ensuring inclusive media literacy and balancing the fight against disinformation with the preservation of fundamental rights for all citizens, including vulnerable groups. 72.1% of Spaniards acknowledge that they have at some point believed a message or video that turned out to be false, and 9 out of 10 Spaniards assure that misinformation is a danger to democracy and the stability of a country[17]. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-stakeholder approach, involving government, media organizations, civil society, and technology companies, to collaborate and find solutions that promote media literacy, protect fundamental rights, and foster an informed and engaged citizenry. Spain is firmly committed to the fight against disinformation and has been working actively, within the framework of the European Union and with special emphasis since 2018, to establish agile and effective procedures in this

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[17] https://www.europapress.es/sociedad/noticia-72-espanoles-reconoce-haber-creido-alguna-vez-mensajes-resultaron-ser-falsos-estudio-20220613131721.html

regard. In addition to the measures promoted in coordination with the European Union, Spain carries out multiple actions in the fight against disinformation through its institutions and has established permanent coordination mechanisms between the different bodies of the Administration, including the Permanent Commission for the Fight against Disinformation, established in March 2019.

The findings from the focus group held in Spain between February and March 2023 revealed that participants expressed unawareness of the widespread prevalence of fake news in today's media landscape, as well as its detrimental implications for democratic societies. They also highlighted the complexity of combating disinformation, which involves multiple actors and varied causes, making it challenging to find a simple solution. Participants emphasized the need for coordinated efforts among governments, technological platforms, media outlets, educational institutions, and users themselves to address this issue effectively.

Many participants expressed frustration with the perceived lack of proactive measures from authorities in tackling disinformation. However, they were reminded that any actions taken must be cautious and proportionate to avoid infringing upon the fundamental rights of freedom of expression and information, which are pillars of any democratic system.

Fake news not only fosters a general atmosphere of distrust towards all types of media, including traditional outlets, but also undermines confidence in the democratic process. Some studies and personal experiences indicate that false information spreads faster and wider than true news, exacerbating the challenge. Additionally, mainstream media, under pressure to provide immediate news, sometimes adopt practices similar to those of new media, leading to the dissemination of unverified information.

Despite the significant problem posed by misinformation and disinformation, participants stressed the importance of not demonizing all media, as most outlets conduct their work professionally and accurately. They cautioned against succumbing to conspiracy theories and urged for discernment between false news and biased reporting or differing interpretations of facts. Young people are particularly vulnerable to misinformation due to their reliance on social networks for news consumption, where false information is more prevalent. Unlike adults, they may lack the experience and knowledge to critically evaluate news sources and corroborate information across multiple platforms. Participants agreed unanimously on the importance of media literacy as a key tool in combating misinformation. They recognized it as a measure that respects individual liberties and empowers individuals to critically evaluate the content they encounter, rather than relying solely on efforts to prevent misinformation from reaching them, which is practically unfeasible.

Bulgaria

Bulgaria is among the countries most vulnerable to disinformation in Europe, occupying 35th place among 41 countries and worsening its position by two places compared to 2022 (Media Literacy Index). The index measures the potential vulnerability of societies to misinformation and related negative phenomena based on indicators of quality of education, media freedom, trust in people and e-participation. The majority of active civil organizations in Bulgaria are sceptical about the effectiveness of regulations and institutions in Bulgaria in countering fake news and disinformation. This is shown by the data from a survey conducted among nearly one hundred representatives of civil organizations who registered to participate in the annual meeting of the Active Citizens Bulgaria Fund in November 2022. The survey was conducted in the period 15 – 25 November 2022 in connection with the preparation of the fourth annual meeting of the Active Citizens Bulgaria Fund on the topic: "The role of civil organizations in

combating disinformation and improving media literacy". The majority of survey participants strongly shared the view that education, media pluralism (defined as the presence of media with diverse values and journalistic practices), coverage of a wealth of perspectives, the creation of fact-checking platforms, the adoption of ethical codes for journalists and transparent media ownership acts as a deterrent to the spread of misinformation and fake news. The assessment of the contribution of specific forms of government with their characteristic institutions demonstrates the strong conviction of the survey participants that a democracy with constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech should have clear and indisputable advantages in the fight against disinformation over authoritarianism and other non-democratic forms of government. Bulgaria ranks last among EU countries in the media literacy index for 2023, prepared within the European Policy Initiative (EuPI) of the Open Society Institute.

The focus group held in Bulgaria in March 2023 mainly discussed media literacy education and the influence of social media platforms on digital journalism quality. These dialogues facilitated a deeper understanding of the complex impacts of disinformation on societies and democracies. Participants identified critical competencies for media literacy training, emphasizing skills such as critical thinking, fact-checking, source evaluation, and understanding the media landscape. They also highlighted the importance of offline and online information access, language proficiency for discerning source tones, and the utility of resources like online fact-checking tools, media literacy classes, and interactive games. Recognizing the need for equitable access, especially among socially disadvantaged youth, suggestions included providing internet access and offering courses or seminars for parents and educators on media literacy. Acknowledging the EU's pivotal role, participants advocated for regulations and strategic involvement in combating dis/misinformation and fake news. While safeguarding journalistic freedom, proposals included holding the media accountable for repeated dissemination of false information and establishing independent oversight mechanisms to issue warnings for misinformation. Recommendations extended to creating international platforms listing false facts, raising awareness about misleading information, and facilitating citizen reporting of suspected misinformation.

Educating individuals to discern fact from fiction emerged as a potent yet gradual countermeasure against disinformation consumption. Participants emphasized the importance of free speech in journalism and democracy, emphasizing the need for carefully considered efforts that preserve freedom of speech while holding actors accountable for their statements. Ultimately, participants underscored the necessity for transparent, well-considered initiatives to combat disinformation while upholding democratic principles.

CHALLENGES

Notwithstanding the unique information landscapes of each country, we have identified common challenges shared across regions. Understanding the social, political, and cultural dynamics is crucial in tackling various instabilities, regardless of their nature. By analysing both successes and failures, important insights can be obtained from each country's approach, enriching the collective understanding within the EU. This section explores some common pivotal challenges and vulnerabilities found in the media literacy approaches.

Digital divide

The digital divide within the EU underscores disparities in access to technology and the internet among different socio-economic groups and regions. This gap not only affects individuals' ability to stay connected but also impedes the development of essential media literacy skills, particularly among disadvantaged communities. Without adequate access to technology and the internet, individuals from these communities may face significant barriers in acquiring the digital skills necessary to navigate today's media landscape effectively. Additionally, this phenomenon may generate exclusion and societal inequalities due to unequal access to accurate information and active participation in public affairs. Efforts to bridge this digital gap are critical in ensuring that all members of society have the opportunity to develop equally the media literacy skills needed to thrive in the digital age.

Impact of social media and technological advancements

Social media platforms wield significant influence over public discourse. The sway of social media on how information is consumed is immense. Nevertheless, algorithms and filter bubbles may propagate biased or sensationalized content, as well as short-form media contents, posing a hurdle for individuals in discerning and critically assessing the information they come across. In addition, rapid technological advancements present new challenges for media literacy. With the emergence of deep-fakes and artificial intelligence, individuals may struggle to discern between authentic and manipulated content. Initiatives to promote media literacy must necessarily address these challenges and equip individuals with the skills to navigate an increasingly complex media landscape.

Lack of shared responsibility in combating fake contents

The lack of shared responsibility in detecting and reporting fake news stems from a lack of awareness, complacency, and barriers to reporting. Many individuals may not fully understand the impact of spreading misinformation and harmful disinformation or feel it's not their duty to combat it. This can lead to a sense of apathy or reluctance to take action. Addressing this challenge requires efforts to educate the public about media literacy and critical thinking, as well as fostering a sense of collective responsibility.

Education system and tailored approach

Media literacy education is frequently inconsistent across schools, underscoring the necessity for a structured and comprehensive approach within educational systems. Such an approach should include tailored programs targeting diverse age groups, educational levels, and cultural backgrounds, while ensuring accessibility for all segments of society, including marginalized communities and individuals with varying levels of digital literacy. Addressing this challenge demands inclusive strategies and proper resource allocation.

Cross-sectoral cooperation

Cross-sectoral cooperation in media literacy strategy is crucial. However, there still is a lack of understanding of media literacy concepts and competences, as well as a lack of unity and coherence among governmental institutions, hindering effective collaboration. Decision-making systems in education are bureaucratic, limiting flexibility in media literacy

implementation. Limited resources contribute to competition rather than cooperation among CSOs. Moreover, insufficient representation of media literacy efforts across the EU poses a threat to effective implementation. Collaboration among stakeholders, including governments, CSOs and academics is essential for promoting effective media literacy initiatives. By enhancing collaboration, stakeholders can leverage resources, expertise, and best practices to develop and implement impactful strategies. Furthermore, establishing mechanisms for effective collaboration between the European Union and civil society organizations is necessary to harness diverse perspectives and resources for media literacy efforts. This collaboration can facilitate the development of innovative approaches and ensure that initiatives are tailored to the specific needs of different communities. In addition, there is a need to develop mechanisms for sharing best practices in media literacy between countries, regions, and stakeholders. By sharing successful strategies and approaches, stakeholders can learn from each other's experiences and adapt proven methods to their own contexts. This sharing of knowledge can contribute to the promotion of effective strategies and the advancement of media literacy efforts at a European level.

Multidisciplinary research

Conducting multidisciplinary research on disinformation faces several challenges, including insufficient funding, limited government interest, and inadequate cooperation among scientists and practitioners. These obstacles hinder the advancement of knowledge in this field and the development of evidence-based strategies to combat disinformation effectively through media literacy. Overcoming these threats requires collaboration among stakeholders to ensure research efforts receive adequate support and coordination. By addressing these challenges, researchers can better understand the complexities of disinformation and develop more effective interventions to mitigate its impact on society through media literacy initiatives.

Resources and sustainability

The importance of media literacy is often overlooked by governments and other actors with financial resources. Donor organizations may deprioritize media literacy initiatives, potentially jeopardizing their sustainability. Financial instability poses significant risks to media literacy efforts, particularly for Civil society organisations (CSOs), which are playing a key role and are recognised as one of the most important media literacy stakeholders in our societies. Governments often don't allocate the financial means to fulfill their obligations and goals in the realm of media literacy, while media literacy initiatives receive inadequate support at local levels with little emphasis on lifelong learning programs essential for maintaining their relevance and effectiveness.

Effective assessment of media literacy skills

Assessing media literacy skills poses a significant challenge due to the dynamic nature of media consumption, which evolves rapidly alongside technological advancements and shifting media trends. Media literacy includes various dimensions, such as critical thinking, digital literacy, information verification, and ethical considerations, making it difficult to develop comprehensive assessment tools that capture all aspects effectively. Moreover, the lack of standardized metrics and evaluation frameworks for media literacy skills hampers efforts to assess proficiency consistently across different contexts and populations. Additionally, there are several challenges in effectively evaluating media literacy initiatives, including a lack of

flexibility in redefining goals and indicators. Furthermore, a shortage of professional experts involved in projects, changes in society and media consumption, as well as the poor selection of evaluation methods further complicate comparative evaluation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on the common challenges that have been previously shared and on the outcomes of the international workshops implemented by the consortium with the involvement of experts from the key sectors within the media literacy landscape. The goal of these recommendations is to support the development of a European media literacy strategy grounded in a holistic and multidisciplinary approach, alongside cross-sectoral cooperation. Such an approach aims to address all segments of society, mitigate the dissemination of false information, and uphold principles of equality, integrity, and democratic participation in the digital age. The recommendations are structured around 7 main pillars.

1. Promotion of Media literacy to tackle disinformation

- Launch awareness campaigns at both national and European levels to highlight the importance of media literacy in navigating today's media landscape. These campaigns should target diverse demographics, including youth, seniors, and vulnerable populations, and emphasize practical strategies for identifying and combatting disinformation.
- Encourage grassroots initiatives, civil society organizations, and community leaders to promote media literacy and combat disinformation locally.
- More financial resources at both national and European levels for CSOs to support media literacy initiatives. Funding should enable CSOs to develop and implement comprehensive media literacy programs in coordination with the relevant actors. Financial support should facilitate the collaboration and networking of CSOs with other stakeholders, fostering cross-sectoral cooperation and the sharing of best practices.
- Include increased media literacy in the UN sustainable development goals or their successor. Media literacy should be part of the SDGs because it is essential for achieving multiple development and educational objectives. Responsibility for promoting media literacy lies with governments, educational institutions, media organizations, civil society, and international organizations working collaboratively to ensure that all individuals have the skills and knowledge to critically engage with media content and contribute to sustainable development.

2. Media Literacy in School Curricula

- Implement a comprehensive media literacy curriculum across all levels of education, from primary to tertiary institutions. This curriculum should include critical thinking skills, source evaluation techniques, and digital literacy components tailored to navigating online platforms. Pedagogical approaches should be adapted based on school levels, educational systems, and national contexts. The curriculum should be implemented at a national level and primarily be the responsibility of the department of education in partnership with actors like EDMO and local relevant actors.
- Provide professional development for educators offering training courses for teachers covering all media literacy competencies in order to enhance their own media literacy skills and teaching methods. This will ensure that educators are equipped to effectively teach media literacy concepts in the classroom and address disinformation issues with students.
- Integration of media literacy as a formal subject in primary and secondary education curricula, ensuring comprehensive coverage of media competencies from an early age. Work towards standardizing media education curriculum across Europe to promote consistent learning outcomes.
- Develop educational initiatives that combine digital competency, focusing on technical skills for verifying sources, with information competency, emphasizing substantive interpretation and critical evaluation skills essential for recognizing disinformation.
- Support funding to educational initiatives addressing media and information literacy research, development and training in schools.
- Harmonize national standards with best practices observed in other Member States.
- Enable students to engage in continuous lifelong learning with media and information literacy.
- Increase the accessibility of media literacy initiatives through diverse communication tools tailored to different social groups' preferences and lifestyles. Use libraries, educational institutions, online platforms, and government campaigns to reach a wider audience, including individuals with varying levels of digital literacy.
- Media literacy in school curricula must include the following key principles as stated in the UNESCO Global Standards for Media and Information Literacy Curricula Developments Guidelines [18]:
    - Address hate speech
    - Advance human rights
    - Promote safety and rule of law
    - Support gender equality
    - Reduce barriers to mutual understanding
    - Reduce inequalities

3. Multidisciplinary Approach

- Facilitate multidisciplinary research involving experts from fields such as politics, human rights, sociology, psychology, law, communication, economics, statistics, and

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[18]
https://www.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/files/2022/02/Global%20Standards%20for%20Media%20and%20Information%20Literacy%20Curricula%20Development%20Guidelines_EN.pdf

medical science to study the origins, impacts, and countermeasures against disinformation.
- Partner with social media companies to implement measures to detect, label, and remove disinformation content from their platforms. Encourage platforms to promote fact-checking initiatives and media literacy notions.
- Provide support and resources for independent journalism and fact-checking organizations to facilitate cross-sectoral cooperation in media programmes.
- Media workers and journalists remain key actors in the promotion and the development of an effective media literacy strategy. Media organizations, along with media professionals, should undergo training in media literacy and receive guidance on enhancing the value of their productions for users. Additionally, actions should be considered within the European Commission's strategy for Corporate Social Responsibility, encouraging companies to assume responsibility for their societal impact.
- Media workers and journalists should embrace new technologies while upholding traditional values of accuracy, objectivity, and transparency.

4. Research in media literacy

- Encourage collaboration among researchers from diverse disciplines, including politics, sociology, human rights, psychology, law, and economics, to conduct comprehensive research on disinformation phenomena and its impacts.
- Increase funding allocated to media literacy research to support in-depth studies and address knowledge gaps, enabling researchers to explore new avenues and methodologies.
- Facilitate international cooperation and knowledge sharing among scientists, practitioners, and policymakers to exchange insights, experiences, and best practices in combating disinformation across borders.
- Involve stakeholders, including governments, NGOs, platforms, and civil society organizations, in policy development processes to ensure inclusive and effective media literacy initiatives at local, national, and European levels.

5. Social inclusion and access

- Establish community-based media literacy programs targeting marginalised and vulnerable groups, including low-income communities, ethnic minorities, and rural populations. These programs can include workshops, training sessions, and access to resources aimed at empowering individuals to navigate media content effectively and critically engage with information.
- Implement policies to bridge the digital divide and improve access to technology and internet services in underserved communities, including rural areas and low-income neighbourhoods. This can involve investment in digital infrastructure, subsidies for internet access, and support for community centres and libraries providing public access to computers and internet connectivity.
- Design media literacy programs tailored to various demographics, including different age groups, educational backgrounds, and minority communities, by offering content and delivery methods that resonate with their preferences and needs. Use diverse

communication tools and language to ensure accessibility and relevance for all segments of society.
- Use technology and visual media, such as short videos and interactive materials, to create engaging and informative content that effectively communicates key media literacy concepts and skills to diverse audiences.
- Foster collaboration between academia, government agencies, NGOs, media outlets, and other stakeholders to develop comprehensive and inclusive media literacy programs that leverage diverse expertise, resources, and networks to address social inclusion challenges effectively.

6. Involvement of civil society

- Strengthen the role of civil society organizations in promoting media literacy by providing resources, training, and support to enhance their capacity to engage communities, raise awareness, and advocate for media literacy initiatives at local and national levels.
- Implement trainings with participation of media experts, journalists, psychologists, IT specialists, AI researchers, content creators, graphic designers, fact checkers and citizens (with particular emphasis on specific groups – such as citizens with limited education opportunities, students, older generation representatives, teachers).
- Create effective mechanisms to stimulate the reporting of fake news by users themselves: Informational campaigns on a national level on how to report fake news; engaging citizens in shaping the media landscape.
- Labelling of trusted media/ news sources: EU label of trusted media based on expert assessment (and pre-defined criteria).
- Media literacy training specifically addressed to social media moderators: Engaging media companies, digital marketing agencies, freelance journalists and online content moderators in training to help them recognize and report fake and misleading news.
- Extra-curricular media literacy school activities addressed to the younger generation that consumes and shares online media content daily.
- Mobile app training (media literacy education in the form of gamification) and audio guides on how to recognize and report fake news/ effective instruments and techniques to recognize them; relevant authorities/ institutions to report disinformation acts to.
- Mental health sessions focused on the consumption of information (modern media landscape and its influence on mental well-being) addressed to citizens facing mental health issues (stress, anxiety, burn-out syndrome, etc.) in cooperation with corporate sector to encourage employees to visit such sessions.
- Co-creation of educational materials or educational programmes by citizens from different social groups.
- Public Listings of bad/ good media practices (practitioners) aimed to improve the general knowledge and use of reliable high-standards media (both traditional and new media).

7. Evaluation and assessment

- Encourage the monitoring and evaluation of disinformation trends, impacts, and effectiveness of countermeasures. Adapt strategies and interventions based on real-time data and feedback to stay ahead of evolving disinformation tactics.

- Use a combination of qualitative and quantitative assessment methods, including surveys, interviews, case studies, and media analysis projects, to capture the diverse range of media literacy skills and competencies among students.
- Design assessments that focus on students' ability to apply media literacy skills in real-world contexts, such as evaluating media messages, identifying bias and misinformation, and creating media content, to gauge their practical proficiency and critical thinking abilities.
- Incorporate self-reflection exercises and peer evaluation mechanisms into the assessment process, encouraging students to reflect on their own media literacy development and provide constructive feedback to their peers, fostering a collaborative learning environment.
- Tailor assessment criteria to align with specific learning objectives and outcomes, ensuring that assessments accurately measure students' mastery of key media literacy concepts, competencies, and ethical considerations.
- Offer ongoing feedback and support to students throughout their media literacy education programme, empowering them to identify areas for improvement, refine their skills, and cultivate a lifelong commitment to media literacy learning.
- Establish community-based learning platforms, such as education hubs, libraries, and community centers, to provide accessible and inclusive spaces for adults to engage in media literacy workshops, seminars, and collaborative learning experiences.
- Foster peer learning and mentoring networks among adult learners, enabling them to exchange knowledge, share experiences, and support each other in developing media literacy skills and strategies for media engagement.
- Provide professional development opportunities and resources for educators and facilitators involved in adult education programs to enhance their capacity to integrate media literacy principles and practices into lifelong learning initiatives effectively.

Conclusions

This final activity of the MLFD project provides a detailed analysis of the challenges facing media literacy across the participating countries and offers key recommendations for addressing these issues effectively. The identified challenges, such as the digital divide, the impact of social media, and the lack of shared responsibility in combating disinformation, underscore the urgent need for cohesive and targeted interventions to promote media literacy among diverse populations, including the vulnerable and marginalised groups. The recommendations outlined in this report present a multifaceted approach that includes awareness campaigns, integration of media literacy into educational curricula, fostering multidisciplinary research, promoting social inclusion and access, involving and allocating financial resources to civil society organizations, and implementing rigorous evaluation mechanisms. Through the implementation of these recommendations, the EU can significantly enhance its citizens' ability to critically engage with media content, navigate complex information landscapes, and discern between credible and misleading sources. Moreover, the collaborative involvement of stakeholders from various sectors, including governments, academia, civil society organisations, and platforms, is crucial for the successful implementation of these initiatives and the cultivation of a media-literate society able to empower its citizens to become active participants in democratic processes, promote social cohesion, and mitigate the harmful effects of disinformation on society, even in times of crisis.