

# Media Literacy for Democracy



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# 1. ABSTRACT

*The fight against disinformation is a joint effort involving all European institutions.*

**The Media Literacy for Democracy** project focuses on promoting an effective media literacy strategy based on the multidisciplinary approach and cross-sector cooperation to tackle disinformation and empower citizens to make informed decisions and protect democratic values.

This booklet aims at informing citizens of the negative impact of disinformation on democratic societies and the importance of media literacy to build the capacity of civil society to adapt to the digital era. The booklet will help define an effective European strategy to promote media literacy in the Member States.

In the period April 2020 - September 2021, the *CommEUnication – Youth Engagement for communicating the EU* project, funded by the Europe for Citizens Programme, was implemented by the Italian Federation for Human Rights (FIDU) as an action aimed at countering Euroscepticism through the construction of a new strategy of communication able to promote a correct understanding of the EU, its values, and its benefits and at empowering citizens to widen their civic participation and to tackle disinformation. The project focused on analysing the general perception of the EU in each of the participating countries and promoting targeted information in those policy areas that represent a priority in the EU agenda but which are also more susceptible to disinformation. To acknowledge the extent of disinformation in the EU and get a broader understanding of how much the EU citizens know about the European Union, the consortium conducted an online survey.

The findings from the survey *“How much do we know about the EU? A survey about communication and disinformation”* showed that fake news and disinformation spread quickly, and national populism and polarisation of opinions are a real threat to the EU. The survey reached a total number of 989 respondents between 17 and 71 years old across Europe who regularly use social media platforms, which are considered vulnerable to fake news and disinformation. However, the survey also identified that EU citizens are using diverse strategies to identify fake news and disinformation, where 90.47% of respondents check with other news sources, while 7.48% of respondents assume that all information is fake. Based on the findings of the survey and the general conclusions from the *CommEUnication* project, the follow-up project *Media Literacy for Democracy*, funded under the CERV Programme, was launched on 1 November 2022.

## 2. WHAT IS DISINFORMATION AND MISINFORMATION?

Amongst the greatest advances of online media in the digital era are quick access to various online sources, the large array of information and the absence of spatial and temporal barriers. But despite its many advantages, new media hides a significant risk for users - the exposure to unreliable sources such as fake news and disinformation. One of the main characteristics of a journalistic text is its credibility. Every journalistic text intended for dissemination must reflect specific facts and events of its social reality. In the digital realm, it is not easy to tackle the origin and purposes of a given online content, which makes us vulnerable to being exposed to fake news.

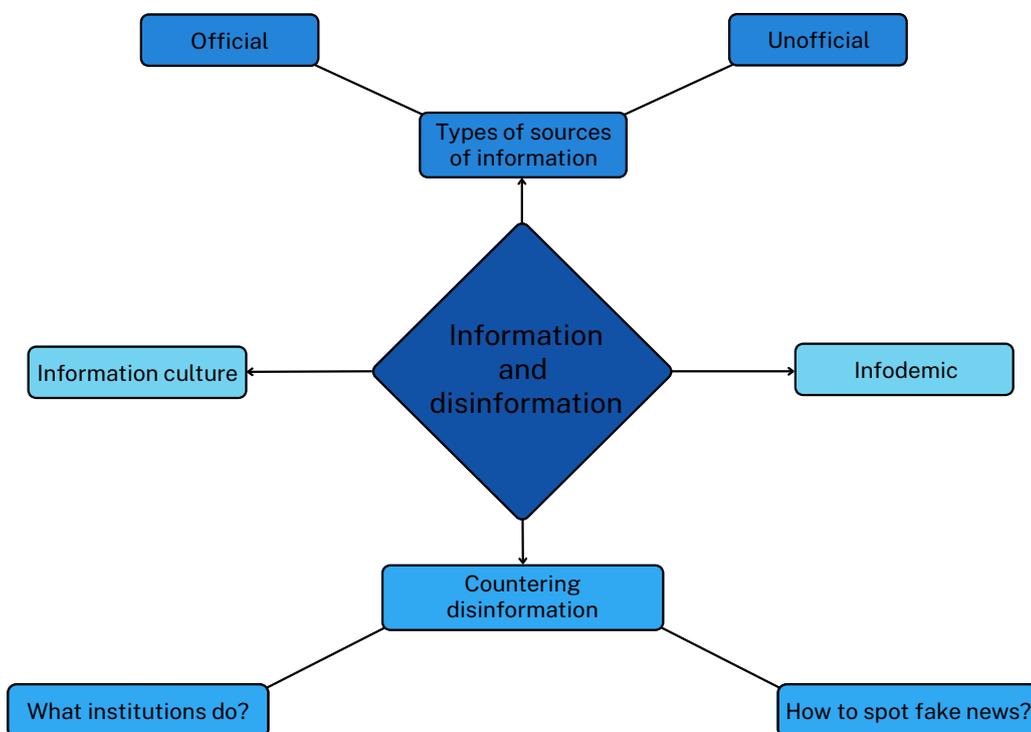
The EU institutions and our society understand the need for immediate actions to protect EU citizens from the dangers in the digital realm. One of the six Commissions' priorities for 2019-2024 is making **Europe fit for the digital era**, empowering people with a new generation of technologies, and tackling the spread of online disinformation and misinformation to protect European values and democratic systems.

The European Commission defines **disinformation as false or misleading content that is spread with an intention to deceive or secure economic or political gain and which may cause public harm**. In other words, people use and share this information to harm society.

In contrast, **misinformation is false or misleading content shared without harmful intent, though the effects can be still harmful**. Hence, by spreading this information, people do not intend to harm societal perceptions. However, the spread of both forms, disinformation and misinformation, threatens European democracies, polarises debates and puts the health, security and environment of EU citizens at risk.

### Social media and disinformation

In today's digital era, information and disinformation travel faster than factual information, shifting the narrative of the information flow. The power of social media gives readers and content creators the ability to consume and engage in whatever interests them most.



According to the World Health Organisation (WHO) an infodemic is too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak.

**Infographic:** The vicious circle of the spread and flow of information and disinformation.

The proliferation of disinformation happens fast, as there is no scientific reading freely available for the users. People read posts on social media more than scientific publications, and there is the mathematics behind it: the algorithm of social media platforms that recommends similar news, images and videos based on personal data collection and preferences. There are different ways by which disinformation circulates. Social media play a crucial role in spreading disinformation in a sea of bots and trolls.

# HOW DOES SOCIAL MEDIA PLAY A CRITICAL ROLE IN SPREADING DISINFORMATION



## EASY

It is easy to share news.



## NO PREVENTION

No effective measure to prevent.



## INNER CIRCLE

The impact of "inner circle".



## WORLDWIDE

Social Media is effective worldwide.



## NO SCIENTIFIC READING

People read posts on social media more than scientific publication



## ALGORITHM

Social media platforms recommend similar news, images and videos based on personal data collection and algorithm.



## FAST

Faster proliferation of disinformation.

**BOT:** A software program that can execute commands, reply to messages, or perform routine tasks, as online searches, either automatically or with minimal human intervention.

**TROLL:** A person who intentionally antagonises others online by posting inflammatory, irrelevant, or offensive comments or other disruptive content.

## 2.1 IMPACT AND COUNTERING OF DISINFORMATION

We live in a network society, in which information travels faster than ever before. Social and media networks shape communities and nobody can stay entirely isolated from others. Hence, the phenomenon of disinformation can be treated as a world-wide challenge. It requires a well-coordinated response from the EU member states, EU institutions, social networks and online platforms, news outlets and citizens. The impact of disinformation can cause a severe polarising effect, undermine democratic debate and our democratic societies.

The EU first recognised the immediate threat of online disinformation campaigns in 2015 when such campaigns originating from Russia were classified as hybrid threats. The collected evidence shows that foreign state actors are increasingly using disinformation strategies to influence societal debates and interfere in decision-making processes. Since 2015, the European Commission has developed a number of tools, actions and initiatives to help citizens and organisations combat disinformation.

**The Commission's Communication 'Tackling online disinformation: a European approach' (2018)** outlines key overarching principles and objectives, which should guide actions and specific measures to raise public awareness and tackle the phenomenon of disinformation effectively. The EU recognises the need to strengthen collective resilience in support of our democratic bearings and European values. This can be achieved by fostering the following principles:

- To improve transparency regarding the origin of information and the way it is produced
- To promote diversity of information to enable citizens to make informed choices
- To foster credibility of information by providing an indication of its trustworthiness
- To promote inclusive solutions such as awareness-raising, more media literacy, cooperation of public institutions, online platforms, advertisers, journalists and media groups

**The Action Plan against Disinformation (2018)** aims to strengthen EU capability and cooperation in the fight against disinformation. The coordinated response to the evolving disinformation threat relies on four pillars:

- Improving the capabilities of Union institutions to detect, analyse and expose disinformation
- Strengthening coordinated and joint responses to disinformation
- Mobilising private sector to tackle disinformation
- Raising awareness and improving societal resilience

One of the tools created under the Action Plan against Disinformation is the Rapid Alert System called EUvsDisinfo (<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>). Its core objective is to increase public awareness and understanding of the Kremlin's disinformation operations, and to help citizens in Europe and beyond develop resistance to digital information and media manipulation.

Countering disinformation is one of three milestones in **the European Democracy Action plan (2020)**, designed to empower citizens and build more resilient democracies across the EU, as well as developing guidelines for obligations and accountability of online platforms in the fight against disinformation.

To combat the spread of disinformation one has to start on an individual level and further expand on a community level.



Infographic: Combating disinformation on an individual level

At an individual level one can start by:

- Reporting false information to platforms
- Getting information on reliable sites
- Become a fact-checker
- Think before you share!
- Check the sources, the author and the pictures!

At a community level:

**The European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)** is a project that supports the independent community working to combat disinformation. EDMO brings together fact-checkers, media literacy experts, and academic researchers to understand and analyse disinformation, in collaboration with media organisations, online platforms and media literacy practitioners: <https://edmo.eu/>.

**EU Disinfo Lab** is an independent non-profit organisation focused on tackling sophisticated disinformation campaigns targeting the EU, its member states, core institutions, and core values. Through research, knowledge sharing, advocacy and outreach, the organisation does annual conferences and debates to combat disinformation. (source: <https://www.disinfo.eu/>).

**EUFACHECK** wishes to motivate fact-based debate in the EU and to stimulate media and information literacy. Through fact checking European political claims to tackle misinformation, this platform aims for the public to grow a deeper insight and interest in democratic processes, both on national and European level. (source: <https://eufactcheck.eu/>).

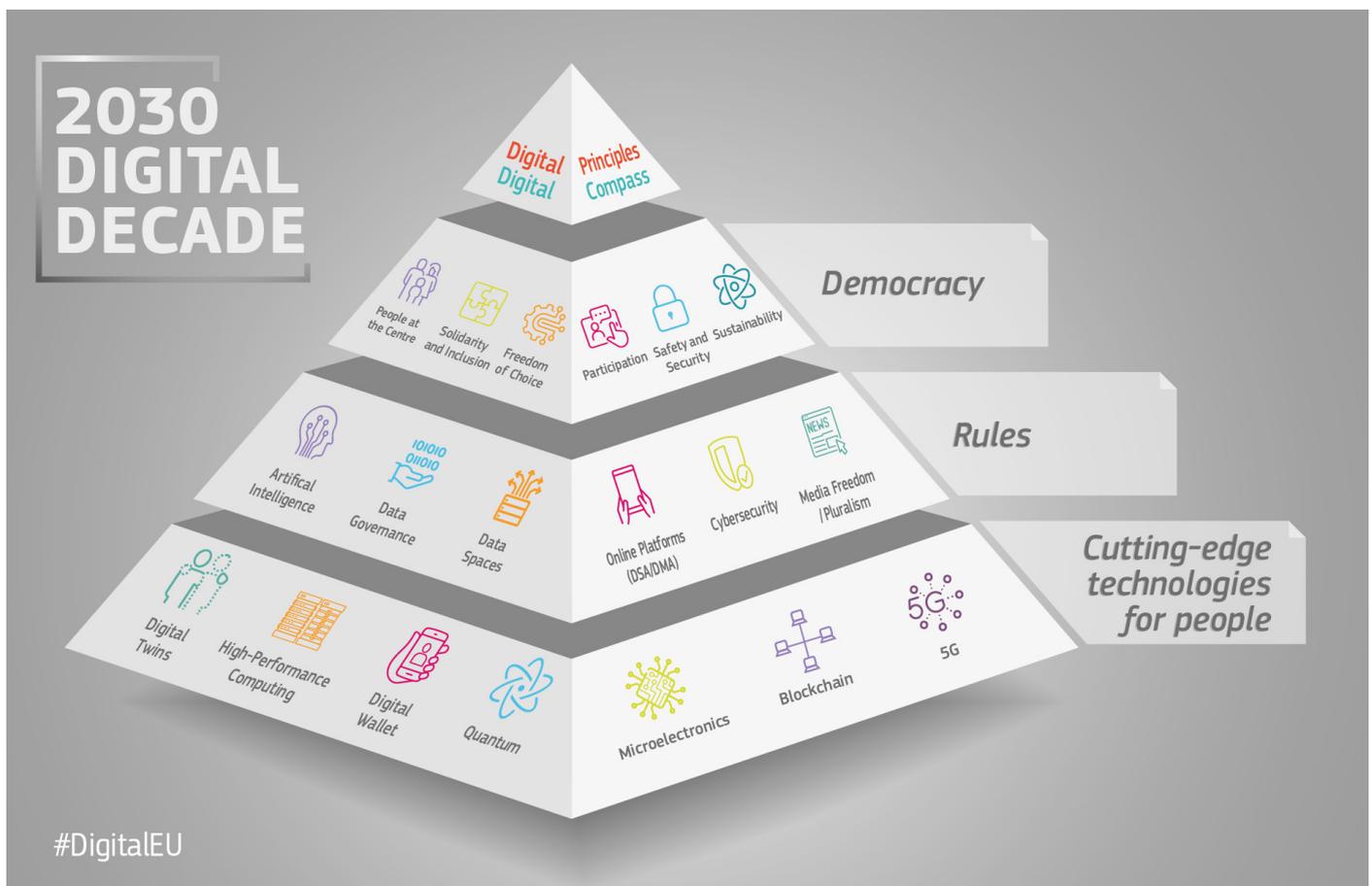
### 3. WHAT IS MEDIA LITERACY?

*Information literacy is related to the dynamic process of globalisation and digitization of information.*

According to the Council of Europe, **media and information literacy** are the main tools for empowering people, communities, and nations to participate in and contribute to global knowledge societies.

Media literacy is of utmost importance for individuals to be able to develop cognitive, technical and social skills and capacities that enable them to effectively access and critically analyse media content. Media literacy is essential for our work, life and citizenship, because it allows us to make informed choices, understand the ethical side of media and new technology and, above all, to communicate effectively in the digital age.

Media literacy plays a crucial role within the Commission's priorities and the Commission's digital strategy, as a prerequisite for citizens of all ages to navigate in the modern news environment and make informed decisions. The life-long education on critical and digital competencies is crucial to reinforce the resilience of our societies to disinformation.



The digital divide (<https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/europes-digital-decade>).

The most convenient weapon in the fight against disinformation is education and the acquisition of digital skills, media and technical literacy. In this regard, **the EU's digital strategy focuses on transforming the businesses and lives of people, while also fostering actions towards a climate-neutral Europe by 2050.**

### Priorities of the EU's digital strategy:

- Invest in digital skills for all Europeans
- Protect people from cyber threats (hacking, ransomware, identity theft)
- Ensure artificial intelligence is developed in ways that respect people's rights and earn their trust
- Accelerate the roll-out of ultra-fast broadband for homes, schools and hospitals throughout the EU
- Expand Europe's super-computing capacity to develop innovative solutions for medicine, transport and the environment

The digital age has made it easy and accessible for everyone to create, share and consume media. But, we don't always have the means to know who created the media content, why it has been made like this, and most importantly whether it is **credible**.

This, to some extent, makes media literacy tricky to learn and teach. Nevertheless, it can teach us:

- To think critically
- To become a smart consumer of products and information
- To recognise a point of view
- To create media responsibly
- To identify the role of media in our culture
- To understand the author's goal and intentions

## 3.1 THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN DEMOCRACY

***Independent media is essential for the functioning of a democratic society.***

Media is often called nowadays the fourth pillar of democracy and its power is vital for generating a democratic culture that extends beyond the political system. Media is supplying political information, and society bases its assumptions and makes decisions on it. Having a real democracy includes a politically and economically free media. A civil, democratic, tolerant society primarily includes the media as an information medium and communication tool.

Democracy is one of the core EU values and a foundation on which the European Union is built. Democracy can flourish only where freedom of expression and freedom of information are adhered to, allowing for citizens to freely express their views regardless of any criticism towards the government or those in power.

Freedom of expression is crucial for democracy. There are many aspects to this rationale, but the fundamental concept is that in order for democracy to be effective, the citizenry that votes in elections and engages in public processes with the government must be informed and must have the right to participate freely in public discourse.

One of the rationales of the notion of democracy is the right of people to elect their political leaders and to make free and informed decisions, which cannot exist in a meaningful way without the right to freedom of expression.

The European Union’s commitments to respect media freedom and pluralism and to uphold freedom of expression — which includes the right to receive and impart information without interference by public authority — are enshrined in Article 11 of the EU’s Charter of Fundamental Rights, which mirrors Article 10 of the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms.

Infringement on the independence and abuse of media for political and economic gains essentially lead to limitations of the freedom of expression, which might prove detrimental to democracy.

In 2022, the European Commission adopted a **European Media Freedom Act**, composed of a set of rules to protect media pluralism and independence in the EU. The Act lays down rules for the independence of media regulators, promotes transparency of media ownership and recognises that editorial decisions should be free from interference.

The Act will ensure that both public and private media can operate more easily across borders in the EU internal market, without undue pressure and taking into account the digital transformation of the media landscape.

## EUROPEAN MEDIA FREEDOM ACT



**No interference in editorial decisions of media**



**No spyware against journalists**



**Independent and adequately funded public service media**



**Transparency of ownership**



**Transparent and fair audience measurement systems and allocation of state advertising**



**Establishment of a new European Board for Media Services**



**More protection for media against unjustified online content removal**



**Assessment of market concentrations and requirements on national measures affecting the media**

### Commission recommendation

**Toolbox of good practices to promote internal safeguards on editorial independence and media ownership transparency**

## 3.2 THE DIGITAL ERA AND MEDIA LITERACY

### *Being digitally competent – a task for the 21st-century citizen*

Media and the online space play a vital role in formatting and consolidating public attitudes. The media not only have informative functions but also establish the moral limits of publicity. Citizens should acquire the knowledge and skills to distinguish between fact and fiction in our highly digitised and mediatised world. Media literacy is becoming an essential component of education. It is not only of vital importance to develop critical thinking to recognise disinformation but also to harness the full potential of the media creatively.

The Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp) provides a common understanding of what digital competence is, as well as a basis for framing digital skills policy.



Information and data literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.1 Browsing, searching and filtering data information and digital content</li> <li>1.2 Evaluating data, information and digital content</li> <li>1.3 Managing data, information and digital content</li> </ul>
Communication and collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2.1 Interacting through digital technologies</li> <li>2.2 Sharing information and content through digital technologies</li> <li>2.3 Engaging in citizenship through digital technologies</li> <li>2.4 Collaborating through digital technologies</li> <li>2.5 Netiquette</li> <li>2.6 Managing digital identity</li> </ul>
Digital content creation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3.1 Developing digital content</li> <li>3.2 Integrating and re-elaborating digital content</li> <li>3.3 Copyright and licences</li> <li>3.4 Programming</li> </ul>
Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4.1 Protecting devices</li> <li>4.2 Protecting personal data and privacy</li> <li>4.3 Protecting health and well-being</li> <li>4.4 Protecting the environment</li> </ul>
Problem solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5.1 Solving technical problems</li> <li>5.2 Identifying needs and technological responses</li> <li>5.3 Creatively using digital technologies</li> <li>5.4 Identifying digital competence gaps</li> </ul>

Source: [https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/digcomp\\_en](https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/digcomp_en)

DigComp is an important tool to support the EU's Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027, which in turn contributes to the Commission's priority 'A Europe fit for the Digital Age' and to Next Generation EU.

The Digital Education Action Plan (2021-2027) is a renewed European Union policy initiative that sets out a common vision of high-quality, inclusive and accessible digital education in Europe, and aims to support the adaptation of the education and training systems of Member States to the digital age.

To be ready for the digital decade, the European Commission has introduced six rights and principles that should guide the Union in the digital transformation, promoting a sustainable and human-centric vision.



### PEOPLE AT THE CENTRE

Digital technologies should **protect people's rights, support democracy, and ensure that all digital players act responsibly and safely.** The EU promotes these values across the world.



### SOLIDARITY AND INCLUSION

Technology should **unite, not divide, people.** Everyone should have access to the internet, to digital skills, to digital public services, and to fair working conditions.



### FREEDOM OF CHOICE

People should benefit from a **fair online environment, be safe from illegal and harmful content,** and be empowered when they interact with new and evolving technologies like artificial intelligence.



### PARTICIPATION

Citizens should be able to **engage in the democratic process** at all levels, and have **control over their own data.**



### SAFETY AND SECURITY

The digital environment should be **safe and secure.** All users, from childhood to old age, should be empowered and protected.



### SUSTAINABILITY

Digital devices should support **sustainability** and the **green transition.** People need to know about the environmental impact and energy consumption of their devices.

## 4. CIVIL SOCIETY AND PARTICIPATION

Nowadays, participation is not just limited to holding political office or voting. The notion of participation has expanded to our behaviour and actions in the virtual public spheres. This brings new opportunities for civic engagement, making it easier for young people to participate through various forms in the public and democratic life of their communities. This particular behaviour is sometimes called e-participation or smart participation.

The EU works extensively to involve young people in the shaping of the European future through a participatory approach, beyond simply participating in elections. The European Commission's work efforts to support a vibrant civil society and to promote and enhance democratic participation through fostering policies on EU citizenship, equality, non-discrimination, youth, research, education and culture.

The Youth Participatory Strategy enhances youth participation in democratic life through the Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps programmes. Young people nowadays are involved in various alternative forms of participation, such as online and offline activism, volunteerism, youth clubs, youth Councils, and youth social movements. These new forms of participation bring a transition in the youth civil society as well, from a structured hierarchical model to more networked and diverse ones.

The EU Youth Strategy (2019-2027) aims to promote active citizenship among young people and to foster their participation in democratic life. The strategy is built around the terms *Engage*, *Empower* and *Connect* and places youth participation right at the forefront of the EU's youth policy.

### Other tools for active participation in decision-making:

**Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps** aim to promote active citizenship and the participation of young people. Both programmes offer a diverse range of opportunities for civic engagement by supporting young people and communities across Europe.

**ENTR** is a truly pan-European and multilingual project that provides a new space for open and authentic discussion about our shared present and future. ENTR shines a light on the abundance of different perspectives across Europe. ENTR and discover! (source: <https://entr.net/en/>).

**Citizens Dialogues** are public debates with Commissioners and other EU decision-makers, which are aimed to ensure that the needs are met and can influence policy decisions and making. The Citizens dialogues are held across the EU, the sessions are free to attend and many are broadcasted live online.

**What Europe does for me** is a website that provides citizens around Europe with short, easily readable notes on how the EU has improved their lives. A quick and simple navigation by region, profession, leisure activity will help you to discover what it has done for you. The notes provide a snapshot of EU action for citizens - based on interesting examples, with onward links to further information - rather than trying to list everything the EU has ever done. The website has been put together by the European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), in conjunction with the Communications and Translations services of the European Parliament. Website: <https://what-europe-does-for-me.eu/>



The spread of disinformation and misinformation is a threat to the European Union and a tangible concern to our democratic systems. The EU institutions put a lot of effort into various action plans, tools and instruments that can help in the fight against disinformation. Moreover, the EU is working with online media platforms, technology companies, civil society and fact-checkers to encourage the spread of factual and credible information and take down fake news that might harm the readers. All coordinated joint actions aim to separate fact from fiction and strengthen democratic societies across Europe.

The European Action Plan on Democracy and the 2018 Action Plan against Disinformation have something in common – the coordinated response to disinformation and the building of more resilient democracies across the EU. In addition, the Commission's Communication 'Tackling online disinformation: a European approach' (2018) guides actions and specific measures to raise public awareness and tackle the phenomenon of disinformation effectively by promoting the principles of transparency, diversity, credibility, and inclusiveness. Together with the European Media Freedom plan, the European Commission provides a coordinated response to tackling disinformation but also addresses the importance of raising awareness on strengthening democracy and democratic procedures in Europe.

By acquiring digital and media literacy skills, people have the means to navigate themselves in the digital realm and protect their democratic society from the negative impact of disinformation. Media literacy is gaining more and more popularity as an academic and social discipline in an ever-changing and digitally transitioning public sphere. Being able to think critically and analytically, distinguish facts from false information and be a digitally competent consumer and creator of media content is becoming the skill of the 21st century.

Being digitally aware has a lot to do with participation as well. The forms of participation and civic engagement have also been shifted in the digital era, providing new means of participation in democratic processes. These new means revolve around the notion of active citizenship, which, on the one hand, has to do with being actively involved in the democratic life of one's community and, on the other, promoting the EU's core values, such as democracy, equality, the rule of law and general human rights.

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