



Co-funded by
the European Union

**Media literacy and Disinformation Response
Readiness in Bulgaria
Needs assessment and state-of-play analysis**



Read Twice has received funding under Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) of the European Union, under Grant Agreement 101081326.

The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of Euro Advance Association and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the European Union.

Editorial information

Euro Advance Association

Euro Advance Association is a non-governmental organization established in Sofia in 2013. The Association's non-profit activities are related to organizing various public initiatives and events, and analyses on topics related to Europe and the European Union, local and regional self-government. The Association was a winner of the European Citizen's Prize of the European Parliament for 2021.

Among our main goals are the promotion and support of initiatives related to local and regional development, promotion of cooperation between Bulgarian and European regions, youth empowerment, support for the development of civil society and assistance in developing and building a new model for cooperation between the non-governmental sector and government institutions with the aim of improving the support for young people.

The Association maintains "TheMayor.EU - the European portal for cities and citizens", which publishes daily news, stories and good practices by local and regional authorities in the European Union. TheMayor.EU has proven to be a trusted media partner and actively works with municipalities from different corners of the EU, public institutions at European, local and regional levels, as well as international NGOs working on urban development, sustainability, culture and youth empowerment.

Authors

Aseniya Dimitrova has a bachelor's degree in political sciences and master's degree in Political Management and Public Policies from New Bulgarian University. She also has a Master in European Projects from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". She has been working on various projects with Euro Advance Association and the non-profit sector in the past decade. She has also been managing TheMayor.EU – the European Portal for Cities and Citizens, winner of the European Citizen's Prize of the European Parliament for 2021. Currently, she is the Project Manager of Read Twice.

Stoyanka Germanova has a bachelor's degree in Bulgarian Philology, and master's in Diplomacy and Intelligence. A journalist and a teacher of Bulgarian language and literature. She is the winner of the "Vreme razdelno" scholarship awarded by academician Anton Donchev and the International Foundation St. Cyril and Methodius. She also won Journalist of the Year for 2021, awarded by the Bulgarian Teacher's Syndicate for her contribution to the popularization of topics in the field education and pedagogy. Currently, she is teacher of Bulgarian language and literature in 19th Middle School 'Elin Pelin', in Sofia, where she was declared Teacher of the Year. She also contributes as a reporter at Economic.bg.

Editor

Lora Simeonova, PhD is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Journalism and Publishing at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". She is a researcher in the field of print and online media, digital communications, and social networks. Simeonova is a journalist with extensive experience, having worked for 14 years at one of the most influential Bulgarian newspapers – "Standart Daily".

Simeonova has been teaching at the Faculty of Journalism since 2018. She develops and maintains educational media outlets such as "Z Generation" and "Z-Media Academy" in collaboration with students.

Lora Simeonova's research interests are focused on: the present and future of print and online media; the processes and trends in social networks and their socio-political impact; the rise of disinformation in the post-truth era; the communication models' transformation and the role of opinion leadership in the digital world.

Lora Simeonova is an author of a monograph titled "The (R)evolution of Influencers," as well as numerous papers dedicated to the metamorphosis of media and social networks development.

Correction:

Tzvetozar Iolov holds a bachelor's degree in Tourism Management from the University of Pretoria (South Africa), a bachelor's in European and Latin American Studies from University of Toronto (Canada) and a master's degree in international history from the Graduate Institute of Geneva (Switzerland). He has rich experience with pedagogy and teaching English language to adults in Spain. Currently, he's the Content Editor at TheMayor.EU.

Publication date: 21 July 2023, v. 1

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>Objective</i>	7
<i>About Read Twice (R2)</i>	7
<i>Executive summary</i>	9
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	11
<i>Introduction</i>	12
<i>Methodology</i>	15
<i>Findings</i>	17
Overview of curriculum related to media literacy	17
Table 1. Studying media literacy, fake news and disinformation in formal education	23
Stakeholders' interviews	30
General overview of the needs and skills gaps	46
Best practices	49
Media Literacy Days	49
Factcheck.bg	50
MeGra	51
Vijte: The News in Children's Language	51
<i>How Read Twice responds to the needs of young people?</i>	53
<i>Conclusions and recommendations</i>	54
<i>Sources</i>	57
<i>Annexes</i>	61
Questionnaire for expert interviews	61
Questionnaire for target groups	63

Objective

This document is part of the EU-funded project Read Twice. It aims to identify the skills-and-knowledge gaps and needs of the project target groups in the context of media literacy training.

About Read Twice (R2)

The European Commission recognises that disinformation poses major risks to European democracies and societies, and that this needs to be addressed in order to preserve European values and freedoms. Fake news undermines the trust of citizens in democracy and democratic institutions and contributes to the polarisation of public debate. Considering this, it is crucial to teach people how to assess content critically (especially online content) and make them more aware of the phenomenon of disinformation, and how it can interfere with democracy and human rights.

Project objective:

In this respect, Read Twice will counter disinformation and limit the spread of fake news by enhancing citizens` skills to assess information critically, to identify vicious and harmful media content and to distinguish between facts and opinions. The expected result is the general improvement in their media literacy competences.

The project consortium involves organisations coming from countries with high and low media literacy rankings. To ensure exchange of knowledge and best practices, and transfer of know-how two international capacity building trainings were conducted – one in Portugal and another in Germany. The events helped improve the capacity of 30 young media practitioners to identify disinformation and implement state-of-the-art practices in their media work.

Furthermore, 9 media literacy trainings for university students, 3 seminars for local stakeholders and multipliers in the field of media literacy will take place in Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia. In total, these are expected to involve almost one thousand people.

In addition, an international webinar will increase the access to and use of digital tools for countering disinformation. The social media campaign “Read twice, don't repeat lies” will encourage citizens to re-read the content they encounter and check if the information is accurate

and reliable before sharing it. At the end of the project, an international conference will take place in Brussels capitalising on the lessons learnt and promoting active participation in the EU policy-making process.

Partnership:

The project is coordinated by Euro Advance Association (Bulgaria), in partnership with Udruga za promicanje aktivnog gradanstva - ECHO (Croatia), Asociatia Se Poate (Romania), COFAC Cooperativa De Formacao E Animacao Cultural CRL (Portugal), Alliance 4 Europe GMBH (Germany).

Timeframe:

1 October 2022 - 31 March 2024

More information:

www.themayor.eu/en/read-twice

office@euroadvance.eu

Aseniya Dimitrova, Project Manager

Executive summary

The present document intends to be a general overview of the trends and needs identified among the target groups – (identified by themselves and by the stakeholders working with them) – when it comes to education and training concerning media literacy, fake news and disinformation. Having no ambition to be scientific or representative, it nevertheless managed to identify important challenges facing online media users in Bulgaria and some paths for resolving them.

The document makes an overview of the existing study curriculum related to media literacy and explores the presence of disciplines that treat the subjects of fake news and disinformation in the formal education system in Bulgaria. The results of this section show that media literacy is generally absent from the curriculum for the lower educational levels, while in higher education it is mainly encountered in specialised curriculums, such as those in found in journalism and communications university faculties. The specific topic of fake news and disinformation is rarely touched upon, at least as a separate subject. A suggestion is made to give more prominence in teaching this topic, given its growing importance for the socio-economic life and the threats that disinformation poses to the European values in Bulgaria.

Similarly, an analysis of interviews with 13 national stakeholders with professional background in journalism, education and training, identifies the same societal needs. Some long-lasting issues were identified as the reasons for the low media literacy levels and capacity to withstand disinformation. These are general problems with the quality of education, which fails to teach critical thinking, low levels of institutional trust, corruption, unstable media environment, and high levels of social media usage, among others. External influences as well as totalitarian past make Bulgarian society more prone to fall victim to false information. The most vulnerable are people with lower education levels and those who are isolated from the mainstream society. A widespread expert opinion is that media literacy must be included as a topic in formal educational settings as early as possible, but under the condition that those who teach it are well acquainted with the subject. Correspondingly, the need to train teachers how to use digital tools is very pressing, according to experts.

Finally, a survey among 50 online users reveals a general overconfidence in one's own abilities to discern fact from fake – something that does not correspond with previous representative surveys. Highly educated, the respondents confirm that they have generally learned the necessary skills to fend off disinformation with their own means – from professional and personal experience, having been forced to do so by life circumstances. However, they admit that there is a general problem of lack of training and suggest that younger generations should be taught about this contemporary challenge from an early age.

Acknowledgments

The authors of the publication would like to thank all contributors without whose assistance the analysis could not have been possible. This includes, among others, stakeholder interview responders and the organisations supporting them, surveys and polls responders, Read Twice consortium members and their contribution to defining a shared methodology and the European Union, which provided funding for the Read Twice project.

Introduction

The Read Twice project sprang up in response to a European call for proposals aimed at tackling the problem of disinformation in Europe through societal initiatives. The specific context of our initiative is the disadvantaged position held by part of the countries participating in the project, which continuously show poor standings in terms of media literacy.

Bulgaria ranks last among EU countries in the Media Literacy Index for 2023¹, published in June by the Open Society Institute – Sofia Foundation. The country occupies 35th place out of 41 ranked countries in Europe, which puts it among the nations most vulnerable to misinformation.

The index measures the potential vulnerability of societies to misinformation and related negative phenomena based on indicators of education quality, media freedom, trust in people and e-participation.

With a score of 31 points out of a maximum of 100, Bulgaria is still ahead of neighbouring Turkiye (36th place with 29 points) and the Republic of North Macedonia (39th place with 22 points), but behind Serbia (31st place with 33 points) and Romania (34th place with 32 points).

Compared to the 2022 index, Bulgaria dropped two places – from 33rd in 2022 to 35th in 2023 - and lost 2 points - from 33 points in 2022 to 31 points in 2023. Regardless, the country remains in the 4th cluster out of five. Bulgaria performs worst in the indicators related to education and media freedom, and best in the indicators on new forms of civic participation.

The overall ranking of the new Media Literacy Index 2023 is headed by Finland, which ranks 1st among 41 countries in Europe with 74 points out of a possible 100. It has remained a consistent leader in the six editions of the Index since 2017. Denmark takes the second position with 73 points, followed closely by Norway in third place with 72 points. Estonia and Sweden share 4th and 5th place respectively, with both countries scoring 71 points.

¹Лесенски, Марин. (2023). Индекс за медийна грамотност 2023 [Media Literacy Index 2023]. Институт „Отворено общество“ – София. Available on: <https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/MLI-report-in-Bulgarian-22.06.pdf>, accessed on 30.06.2023

*"Worryingly, the countries that are the most vulnerable to misinformation, according to the Media Literacy Index for 2023, are also closest to the war in Ukraine started by Russia, and are among the most exposed to malicious misinformation,"*² said the author of the analysis, Marin Lessenski. According to him, an additional difficulty derives from the fact that many of the societies most vulnerable to disinformation in Europe are living in Balkan countries, some of which in 2023 are still experiencing internal instability and have serious inter-state issues.

With the present needs assessments, we hope to contribute to the understanding of the factors that influence this vulnerability to propaganda and maliciously intended false information, focusing on education and in particular – on the skill-training that tackles the specific and prominent issues of fake news and disinformation.

It is important to note that similar efforts have been made in the past. Several existing documents have proven systematic gaps between the needs of society and what the formal environment is offering to address the problem.

For example, a national survey evaluating the digital media competencies of high-school students and teachers in Bulgaria was conducted by the Coalition for Media Literacy in 2020. It reveals that only 8% of teachers have ever conducted a class on verifying information sources, while barely 30% of students have ever worked with different information sources after having been instructed how to approach such a task and what criteria to apply in choosing their sources.³ A later study from 2021 by the same organization, this time among parents, reveals that over 40% of them believe that critical thinking, media and democracy are not taught well enough at school.

2 Open Society Institute - Sofia. (2023). Индекс за медийна грамотност 2023: България е най-уязвима към дезинформация сред страните в ЕС. (23.06.2023) [Media Literacy Index 2023: Bulgaria is the most vulnerable to disinformation among the countries in the EU] Available on: <https://osis.bg/?p=4449>, accessed on 30.06.2023

³Media Literacy Coalition. Национално изследване за оценяване на дигитално-медийните компетентности на гимназистите. Аналитичен доклад. [A national study to assess the digital-media competences of high school students. Analytical report.] Online resource, available on: <https://old.gramoten.li/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%BC%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B5-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%B9%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82-%D0%94%D0%9C%D0%93-2022-%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%BD-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B4.pdf> accessed on 6.6.2023.

In terms of legislation, teaching media literacy is prescribed in the Ordinance for the Civic, Health, Environmental and Intercultural Education,⁴. In 2018 a line in article 11 was added stating that electronic governance and media literacy are among the targeted areas for citizen education and that they shall be taught in school classes. Since the 2020 – 2021 school year, there has been a separate discipline called Citizen education taught at 11th grade.

The encouragement of media literacy skill development through a media literacy policy has been recently inscribed in the Radio and Television Law as part of the responsibilities of the Minister of Culture⁵. The document clearly defines what media literacy is and what skills and knowledges must be included in it without specifically mentioning disinformation. However, to this date, we can hardly say that there is a working strategic framework to develop media literacy, especially when it comes to discerning fake news and disinformation.

A positive development in this direction is the Index for measurement of media literacy skills at the high-school level, developed by the Media Literacy Coalition. A massive effort to measure the competencies of high-school students was conducted in 2022 under the guidance of the Coalition, supported by the Ministry of Education.

At the same time, teaching online media literacy and disinformation readiness remains crucial for the Bulgarian audience and should be a priority for public institutions. A recent report on Media use in the European Union⁶ shows that Bulgarians are the least aware of the quantity of false and misinterpreted news and information that they encounter daily. Although results show that over half (54%) of the respondents often come across news or information that they believe misinterprets reality or is false, this is still a low result (compared to 70% EU average). We have no reason to believe that Bulgarians are less exposed to disinformation compared to the average European, so the explanation might be their insufficient skills to detect it.

⁴ Наредба за изменение и допълнение на Наредба № 13 от 2016 г. за гражданското, здравното, екологичното и интеркултурното образование (ДВ, бр. 80 от 2016 г.) [Ordinance amending and supplementing Ordinance No. 13 of 2016 on civic, health, environmental and intercultural education]. Online resource, available on: https://web.mon.bg/upload/16759/izm_ndbr13_2016_GZEIObrazovanie_280918.pdf accessed on 12.6.2023

⁵ Закон за радиото и телевизията. [Law on Radio and Television] Lex.bg, online resource available on: <https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2134447616> accessed on 6.6.2023.

⁶ European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, Media use in the European Union – Report, European Commission, 2022, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2775/911712> accessed on 6.6.2023.

In the same line of thought, the survey also shows that Bulgarians have lower than the average confidence in their own ability to easily identify news or information that they believe misrepresents reality or is false. On top of this, the Eurobarometer Media & News Survey 2022⁷, shows that Bulgarians more than the average for the EU use online platforms, social media and blogs to follow the news. The same survey shows that Bulgarians believe they have been exposed almost three times more often than the EU average to fake news and disinformation in the last 7 days.

For these reasons, we decided to ask the different target groups of the project their opinions on what is needed to get them to understand how disinformation works better. We talked to experts from different fields and gave citizens the chance to share their thoughts and needs.

Methodology

First, the document looks at the existing teaching curriculum, which treats media literacy and more importantly – the topics of fake news and disinformation. Desk research looks into the existing official school curriculum and the announced university programmes.

To define the media literacy and disinformation training needs of the target groups, the Read Twice consortium first determined and agreed on a shared methodology to be used for Bulgaria, Croatia and Romania. The agreed approach was a combination of desk research of existing curricula related to the analysed topic, research of existing initiatives and best practices, stakeholder interviews, and online polls and surveys among target groups.

Project partners agreed on shared questionnaires to be distributed in national languages among target groups and stakeholders' representatives.

They agreed on a period and type of distribution of said questionnaires. In Bulgaria, the questions were distributed between February and May – online, using anonymous Google Forms

⁷Eurobarometer, Media & News Survey 2022, Online resource available on: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2832> accessed on 6.6.2023.

questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed freely and boosted through Facebook advertising to reach more respondents. The ad targeted people from different cities, age, gender and interests. The number of received responses was 50, which is not meant to be representative, but rather – to serve as an illustration of existing societal trends.

Additionally, the analysis takes into account the opinion of several experts with different roles with regards to media literacy. The consortium also agreed on the profile of experts to be interviewed taking into account their field and level of expertise, as well as the different target groups they are working with. Said experts were then interviewed either in person, over the phone or returned their responses in writing. Some preferred to remain anonymous. The number of experts who participated was 13.

Findings

Overview of curriculum related to media literacy

In the last decade, technologies developed rapidly, and this led to reformatting of the educational process in Bulgaria. Social media is present everywhere, and this has turned every user into a content creator. Young people use social media networks every day, and the online space makes the information they receive more and more accessible. In this regard, the importance of the topic of media literacy in Bulgarian education is also increasing, as it can contribute to young people being able to successfully navigate the media environment, to build critical thinking skills and present informed behaviour in social media networks.

According to a number of experts, media literacy education is lifelong education. However, it is important that it is built up gradually, starting from early childhood, and then continued and built upon in secondary and higher education levels.

For years in Bulgaria, the emphasis has been on the learning of the content of the specific subject, at the expense of analytical skills and interpretation. Today, the need to critically study and evaluate information has come to the foreground, because of the dynamic communication environment, which requires such skills. Against this background, the topic of teaching media literacy in Bulgarian education is becoming increasingly relevant. Since 2016, experts' assessment of the level of media literacy in our country has been very low, and among the main reasons cited are the lack of developed policies or any significant measures taken by the state.

In the world of education, the development of curricula and plans has long been a difficult and specific task. Students' attention is being engaged with solid factual information - which is in line with state educational standards, but at the same time, this teaching needs to feature inspiring and interesting examples.

Thus, the aim of the present review is to **show how far the topic of media literacy and in particular - the limitation of fake news and disinformation – has taken root in formal education.**

The review of the curricula from 1st to 12th grades shows that a separate subject dedicated to media literacy is missing from the mandatory classes in Bulgarian schools. As explained earlier, it is only expected to be included in class time (a weekly class dedicated to organisational affairs) or integrated within other subjects. However, finding a systematic way of teaching the subject might be problematic, because this requires skills that are often difficult for teachers to apply. Many of them do not feel sufficiently prepared to teach such a discipline and feel the need for relevant training and qualifications. In 11th grade, the programme for the Citizen education subject prescribes those students “realize the possibilities of critical publicity for counteracting media and political manipulation populism”, but this is just one among dozens of other skills that should be touched upon during the course.⁸ This shows that much more work is needed to refine the subject of media literacy in the curricula.

On the other hand, there are individual organizations in the country that work in the field of media literacy. The non-governmental organizations that, (even with insufficient funding), successfully implement various ideas, initiatives, activities and projects in the school environment have an essential role there. The Ministry of Education and Science often only acts as a partner to most of these civil initiatives.

One of the most prominent organizations is the Media Literacy Coalition, which since 2017 has brought together various organizations from the fields of education, journalism and civic participation, academic representatives and media literacy experts. Over the years, the Coalition has prepared a number of manuals, guides, video lessons and electronic resources to support the learning of students and pupils. It is noteworthy that the topics cover different ages - from 1st to 12th grade, and the resources delve into topics, such as social media networks, the reliability of information, the fight against fake news, hate speech, ethical communication on the Internet, and more.

The educational platform Ucha.se, on whose website there is a video lesson called "Misleading information and fake news", is a good example of treating the topic of media literacy. The lesson

⁸ Ministry of Education. Study curriculum in Citizen education. Online resource, available on: https://web.mon.bg/upload/14983/pr_UP_GO_11kl_170418.pdf accessed on 12.6.2023

is presented in an interesting and understandable way that would grab the attention of the students. It is included in a category titled “Skills for the 21st century.”⁹

As for higher education, there are not many universities in Bulgaria that offer training in media literacy, fake news and disinformation. The review of their curricula shows that the subject is most widely taught in Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" (SU) and New Bulgarian University (NBU). It seems paradoxical that the undergraduate programs in Journalism, Public Relations and Book Publishing, offered at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication (FJMK), lack mandatory courses in media literacy. It is important to note, however, that the topic is widely covered in various courses such as "Online Journalism," "Theory of Digital Communication," "Journalistic Ethics," "New Media," "Media Law," etc. Students of above-mentioned programmes can also choose the optional discipline "Media and disinformation"¹⁰. However, optional disciplines are only designed to supplement students' knowledge but are not part of the mandatory curriculum of the major.

In the 2018/2019 academic year, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" launched a new programme at FJMK, called Communication Management. In fact, an overview of the programs showed that it is the only bachelor's program in the faculty to include "Media and information literacy" and "Working with facts and data in a digital environment" as mandatory subjects. Both courses grant a considerable number of credits – 5 with 45 lectures, or a total of 150 hours.

FJMK’s master’s programs in Journalism and Media, Professional Copywriting, Media Design, Production and Creative Industry, Domestic Political Journalism, Digital Media and Video Games, Sports Journalism, Public Relations, Advertising and Public Communication, Traditional and Digital Publishing and Lifestyle Journalism lack courses dedicated to fake news and disinformation.

⁹Ucha.se. Уроци, тестове и преговори. Видео урок: Подвеждаща информация и фалшиви новини. [Lessons, tests and revisions. Video tutorial: Misleading information and fake news]. Online resource, available on: <https://ucha.se/watch/12999/podvezhdashta-informatsia-i-falshivi-novini>, accessed on 11.04.23.

¹⁰Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski“. Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication. Academic programs. Masters programs. Online resource, available on: <https://fjmc.uni-sofia.bg/education/academic-programs/masters> , accessed on 12.04.2023.

However, the programmes in International Journalism, Digital media and communication (in English) and Online Journalism and Media, there are disciplines focused on media literacy, fake news and disinformation. Among the mandatory disciplines in the master's of Digital media and communication (in English)¹¹ is "Fake News and Online Disinformation", which grants students 3 credits, with 30 lectures, 15 seminar classes, and a total of 90 hours. In the International Journalism program, the elective course "Fake News and Disinformation" stands out, and in the master's program in Online Journalism and Media students can choose the course "Media Literacy and Fact-Checking".

The Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" has significant potential in training experts to teach media literacy to students from primary to secondary education. In the bachelor's degree level, they offer the program "Media Pedagogy and Artistic Communication" (both in Bulgarian and English)¹².

In the Media and Communication Department at the NBU there are two bachelor's programs - in "Journalism"¹³ and in Public Relations¹⁴. Both have classroom (credit) courses in "Media Literacy", as well as a "Media Literacy and Public Relations" Seminar. The Master's programs of NBU - Digital Communications¹⁵ and "Journalism 3.0 (online press, radio and television)"¹⁶ - offer a training course – a seminar in Media and PR Literacy. The master's degree in "International Business Communications (in English)" lacks disciplines that touch the subject of fake news and disinformation.

¹¹ Idem.

¹² Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". Faculty of Educational Study and the Arts. Bachelor programs. Media Pedagogy and Artistic Communication. Curriculum. Online resource, available at: https://fnoi.uni-sofia.bg/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/4-UP-MPHK-bak-2017_new-ENG-13.02.17.pdf, accessed on 30.06.2023

¹³NBU. Bachelor programs. Journalism. Curriculum. Online resource, available on: https://ecatalog.nbu.bg/default.asp?V_Year=2022&YSem=1&Mod_ID=&Spec_ID=&PageShow=programpresent&P_Menu=courses_part1&Fac_ID=3&M_PHD=&P_ID=2212&TabIndex=1&l=0, accessed on 12.04.23.

¹⁴NBU. Bachelor programs. Public Relations. Curriculum. Online resource, available on: https://ecatalog.nbu.bg/default.asp?V_Year=2022&PageShow=programpresent&P_Menu=courses_part1&Fac_ID=3&M_PHD=&P_ID=2209&TabIndex=2&l=0, accessed on 12.04.23.

¹⁵NBU. Masters programs. Digital communications. Program scheme. Online resource, available on: https://ecatalog.nbu.bg/default.asp?V_Year=2022&PageShow=programpresent&P_Menu=courses&Fac_ID=4&M_PHD=0&P_ID=3059&TabIndex=2&l=0, accessed on 12.04.23.

¹⁶NBU. Masters programs. "Journalism 3.0 (online press, radio and television)". Program scheme. Online resource, available on: https://ecatalog.nbu.bg/default.asp?V_Year=2022&PageShow=programpresent&P_Menu=courses&Fac_ID=4&M_PHD=0&P_ID=3061&TabIndex=2&l=0, accessed on 12.04.23.

The University of National and World Economy (UNWE) in Sofia also has a department of Media and Public Communications, where, although there is a bachelor's program in Media and Economics¹⁷, there are no academic courses on media literacy. The Media and Journalism programme, however, offers a Media Literacy course, which is studied in the second year. The master's programs in Public Relations and Business Journalism and Production lack disciplines related to fake news and disinformation.

The University of Library Studies and Information Technologies (UniBIT) also offers several programs in the field of media and communications, such as Print Communications¹⁸, Communications and Informing¹⁹, Innovative Communications and Media Technologies²⁰ and Media Information and Advertising²¹ (master's degree). However, there is no Media literacy course in their curriculum.

Outside the capital, students can receive media education at Plovdiv University "Paisiy Hilendarski" (PU), South-West University "Neofit Rilski" (SWU), Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar" (VSU), Burgas Free University (BSU), Veliko Tarnovo University "St. St. Cyril and Methodius" (VTU) and in Shumen University "Bishop Konstantin Preslavski" (SHU). Only the program in Public Relations of SHU offers the optional course "Media Facts and Fictions"²². None of the other institutions of higher education, however, offer majors in subjects related to media literacy, fake news and disinformation.

¹⁷UNWE. Bachelor programme "Media and Journalism". Curriculum. Online resource, available on: <https://prezi.com/p/hphiby8fvn4n/presentation/>, accessed on 12.04.23.

¹⁸ UNiBit. Bachelor programme "Print Communications". Curriculum. Online resource, available on: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/111pmWeADXn-icTFMEmfhvO14wF9wMCt0/view>, accessed on 30.06.23.

¹⁹ UNiBit. Bachelor programme "Communications and Informing". Curriculum. Online resource, available on: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1YBc_U3G41wxSD5y0Fos9_4STzDsTrxCi/edit, accessed on 30.06.23.

²⁰ UNiBit. Bachelor programme "Innovative Communications and Media Technologies". Curriculum. Online resource, available on: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1keJ_GvHb9QmOS1R17Ox4--tDI-7NV7Lt/edit, accessed on 30.06.23.

²¹ UNiBit. Bachelor programme. "Media Information and Advertising" Curriculum. Online resource, available on: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1d-MfMOZqZNW6A34JuZ8z1nD2OK3iASsM/view>, accessed on 30.06.23.

²² SHU. Bachelor programme "Public Relations". Curriculum. Online resource, available on: <https://www.shu.bg/students/razpisi-i-grafici/uplanove/?ID=9529>, accessed on 30.06.23.

In the end, the study indicates that school institutions and higher education institutions are rather passive towards the inclusion of the subject of media literacy in the educational process, and this is a risk for the civil society in Bulgaria.

Of course (as we have already noted in the case of the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication), the absence of specific disciplines whose names include "media literacy" or "disinformation" does not mean that the topics are not covered at all within the relevant training programs – they are probably still discussed in some form as part of other disciplines. In any case, however, it can be assumed that they do not represent a sufficient priority to be singled out in a separate discipline – a fact that contrasts with the distinct needs of both target audiences and stakeholders, as we will demonstrate later.

Finally, the review of the curricula in secondary and higher education clearly shows that the improvement of cooperation between schools, universities, the Ministry of Education and Culture and the non-governmental sector in the country should be much more strengthened and coordinated, which would contribute to the increase of media literacy in Bulgaria.

Table 1. Studying media literacy, fake news and disinformation in formal education

Educational level					
Undergraduate level					
Institution	Grade	Subject	Volume	Other information	
-	-	-	-	The topic is part of the class time education and citizen education.	
University level					
Institution	Level	Specialty	Discipline	Volume	Other information
Sofia University „Sveti Kliment Ohridski, Faculty of Journalism and	Bachelor	Journalism	-	-	-
	Bachelor	Public Relations	-	-	-
	Bachelor	Book Publishing	-	-	-
	Bachelor	Communication Management	Media and information literacy (mandatory discipline) Working with facts and data in a digital	45 lectures, 150 hours 45 lectures, 150 hours	5 ECTS credits 5 ECTS credits

Mass Communication			environment (mandatory course)		
			Media and disinformation (selective course)	-	-
	Master	Journalism and media, Professional copywriting, Media design, Production and creative industries, Domestic political journalism, Digital media and video games, Sports journalism, Public relations, Advertising and public communication, Traditional and digital publishing, Lifestyle journalism	-	-	-
Master	International Journalism	Fake news and disinformation (selective course)	30 lectures, 240 hours	8 ECTS credits	

Sofia University „Sveti Kliment Ohridski, Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication	Master	Digital media and communication (in English)	Fake News and Online Disinformation (mandatory course)	30 lectures, 15 seminars, 90 hours	3 ECTS credits
	Master	Online Journalism and Media	Media Literacy and Fact-Checking (Selective course)	15 seminars, 60 hours	2 ECTS credits

Sofia University „Sveti Kliment Ohridski, Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts	Bachelor	Media Pedagogy and Artistic Communication (in Bulgarian)	Media Pedagogy		5 ECTS credits
			Children and Media Communication: Models and Mechanisms of Interaction		6 ECTS credits
Sofia University „Sveti Kliment Ohridski, Faculty of Educational Studies and the Arts	Bachelor	Media Pedagogy and Artistic Communication (in in English)	Media Pedagogy		5 ECTS credits
			Children and Media Communication: Models and Mechanisms of Interaction		6 ECTS credits
UNWE - Department of "Media and Public Communications"	Bachelor	Media and economy	-	-	-
	Bachelor	Media and Journalism	Media literacy	-	Studied in second year.
	Master	Business Journalism and Production	-	-	-
	Master	Public Relations	-	-	-
			Media Literacy	30 hours	3 credits

NBU - Media and Communications Department	Bachelor	Journalism	Seminar " Media literacy and public relations"	12 hours	6 credits
	Bachelor	Public Relations	Media Literacy	30 hours	3 credits
			"Media Literacy and Public Relations" Seminar	12 hours	6 credits
	Master	Digital Communications	Seminar "Media and PR Literacy" (training course)	6 hours	3 credits
	Master	Journalism 3.0 (online press, radio and television)	Seminar "Media and PR Literacy" (training course)	6 hours	3 credits
	Master	International Business Communications (in English)	-	-	-
UNibit – Faculty of Library Studies and Cultural Heritage	Bachelor	“Print Communications”	-	-	-
	Bachelor	“Communications and Informing”	-	-	-

	Bachelor	“Innovative Communications and Media Technologies”	-	-	-
	Master	“Media Information and Advertising”	-	-	-
Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv (PU)	-	-	-	-	-
South-West University “Neofit Rilski” (SWU) – Faculty of Arts	Bachelor	Culture and Media	-	-	-
	Bachelor	Public Relations	-	-	-
	Master	Internet, New Media and Culture	-	-	-
	Master	Social Management and Cultural Communication	-	-	-
	Master	Media, Production and Business	-	-	-
Shumen University "Bishop Konstantin Preslavski" (SHU) – Faculty of Humanities	Bachelor	Journalism and Advertising	-	-	-
	Bachelor	Public Relations	Media Facts and fictions (elective course)	15 hours	2 credits

	Bachelor	Bulgarian Studies and Media	-	-	-
	Master	Linguistics and Mass Communication	-	-	-
	Master	Public Relations in the Public Administration	-	-	-
Varna Free University "Chernorizets Hrabar" (VSU)	-	-	-	-	-
Burgas Free University (BSU)	-	-	-	-	-
Veliko Tarnovo University "St. St. Cyril and Methodius" (VTU)	-	-	-	-	-

Stakeholders' interviews

This part of the analysis is based on expert interviews conducted with the aim of identifying their attitudes towards media literacy training and countering fake news and disinformation, as well as to identify the main problems, challenges and needs of the target groups. The group of respondents consisted of representatives from various non-governmental and civil organisations, and of representatives from the education and media sectors. Some of them preferred to remain anonymous, other opting to answer on their own behalf, whereas the remaining part chose to answer on behalf of the organisations they represent. The questions they were invited to answer are available in the annex to this document.

Why does Bulgaria rank last in terms of media literacy in the European Union?

When asked about their interpretation of the reasons for the country's poor media literacy results, most of the respondents indicated that these were complex. **The problems with the quality of education, low degree of media freedom, widespread dissemination of social media networks and low trust between people are cited as the most common factors.**

In addition to the key factors for the country's bad performance, respondents underline the levels of functional literacy among the population, especially among teenagers, and to what they describe as a habit of older generations to trust main media sources. A significant number of respondents believes that **low trust in political leaders and institutions** favours the spread of conspiracies. There are also explanations that Bulgaria's result from the latest edition of Media Literacy Index was inevitably influenced by the country's totalitarian legacy:

"Before 1989, citizens were taught to absolutely trust the media. That monopoly, however, prevented the development of critical thinking about information sources. This problem has been handed down to some extent through the generations and is not addressed in any way in the secondary education system," says Daniel Yanev from the platform "Are you lying".²³

²³ Лъжеш ли? [Are you lying?]. Online resource, available on: <https://www.lazheshli.com/> accessed 18.7.2023.

Another respondent links distrust in institutions to low media literacy. *"If we compare the data from the media literacy index with Eurostat's Corruption Perceptions Index, which shows the most corrupt countries, there is a very high correlation between the countries with the lowest media literacy index and those with the highest level of corruption,"* explains Konstantin Iliev, entrepreneurship and marketing teacher in 19th Secondary School "Elin Pelin"²⁴, in the city of Sofia.

A media expert, who wished to remain anonymous, points out the **increasingly difficult access to information, silencing of critical voices, and the initiation of legal proceedings (SLAPP lawsuits) as methods to exercise behind-the-scenes influence from business and political circles over journalists.**

Representatives from National Network for Children²⁵ rank the unreformed education system, which does not give priority to subjects, such as Civic Education, and to the topics of disinformation, propaganda and hybrid aggression, among the main factors. The opinion of the Network is also supported by the Foundation for Entrepreneurship, Culture and Education, according to which there is a gap in the education system caused by **the lack of teaching media literacy**, and by the inability to think critically, which gives rise to formation of easily manipulated society, susceptible to propaganda. The Centre for Arts, Culture and Education states that the subject Media Literacy is not studied in schools and **is clearly not a priority for education.**

"This subject is not among the priorities of either the Ministry of Education or other institutions that are in charge of the well-being of young people," believes Dilyana Vuchkova from the Centre for Arts, Culture and Education.²⁶

In the opinion of Vesislava Antonova, journalist and lecturer of media law at the University of National and World Economy²⁷, ethical media standards and traditional media, which have proven to be a reliable source of information, have lost to some extent the battle for the young people's attention **due to the strong influence of social media.** She claims that the consumers of media content are swimming in an ocean of information

²⁴ 19. СУ „Елин Пелин“, София. [19th Secondary School Elin Pelin, Sofia] Online resource, available on: <https://19su.bg/> accessed on 17.7.2023.

²⁵ Национална мрежа за децата. [National Network for Children]. Official website, available on: <https://nmd.bg/> accessed on 17.7.2023.

²⁶ Център за изкуства, култура и образование „София“. [Centre for Arts, Culture and Education Sofia]. Official website, available on: <https://www.stcrd.com/> accessed on 17.7.2023.

²⁷ Университет за национално и световно стопанство. [University of National and World Economy]. Official website, available on: <https://www.unwe.bg/en/> accessed on 17.7.2023.

where there are various and dangerous undercurrents, which people are largely unprepared to deal with.

"A considerable number of young people who have not developed sustainable critical thinking then attend university. They are incapable of verifying the information that reaches them", says Vesislava Antonova.

Vasilen Vasilev, a teacher of philosophy and civic education in 19th Secondary School "Elin Pelin", in Sofia, takes into account two factors that place Bulgaria last in media literacy in the EU. In his opinion, these are the **lack of educational practices, strategies and policies and the lack of wider and active public discussions** about media, its function and basic media literacy.

A respondent from Bulgarian National Television (BNT)²⁸ thinks that there is currently **no accessible training in schools** and no adequate, high-quality **media literacy platform**. The expert adds to these factors the change in information consumption habits - traditional media channels are being replaced extremely quickly by digital ones and by social media.

"The sources of information are increasing, and the audience does not have sufficient capacity to sift out quality and reliable information. This is how a vicious circle, which is difficult to leave, gets created," states Anton Andonov, a member of BNT Board of Directors.

The recently observed migration of popular journalists from traditional media to their own online channels is also considered a negative trend. In the opinion of Mr. Andonov, it is difficult for them to monetise their content through such channels and therefore they compromise quality for sensational journalism.

BNT points out that **the deepening divisions in society** - both politically and on topical issues - is one of the reasons why Bulgaria ranks last in the EU in terms of media literacy. Andonov thinks that all public speakers and media support certain political agenda (implicitly or explicitly).

²⁸ Българска национална телевизия [Bulgarian National Television]. Official website, available on: <https://bnt.bg/> accessed on 17.7.2023.

Last but not least, according to the respondents, **socio-economic factors** are also important. In the opinion of a representative from the Teach for Bulgaria²⁹, the isolation of some groups in society and the low standard of living have a great impact on the feeling that someone is guilty of something and that there is a higher and anonymous power that wants to hurt us. The Foundation adds to these reasons the influence of social media.

“The low level of digital literacy and social media make people to be less critical of the information they receive, since it reaches them through friends and acquaintances, whom they logically tend to trust,” says Yulia Mishkova.

Perception of fake news

Another topic that we discussed with the experts is the perception of the presence of misinformation and fake news. The Media Literacy Index shows that Bulgarian respondents believe that they are very often exposed to misinformation and fake news - more than any other EU group. Several different explanations for this are found in the answers of the surveyed experts.

First of all, these are the lack of trust in political leaders and democratic institutions and the pervasive corruption in the state administration. That is why, lots of Bulgarians have arguably become **suspicious of everyone and everything**.

“How can you trust someone who is ready to provide a service against payment of certain amount? I suggest that the lack of trust in the disseminated information is aimed mostly at the systems of Ministry of Interior, Healthcare and Justice, which are the most critical for the functioning of our society,” says Daniel Yaniev.

In the opinion of Yulia Mishkova from the Teach for Bulgaria, people's nationality is often regarded high in our public space and patriotic feelings are exploited. *“Currently, it turns out that very serious role is played by anti-Western propaganda, which focuses on exactly this type of passions and feelings, creating and maintaining the feeling of external threat, and the narrative goes that we can protect ourselves with the help of history,”* claims the expert.

Konstantin Iliev also links the strong feeling of presence of disinformation in the Bulgarian society with the division between Western countries and Russia. In his opinion,

²⁹ Фондация „Заедно в час“ [Teach for Bulgaria]. Official website, available on: <https://zaednovchas.bg/en/> accessed on 17.7.2023.

it is mainly determined by financial relationships, since the cash flows that come from both the Western countries and Russia, are significant: *"For this reason, it is normal to expect that poles, which try to manipulate public opinion in their favour may be created"*, he says.

Dilyana Vuchkova claims that in Bulgaria the COVID-19 pandemic has provided serious opportunity for the spread of disinformation and fake news. She gives as example the war in Ukraine, where the West says one thing and the East another thing.

The strong influence of key hybrid aggressors in Bulgaria, the inability and lack of will of the institutions to react to disinformation and the transformation of citizens, who are highly vulnerable to disinformation, into "civilian trolls" are some of the main factors described by National Network for Children.

The Foundation for Entrepreneurship, Culture and Education³⁰ identifies targeted attacks from other countries, low levels of media literacy, inability to filter information, excessive use of social media and poor education as the main factors for the spread of misinformation in the country. According to BNT representatives, this result is due to the low media literacy and defined hybrid attacks from foreign countries. The public television adds to this the division in society and the political situation of Bulgaria in recent years, i.e. the frequent election cycles that occurred in the recent past.

Journalist Vesislava Antonova notes that the influence of social media is becoming stronger and more often they are the main source of information, instead of the established classic media models, which leads to the loss of trust in legacy media. The expert believes that this is due to the low entry barrier into the media market for digital outlets. With tiny investment and without legal obstacles, website can easily be created to circulate fake news and propaganda for someone's benefit.

"... The oversaturation of the market with lots of websites claiming to be media. To a large extent, they turn out to be propaganda megaphones that serve hidden agendas, gossip or certain political views. The crisis in the Bulgarian media market has undermined the trust in the classical media, leading to an outflow of audience from them," says Vesislava Antonova.

³⁰ Фондация за предприемачество, култура и образование. [Foundation for Entrepreneurship, Culture and Education]. Official website, available on: <https://foundationece.eu/> accessed on 17.7.2023.

In the opinion of Blagovest Iliev, journalist, PR expert and university lecturer, the majority of the public consumes media content through the so-called "new media". He thinks that **it is time to activate the regulations in this direction and establish control mechanisms.**

Who is most vulnerable to fake news?

Respondents ranked people with low levels of education as the most susceptible to propaganda, and among those most vulnerable to become victims of fake news and disinformation in our society. Another vulnerable group identified are people **isolated from the modern world** – the retired, the unemployed, low-income people and people living in remote regions, as well as the young, ethnic minorities and any people who remain detached from the mainstream trends of the economy.

"Actually, the group of vulnerable people expands enormously during military conflicts or pandemics, such as the pandemic of COVID-19, banking crises and the like," says Anton Andonov from BNT.

"The discussions on COVID pandemic and war in Ukraine have made it clear that fake news feeding the ideological stream of conspiracy theories can be taken quite uncritically by both people with lower level of education and the educated elite, from children to the elderly. Everyone is vulnerable, perhaps to different degrees," adds Vasilen Vasilev.

What are the needs of the target groups?

Respondents work with different target groups and find gaps in skills and knowledge in terms of dealing with fake news and disinformation among all of them. **Yulia Mishkova** from Teach for Bulgaria states that the **main gaps and needs of teachers are linked to technology, Internet and social media.** In her opinion, most of the teachers are not familiar with the way these technologies work, and this lack of knowledge and experience makes them uncertain of their capacity to discuss the topic with their students, which reflects negatively on the development and attitudes of the latter.

Daniel Yanev from the platform "Are you lying" works actively with citizens, and in his opinion, the biggest gap is the lack of critical thinking caused by the too strong identification with political parties or ideologies.

NNC recognises the lack of democratic competences and low media literacy as a shortcoming among children and families. They claim that the target group they work with is unaware of **phenomena such as "disinformation", "hybrid aggression", "information war", etc.** Georgi Elenkov talks about *“the inability to filter information, to search and sift data from various sources, to recognise publications and comments made by so-called trolls or by integrated circuits”*.

The Foundation for Entrepreneurship, Culture and Education works actively with young people and reports that they have never been taught how to handle different sources, how to filter information, how to check facts and sources, how to make references, etc.

Vesislava Antonova, a representative of the academic sector, notes that college **students' knowledge of how to recognise fake news is scarce.** Blagovest Iliev also works with students enrolled in St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University, in programs that are directly related to media, public relations, book publishing and communication management fields. He finds there's **lack of interest in news content.**

"When you do not observe the processes through the prism of electronic and print media, when you do not search for analytical information and different points of view, but rely only on headlines, scrolling or sharing them with the family or circle of friends, then fake news and disinformation will continue to prevail”, states the lecturer.

An educational expert from the town of Smolyan recognises the **dependence of young people up to the age of 19 on the social media groups to which they belong** as a shortcoming. He also finds that there is lack of individual stance and immaturity among young people in relation to public, political and social processes.

Similarly, Vasilen Vasilev recognises the lack of adequate critical tools as a deficiency among students: *“Increasing the number of philosophy classes would be beneficial if an adequate curriculum is developed that shows students how logic, which is an independent philosophical subject, is applicable to everyday life and how analysis and reconstruction of arguments help our overall ability to create one's own informed opinion and problematise other points of view”*.

In Konstantin Iliev's view, students at the beginning of upper secondary education still have poor filters, which can gradually develop as their studies progress. Due to these poor filters, they are subject to other people's opinions and easy victims of fake news. *"What*

is observed in the students is their intellectual dependence on their parents. They do not put into question what the parent says, even it is inaccurate," he explains.

The Centre for Arts, Culture and Education works mainly with children between the ages 6 and 19. Its representatives' observations show that children search for information mainly from the first 3 or 4 sources that they come across on Google. In the opinion of Dilyana Vuchkova, children are not taught to search and compare sources of information, to filter information, and to thoroughly analyse data.

"From early childhood, children have access to social media, where disinformation is abundant. Children as young as 9 have profiles in these networks. Their parents do not realise what the consequences of this can be," says Dilyana Vuchkova.

BNT representatives believe that they try to provide timely and reliable information and that the law requires them to perform a number of other important functions. They recognise the fact that the information consumers find it increasingly difficult to develop criteria for credibility:

"The uncritical perception of information and the acceptance of information that coincides with the views of the particular viewer are also part of the problem," claims Anton Andonov.

However, progress is being made

When asked about progress on the issue, the respondents note that if there is any, it is largely because Bulgarian journalists are increasingly countering disinformation in the media. Some of the respondents think that the creation of different platforms or media rubrics for fact examination are a positive example in this direction (there'll be more on these good practices [later in the document](#)).

Most respondents think that the development of interesting **volunteer projects** with a critical view on politics and media, and with implicit objective to fight against manipulation, is a positive trend. In addition, the establishment of non-governmental organisations that work on various projects with informative, explanatory and educational purposes, especially such focusing on disinformation, misinformation and media literacy, is also an advantage. In the opinion of Marin Lesenski from Open Society Institute - Sofia

(OSIS)³¹, the topic is being increasingly discussed as a public problem, and more organisations and activists are becoming involved with proposals for solutions.

The observations of the educational expert from Smolyan show that educational institutions are also engaged with the topic. Konstantin Iliev from 19th Secondary School “Elin Pelin, in Sofia, thinks that in schools, raising media literacy should become a teacher’s mission, and that the level of students’ awareness depends on the teacher’s work in this direction. Accordingly, **progress is made when the teacher has taken responsibility to fulfil this task.**

"Undoubtedly, both new social media and mobile applications have an effect. This effect is not always negative: thanks to their development, students have the opportunity to see the diversity and contradiction of different topics in the social space. This, in turn, can make them think about what is true and what is manipulation," says Konstantin Iliev.

Another group of respondents, however, thinks that progress in the area of media literacy is insufficient or is completely missing.

How to tackle the problem

When we asked the respondents how they themselves address the problem of low media literacy and, in particular, of fake news and disinformation, they indicated specific projects and initiatives related to their work:

- Teach for Bulgaria discusses the topic with teachers, supports them with resources and materials, organises webinars and tries in general to discuss various examples with them **so as to help them become confident.**
- The “Are You Lying” project has been trying to **reveal the level of disinformation** during the country’s election campaigns since 2021. To this end, the experts behind the project thoroughly check the statements made by the most popular candidates running for Parliament, President or local government in their pre-election appearances on BNT, bTV and NOVA. By publishing the results before the respective elections, the platform helps citizens make more informed choices and avoid voting for people actively spreading false information.

³¹ Институт “Отворено общество - София“. [Open Society Institute, Sofia]. Official website, available on: <https://osis.bg/> accessed 17.7.2023.

- Being an alliance of over 120 civil organisations and experts working directly with children and families across the country, the National Network for Children is making "*consistent efforts to counter disinformation campaigns aimed against children's rights and civil sector*" and it initiates, through the Legal Aid Network, "*proceedings against iconic disinformers who slander citizens and organisations.*"
- The Foundation for Entrepreneurship, Culture and Education works on various EU-funded projects aimed at addressing the disinfo problem and informing participants about fake news, its consequences and how to deal with it.
- Open Society - Sofia Institute (OSIS) provides mainly expert input, preparing various analyses and reports on the topic of media literacy, and administering financial support from various donors to non-governmental organisations in priority strands - fact examination, journalism development, etc.
- Representatives of the Bulgarian National Television state that it complies with the basic legislative and ethical standards related to journalism: "*We are among the most regulated media in our country, and there is a strong public sensitivity towards public broadcasters,*" says Anton Andonov. In addition, BNT produced two seasons of the "MeGra" podcast - a special project in which he talks about media literacy and manners to deal with fake news and disinformation - both in traditional and social media.
- The Department of Media and Public Communications of the University of National and World Economy has published a collection of texts - called Media Literacy, which includes texts from the period of creation and development of the concept of media literacy to the period describing the policies and practices of media literacy training in all EU member states. "*Beyond this particular research, a core mission of our teaching is to strive to develop critical thinking in students and thereby protect them from the influence of disinformation and fake news. The process is difficult, but important and it's worth the effort,*" says Vesislava Antonova.
- The Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication of Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" often organises discussions, forums and conferences where fake news and disinformation are the main topics. "*I think that a package of measures/steps should be taken to gradually fight the problem,*" stated Blagovest Iliev.

- A media expert, who wished to remain anonymous, explained that he strives to work at the level of prevailing attitudes, so that the interlocutors realise the strong influence of prejudices, beliefs and personal opinion when deciding which piece of information should be shared and accepted as credible. They discuss the difference between fact and opinion, which although obvious, is often disregarded on a day-to-day basis.
- In a school in the town of Smolyan, the Civic Education series determines subjects for senior students, which are taught in class. Journalists, representatives of Public Council, representatives of local and regional authorities and NGOs are regularly invited to the school.
- The Centre for Arts, Culture and Education addresses the media literacy issue through various projects, online courses and games on disinformation and fake news that are attractive to children and parents.

Respondents also pay attention to various good practices in Bulgaria that target the problem. The examples that they give include the aforementioned Media Literacy Coalition, which organises media literacy training courses for various target groups – particularly among so-called "newcomers" to social media (adults and children who already have access to the Internet through smartphones but still lack the necessary skills for safe and effective use of the new communication channels). In addition, the respondents give as an example platforms, such as Data for Good, factcheck.bg, proverif.bg, and the projects Are you lying?, Tsarski Pishtovi, Zemlevezh, Strazha and the fact examination rubrics of BNR and AFP. The projects Citizen Journalism Academy for Youth (2022-2024) and Media Literacy for Democracy of the Foundation for Entrepreneurship, Culture and Education are also cited as good practices.

According to experts, the existence of various **vlogs and podcasts** has a great potential to become the most effective good practice, due to the fascinating and accessible manner of presenting information (the combination of video, animation and experienced speakers) and their independence (compared to conventional media). The educational expert from Smolyan cites as a good practice the profiled training in the 'Bulgarian Language and Literature' subject during the secondary school stage – it includes topics related to media literacy, public speech and communication, as well as school journalism clubs.

The search for sustainable solutions

With regards to disinformation online, the majority of respondents believe that the solutions to limit it lie in the **holding of purveyors responsible for its dissemination, exposing negative examples and commenting on them in the media space.**

"Holding purveyors responsible is a working tool, as long as it does not turn into the so-called "witch hunt". The problem to hold purveyors responsible is that many of them are "mailboxes" - media without clear ownership, and because of GDPR, for example, the owners cannot even be searched in the WHOIS-registers," says Anton Antonov, who is looking for solutions to the problem in a combined approach.

Dilyana Vuchkova also believes that the measures should be complex - **there should be a policy at the state level, by pursuing the sources of disinformation** and holding them responsible. In her opinion, through gamification and training, Media Literacy can enter non-formal education as a subject. She thinks that the Youth- train-youth principle, on which the [Read Twice](#) project is based, could also be a working approach, since it provides for easier connections among peers.

Many respondents also state that the organisation of courses, trainings and massive information campaigns targeted to different groups could solve the problem. The inclusion of Media Literacy in the curricula, the creation and support of volunteer projects and independent media (podcasts and vlog) and programmes or fact examination rubrics on national television to be broadcast in prime time are also solutions.

Representatives of the Foundation for Entrepreneurship, Culture and Education, believe that training courses, explaining how to use sources of information, how to sift and use information and how to search for information, should be included in the education system.

"The long-term strategy involves systemic training in media literacy and development and compliance with ethical codes (for the media), and short-term funds should include measures, such as social media regulation in accordance with the freedom of expression," says Marin Lessenski from Open Society - Sofia Institute (OSIS), emphasising that his opinion is personal and does not bind the organisation where he works in any manner.

"The idea of restricting (blocking) troll factories and clusters/websites, trolls, etc. that spread targeted content created as information bombs could be a good start, but only if it is specified that the tool is not intended to restrict content, but rather malicious

networks, which are determined as such according to strict criteria," claims another media expert.

Finally, in the opinion of Vasilen Vasilev, it is important to integrate media literacy, to cultivate it in school and to initiate a broad civil discussion. In addition, after it has been demonstrated that certain sources spread false information, they must be sanctioned.

The place of media literacy in educational programmes

Respondents are adamant that the topics of media literacy, fake news and disinformation should be included in educational programmes. Some of them believe that media literacy should be a separate subject, while others think that it should be included as a topic in existing subjects.

"The topic should be included in all subjects through different examples, since such information and news spread in all areas of life and have an impact on our individual choices and on social processes," believes Yulia Mishkova.

Representatives of the National Network for Children think that the subject Media Literacy should be given a priority in the educational programmes and in the secondary education (grades 8 to 12). Representatives from the Foundation for Entrepreneurship, Culture and Education and the platform 'Are you lying?' believe that the subject should **be completely separate and dedicated to popular media topics and to the search for information on the Internet.** In the opinion of Anton Andonov from BNT, the topic should be introduced as early as the 3rd-4th grade within school subjects, such as Man and Society, and in special modules of the curriculum.

"The first classes on such a subject should be introduced in the seventh grade at the latest, but preferably in the sixth grade," says Daniel Yanev. Marin Lesenski expresses similar opinion: he believes that the discussion of the topic should start as early as possible, using an adapted approach.

According to Vesislava Antonova, the issue should be subject to discussion in order to select a working model. She sets France, where the Ministry of Education has introduced the subject Media and Information Literacy in school, as a good example.

"Teachers must be trained and there must be better control in the preparation of textbooks and curricula, since teachers of history, biology, philosophy and literature also have a

leading role in developing critical thinking among students. If the teacher does not follow the facts, but relies on personal convictions, he will easily mislead his students," claims Vesislava Antonova.

Blagovest Iliev believes that Media Literacy should be discussed in the initial stages of education. In his opinion, in secondary school the topic should be well integrated into the philosophical cycle subjects.

"Media literacy must necessarily be a topic included in most of the subjects during secondary education. Each subject has its own area of fake news and disinformation. Lots of real-life examples can be shown for each subject. For example, fake news related to medicine (subjects: chemistry, biology)," says Konstantin Iliev.

An alternative view is that Media Literacy should be included in non-formal education. *"The subject should be multidisciplinary rather than being taught only in class,"* adds Dilyana Vuchkova.

Who should teach Media Literacy?

Respondents have different opinions about who should teach Media Literacy. Some of them believe that these should be teachers, while others think that journalists or specialists from the humanities field (especially sociology, political science or economics) with pedagogical training, or representatives of non-governmental organisations should teach this.

"Teaching is the one part - both teachers and journalists can get involved in it. However, it is important who will develop the curriculum and materials and who will write the relevant textbooks/teaching aids. Therefore, the presence of experienced journalists is mandatory," says Anton Andonov.

In the opinion of a representative from the Foundation for Entrepreneurship, Culture and Education, media literacy training should be first organised by the state, if the government is truly interested in having informed citizens. As an alternative, if the state is not able to do this, NGOs and the private sector should be relied on.

"An interdisciplinary approach needs to be applied. The school should not be considered as a closed institutional environment, but as a laboratory in which knowledge is first and foremost an experiment," claims Vasilen Vasilev.

Conclusions

Regarding the last place occupied by Bulgaria in the Open Society Foundation's Media Literacy Index, the respondents think that the reasons are complex. They include problems with the quality of education, low level of media freedom, rampant social media use and low level of trust between people.

The low level of trust in political leaders and institutions is considered as a factor in the spread of conspiracies. Respondents also believe that the situation is influenced by the country's totalitarian legacy and socio-economic factors. The increasingly difficult access to information, silencing of critical voices and behind-the-scenes influence of business and political circles to the large media are also indicated as reasons.

With regards to the most vulnerable groups in the Bulgarian society, respondents rank people with low level of education as the most susceptible to propaganda. Respondents add to that group those who are isolated from the modern world and the trends of economic development.

Respondents work with different target groups and find gaps in their skills and knowledge when it comes to fake news and disinformation:

- Among teachers, these knowledge gaps are in the field of technology, the Internet and, above all, social media;
- Citizens lack a critical thinking skillset;
- Those working with youngsters up to the age of 19 report that teenagers are unable to search, compare and filter sources of information, and are unable to analyse in-depth data;
- Academic experts notice scarce knowledge among students, especially in the ability to recognize fake news.

However, some of the respondents report progress in elevating media literacy resulting from the creation of platforms, media rubrics and volunteer projects and from the efforts of some journalists to counter disinformation.

When it comes to online disinformation, the majority of respondents believes that the measures to solve the problem should be comprehensive and should include holding

purveyors of disinformation responsible, commenting on and exposing negative examples in the media space, developing a state-level policy, and organising courses, trainings and massive information campaigns targeted at different target groups, in order to integrate and cultivate media literacy at school level.

General overview of the needs and skills gaps

As previously said an online poll was distributed to determine the needs and skills gaps, as identified by different members of society. The questionnaire was distributed via anonymous Google Forms during the months of April and May. It was promoted through the Facebook pages of the Read Twice project, Euro Advance Association and through Facebook ads. To ensure greater variability of respondents, the ads targeted several locations in the country with different ad campaigns – Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas and their adjacent areas. The survey reached people above 18 years of age. It gathered 52 respondents in total, but since not all questions were mandatory, some did not receive answers.

Accordingly, we received only 5 answered surveys from the youngest age group (18-29), 39 from those between 29 and 64, and 7 from people above 65. One person did not mention their age. 57.7% were female, 40.4% were male and one person did not mention their gender. Most were employed, several people mentioned they were currently studying and several others – that they were retired.

It is important to mention that the respondents had particularly high education levels (over 70% had a Master's degree or a PhD), which has certainly influenced their opinion on the topic discussed. First, we may safely conclude that having received higher education, they are themselves more media literate and are aware of the dangers related to the spread of disinformation. Second, they are more knowledgeable when it comes to the educational sphere and therefore, they have more information to infer on the state of media literacy education, based on their own experience.

This is useful for the present analysis in the following way: although not representative of the entire population of the country, the limited group of 52 people shows us that they have not received proper media literacy training, **then the situation among lower educated people is expected to be even worse.**

The results are particularly telling: among the surveyed respondents, over half have had a course on media literacy, while a significant minority (46%) **have never encountered the topic in an educational setting.** Be as it may, the specific topic of disinformation has been encountered in education considerably less – **63,5% of the respondents admit that they have never had classes dealing with this,** which is a considerable share. Only a handful of people responded regarding the practical aspect of such training saying that it

was not up to the level and mostly – that it did not treat current content. 20 out of the 34 persons who responded to this question would attend a course on media literacy if ever offered such, quoting reasons such as its potential usability in their job, being useful to their clients and patients, and being generally prepared to distinguish truthful information.

On the other spectrum, some people feel confident enough to recognize disinformation based on their general culture or they simply do not find it useful to attend a specialized course on this.

Interestingly, the majority of the respondents confirm that they have managed to learn how to approach the subject on their own **outside of educational environments**.

The results related to the rate of occurrence of disinformation are particularly telling – 96% of the respondents confirm that they have encountered fake news online without a single respondent who is not familiar with the phenomenon. Furthermore, most people admit observing it over a few times a week.

Naturally, the majority completely agrees that media literacy and in particular, how to counteract fake news and disinformation needs to be studied at educational institutions – even if they themselves **believe they are pretty good at distinguishing disinformation online, on social media, in print press and to a lesser extent – on TV and radio**.

Among the most influential factors that impede respondents from being even more confident in their skills are the omnipresence of disinformation, the huge information flow, the fact that „technologic development is increasingly and more efficiently used for the production of disinformation“, so sometimes fake news is very cleverly disguised and hard to spot. Time deficit to check relevant sources as well as trust in relatives and friends are also detrimental to respondents' critical thinking.

Some respondents, however, mention that an expert who teaches the subject would play a key role while others argue that schools suffer **a deficit of experts on the topic** who would be capable of giving such classes. One respondent underlines that it is not only important, but it is even crucial to teach media literacy since especially in pharmacy and medicine, the lack of knowledge can prove fatal. Only 4 out of 52 people say it is not necessary to teach this subject in formal educational settings.

Respondents are confident that the best educational level to teach the subject is high school (75%), while university (44 %) and primary school (36.5%) score lower. A

considerable share believe professional education is also useful – 34% (respondents could pick more than one option).

The surveyed group gives special priority to the subject as they believe it deserves a dedicated space in the educational curriculum. One respondent also mentions that a new discipline would provoke greater interest among students and pupils so this is the right way to “advertise“ it. In his view, it will give them enough educational time and depth to process it and really understand it. Those who believe fighting against disinformation should be integrated within one or more existing disciplines, mention communications, philosophy and civic education, philosophy, history, Bulgarian language and IT.

A solid majority of almost 80% say that persons with lower educational levels are more vulnerable to falling victim to fake news and disinformation, while a good 63% mention the elderly as the most susceptible. Others (54%) find that young people are most vulnerable.

In conclusion, based on the distributed survey, it turns out that **respondents are well aware of the dangers of the spread of disinformation online**. Although they generally feel confident enough in their skills to discern fact from fake (which might be a case of overconfidence arising from their high educational levels), they want to be even better prepared to face it and get more training. They have generally found their own ways to orient themselves in a complicated world of abounding information, without relying on formal institutions, but rather on professional experience, general knowledge and sometimes – even gut feeling.

Even more, respondents believe that **large societal groups are not equally prepared and need more targeted, tailor-made and systemic formal training**. They see great dangers stemming from insufficient media literacy and especially from the uncontrolled spread of fake news and society’s unpreparedness to face it. This part of the needs analysis reveals a serious gap between societal needs for anti-disinformation training and what the formal educational system is currently offering to limit the spread of the problem. A gap, that respondents expect can be filled through conscientious efforts of professional experts, given enough time and space to treat the problem and explain it well.

Best practices

Despite the challenges discussed, a number of Bulgarian good practices in the field of media literacy can be named. These can help to solve problems related to the spread of disinformation. Without claiming to be exhaustive, our team has selected some of them; we were guided by their relevance, timeliness and originality.

Media Literacy Days

Media Literacy Days is an annual campaign organized by the Media Literacy Coalition. In 2023, its sixth consecutive edition took place. And while the initiative was inspired by Media Literacy Week in the US, its duration has exceeded that of most similar campaigns.

The initiative lasts seven months and includes trainings for adults, teachers and students, promotion of existing and publication of new educational resources, seminars and webinars with foreign media literacy experts, researchers and journalists, and a national media campaign, promoting the methodologies and training programs of the Media Literacy Coalition and the projects of its members³².

The project contributes to raising awareness of the topic of media literacy and countering fake news and disinformation in Bulgarian society. In addition, the campaign promotes the development and improvement of independent media.

The initiative is supported by the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education and Science - they are the institutions that distribute information about the campaign and the materials. Through the large range of resources³³, teachers with varying degrees of experience and competence can introduce some of the core elements of media and digital education into the learning process, regardless of the subject they teach. This is important because education is an essential component in countering fake news.

Media Literacy Days also receives support and funding under the "Small Grants" program of the US Embassy in Bulgaria, and support from the Representation office of the European Parliament and the European Commission in Bulgaria, UNICEF Bulgaria, and

³²Media Literacy Days. Media Literacy Coalition, Online resource, available on: <https://dni2023.gramoten.li/program/>, accessed on 26.04.23.

³³Media Literacy Days. Resources. Online resource, available on: <https://dni2023.gramoten.li/resources/>, accessed on 27.04.23.

the Lachezar Tsotsorkov Foundation, with which the Coalition for Media Literacy partners on the training program for adults "Media Literacy Online - Lifelong Learning".

It is a positive thing that the educational initiatives with which the campaign is connected seek to unite the efforts of all people who work in the field of formal and informal education to increase the media literacy levels of all age groups in our country. Here it should be recalled that one of the strategic goals of the EU is the development of media literacy and as a member state, Bulgaria has committed to make efforts in this direction.

[Factcheck.bg](#)

Another example of good practice in the field of media literacy in Bulgaria is the Factcheck.bg platform. It is the only comprehensive fact-checking platform in the country. Factcheck is an initiative of the Association of European Journalists - Bulgaria (AEJ), and the platform's team is made up of experienced journalists who have set themselves the goal of fighting disinformation and fake news in the country. Factcheck.bg is part of the Bulgarian Coalition against Disinformation.

According to its website, the platform is also editorially independent because it applies principles of impartiality. The site team assures that they verify any claim objectively - regardless of whether it would cause a conflict of interest with any of their sponsors³⁴.

At different times, Factcheck.bg has received support under the "Small Grants" program of the US Embassy in Bulgaria, from the European Parliament, from the "Active Citizens" Fund in Bulgaria, the NATO "Public Diplomacy" Program and the Fund for Innovations Against Disinformation of the US Department of State.³⁵

The main aim of the project is to verify the facts in topics of public importance with the potential for social impact, and the team claims to always do so according to the highest journalistic standards³⁶.

³⁴Factcheck.bg "Principles of work? Online resource, available on: <https://factcheck.bg/work-principles/>, accessed on 27.04.23.

³⁵Factcheck.bg. Transparency of funding. Online resource, available on: <https://factcheck.bg/transparency-of-funding/>, accessed on 27.04.23.

³⁶Factcheck. Who are we? Online resource, available on: <https://factcheck.bg/who-we-are/>, accessed on 27.04.23.

MeGra

Another recent good practice in the field of media literacy is the Bulgarian National Television's (BNT) podcast series "MeGra" which is implemented with the financial support of the European Parliament. The podcast channel was launched in the summer of 2020, and its author is Anton Andonov, who is a member of the Board of Directors of BNT. In the first season (10 episodes), the public television initiated discussions on the topic of media literacy. The second season of "MeGra" continues with 5 new episodes. In both seasons, some of the most prominent BNT journalists have been included as panellists.

The podcast series examines various aspects of media literacy - what constitutes misinformation; why there is so much false information in the healthcare field; how social networks give birth to fake news; the most important ethical norms that journalists must follow and the role of public media in the development of the media environment in Europe³⁷.

The goal is to reach as large an audience as possible, and to help more people develop critical thinking and build their own mechanisms for verifying information. "MeGra" strives to increase media literacy among young and active Bulgarians, therefore the episodes are available for listening on Spotify, Soundcloud, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, as well as on the renewed news website - bntnews.bg.

Vijte: The News in Children's Language

"VIJTE: News in Children's Language" is the first Bulgarian media outlet³⁸ for children. It was created by the platform "Knigovishte" (backed by the Gutenberg 3.0 Foundation) on 10 May 2021. It is aimed at children between the ages of 7 and 14. The team publishes an article on a topic that interests children every weekday, and every month they conduct a survey among readers to determine the subjects that interest them.

Each news article is accompanied by a brief questionnaire that encourages readers to reflect on what they have read. As children read quality journalism written specifically for them, they accumulate points in a reading comprehension game and unconsciously

³⁷Bulgarian National Television. Media Literacy Podcast series „MeGra“. Online resource, available on: <https://bnt.bg/news/podkast-poredicata-za-mediyna-gramotnost-megra-s-nov-sezon-296291news.html>, accessed on 27.04.23.

³⁸Knigovishte.bg. Online resource, available on: <https://www.knigovishte.bg/> assessed on 7.07.2023

build the foundations of their civic education while developing their media, digital, and reading literacy while playing. The editorial team is composed of professional journalists with diverse interests and skills beyond pure journalism.

In 2022, the Gutenberg 3.0 Foundation also developed the pilot project “KidsTrustNews”, in collaboration with "VIJTE" and the Slovenian children's media outlet “Časoris.” The project was funded with the support of the Erasmus+ program of the European Commission.

As part of the project, a pilot program for teaching media and civic literacy from an early age through quality children's media outlet was developed and introduced in over 20 school classes. Monthly editorial meetings were held, and 200 articles for children and questionnaires related to the respective topics were prepared. Seminars were also conducted during the project to facilitate the sharing of experiences among teachers, resulting in guidelines for primary school teachers on how to use media content for children in education, compiled in the handbook "Media and Civic Literacy in the Classroom with Quality Children's Media."³⁹

³⁹ Knigovishte.bg (2022). Медийна и гражданска грамотност в клас с качествена детска медия: Наръчник за начални учители. [Media and Civic Literacy in the Classroom with Quality Children's Media: Handbook for teachers]. Online resource. Available at: <https://www.knigovishte.bg/uploads/%D0%9C%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%B9%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B8-%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B6%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82-%D0%B2-%D0%BA%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%81-%D1%81-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%82%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%8F.pdf>, accessed on 30.06.2023

How Read Twice responds to the needs of young people?

In the first phase of the project, Read Twice took 30 young media professionals from Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia to two media literacy trainings in Berlin and Porto. These sessions focused on showing ways to detect and limit the spread of fake news and disinformation. The trainings involved theoretical and practical components, as well as visits to different media outlets, such as Deutsche Welle, Der Spiegel, Publico and Radio Nova.

This gave them a general overview of journalistic production and standards in reporting objectively, but also – the chance to dive deep into the latest trends and technological innovations available to journalists and media professionals today.

During the two activities, the young adults got the opportunity to exchange thoughts on the main issues and attempts to address them in their native countries and to share their visions on how the situation could be improved.

In the second stage of the project, upon return to their home countries, the young people took on the role of mentors and prepared lectures and educational materials for people of their age. Each group gave three university workshops in front of audiences composed of various students – a total of over 450 people. By taking the role of lecturers, the youngsters not only got more deeply involved with the topic, but also became much more efficient in spreading the messages and goals of the Read Twice project, namely – the importance of media literacy and critical thinking.

During the entire project implementation, the young participants from the three countries have also had the chance to write articles on topics, related to fake news and disinformation, exploring national and local angles of the problem. They were guided and mentored in the process by the project team and their publications appeared on the project website. This was the first real journalistic experience for many, while for others – it was a chance to create and expand their publication portfolio.

Overall, the project engaged large groups of people by giving them the tools to discover disinformation, but also by fostering critical thinking skills in them. Not only did the project provide valuable knowledge and skills, but it also provoked continuous engagement and long-lasting impact, as it put the participants in different roles: learners, teachers, practitioners, but also – influencers and thought leaders.

Conclusions and recommendations

As stated above, Bulgaria ranks last in the field of media literacy in the EU, and its society seems unprepared for the “waves” of disinformation and propaganda, making it particularly vulnerable to hybrid attacks. In recent years, institutions, civic activists, and professional communities (such as journalists, teachers, academics) have made efforts to combat this pressing issue. However, their initiatives, no matter how adequate, remain uncoordinated. Achieving meaningful change is not possible without implementing a comprehensive policy to enhance media and civic literacy among Bulgarians.

Here are some recommendations to decision-makers, educational institutions, media and civic sector, which - by working together – could improve media literacy and disinformation response readiness of the population in Bulgaria.

Suggested activities for decision-makers at the local, national, EU level:

- *Development of comprehensive national media literacy strategy* – by establishing a working group comprising experts from academia, media, and civil society;
- *Integration of media literacy into the national curricula* of primary, secondary, and higher education levels.
- *Ensuring professional development opportunities* for teachers to enhance their knowledge and skills in teaching media literacy;
- *Collaboration with educational institutions, teachers, and experts* to develop age-appropriate media literacy resources and teaching materials.
- *Adequate regulation of online media* and implementation of effective tools for sanctioning outlets and platforms that disseminate disinformation;
- *Launching public awareness campaigns* to highlight the importance of media literacy and its role in fostering informed citizenship;
- *Engaging with European Union initiatives*, such as the Digital Education Action Plan, to align national efforts with EU-level strategies for promoting media literacy;
- *Seeking EU funding opportunities and grants* to support media literacy initiatives and projects in Bulgaria.

Suggested activities for educational institutions:

- *Advocacy for the introduction of media literacy* as a standalone subject (in secondary school) or integrating it into existing subjects across different grade levels (in primary school);
- *Development of age-appropriate curriculum frameworks* that cover topics such as critical media analysis, digital citizenship, media ethics, and responsible online behaviour;
- *Teaching students* how to critically evaluate and analyze media messages, including identifying biases, evaluating sources, and fact-checking information;
- *Educating students* about responsible digital behaviour, including privacy protection, online etiquette, and respectful online communication;
- *Collaboration of schools with local media outlets and journalists* to provide students with authentic learning experiences, such as media workshops, interviews, or field trips;
- *Introducing “Media literacy”* as a mandatory course in the communication studies curricula of the universities;
- *Enhancing practical training* for university students in the field of fact-checking and evaluation of information;
- *Establishing partnerships with media organizations* to facilitate hands-on learning experiences and promoting responsible media consumption among students.

Suggested activities for media and civic sectors:

- *Providing resources, expertise, and support* to educators in implementing media literacy programs;
- *Offering interactive workshops that provide hands-on experiences* in media analysis, fact-checking, and critical thinking;
- *Creating engaging and interactive content*, such as videos, infographics, and online quizzes, to raise awareness and educate about media literacy;
- *Organizing media literacy campaigns and events* – such as conferences, workshops, panel discussions, or film screenings to facilitate dialogue and learning around media literacy;

- *Collaboration with influencers and public figures* to amplify the impact of media literacy initiatives;
- *Supporting youth-led media initiatives* (vlogs, blogs, podcasts, or community-based media platforms) by providing mentorship, resources, and networking opportunities to help young people develop their media skills and amplify their voices;
- *Engaging with policymakers, stakeholders and funders* to highlight the importance of media literacy and secure resources for media literacy initiatives.

By implementing these recommendations, decision-makers and stakeholders can contribute to strengthening media literacy in Bulgaria and empowering citizens to navigate the media landscape intelligently, responsibly, and effectively.

Sources

19. СУ „Елин Пелин“, София. [19th Secondary School Elin Pelin, Sofia] Official website, available on: <https://19su.bg/> accessed on 17.7.2023.
- Bulgarian National Television. Media Literacy Podcast series „MeGra“. Online resource, available on: <https://bnt.bg/news/podkast-poredicata-za-mediyna-gramotnost-megra-s-nov-sezon-296291news.html>, accessed on 27.04.23.
- Eurobarometer, Media & News Survey 2022, Online resource available on: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2832> accessed on 6.6.2023.
- European Commission, Directorate-General for Communication, Media use in the European Union – Report, European Commission, 2022, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2775/911712> accessed on 6.6.2023.
- Factcheck. Who are we? Online resource, available on: <https://factcheck.bg/who-we-are/>, accessed on 27.04.23.
- Factcheck.bg “Principles of work? Online resource, available on: <https://factcheck.bg/work-principles/> , accessed on 27.04.23.
- Factcheck.bg. Transparency of funding. Online resource, available on: <https://factcheck.bg/transparency-of-funding/> , accessed on 27.04.23.
- Knigovishte.bg (2022). Медийна и гражданска грамотност в клас с качествена детска медия: Наръчник за начални учители. [Media and Civic Literacy in the Classroom with Quality Children's Media: Handbook for teachers]. Online resource. Available at: <https://www.knigovishte.bg/uploads/%D0%9C%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%B9%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B8-%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B6%D0%B4%D0%B0%D0%BD%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82-%D0%B2-%D0%BA%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%81-%D1%81-%D0%BA%D0%B0%D1%87%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B4%D0%B5%D1%82%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B0-%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%8F.pdf>, accessed on 30.06.2023.
- Knigovishte.bg. Online resource, available on: <https://www.knigovishte.bg/> assessed on 7.07.2023.
- Media Literacy Coalition. Национално изследване за оценяване на дигитално-медийните компетентности на гимназистите. Аналитичен доклад. [A national study to assess the digital-media competences of high school students. Analytical report.] Online resource, available on: <https://old.gramoten.li/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%BC%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B5-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%B9%D0%BD%D0%B0->

[%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BC%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BD%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82-%D0%94%D0%9C%D0%93-2022-%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%BD-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B4.pdf](#) accessed on 6.6.2023.

11. Media Literacy Days. Media Literacy Coalition, Online resource, available on: <https://dni2023.gramoten.li/program/>, accessed on 26.04.23.
12. Media Literacy Days. Resources. Online resource, available on: <https://dni2023.gramoten.li/resources/>, accessed on 27.04.23.
13. Ministry of Education. Study curriculum in Citizen education. Online resource, available on: https://web.mon.bg/upload/14983/pr_UP_GO_11kl_170418.pdf accessed on 12.6.2023
14. NBU. Bachelor programs. Journalism. Curriculum. Online resource, available on: https://ecatalog.nbu.bg/default.asp?V_Year=2022&YSem=1&Mod_ID=&Spec_ID=&PageShow=programpresent&P_Menu=courses_part1&Fac_ID=3&M_PHD=&P_ID=2212&TabIndex=1&l=0, accessed on 12.04.23.
15. NBU. Bachelor programs. Public Relations. Curriculum. Online resource, available on: https://ecatalog.nbu.bg/default.asp?V_Year=2022&PageShow=programpresent&P_Menu=courses_part1&Fac_ID=3&M_PHD=&P_ID=2209&TabIndex=2&l=0, accessed on 12.04.23.
16. NBU. Masters programs. "Journalism 3.0 (online press, radio and television). Program scheme. Online resource, available on: https://ecatalog.nbu.bg/default.asp?V_Year=2022&PageShow=programpresent&P_Menu=courses&Fac_ID=4&M_PHD=0&P_ID=3061&TabIndex=2&l=0, accessed on on 12.04.23.
17. NBU. Masters programs. Digital communications. Program scheme. Online resource, available on: https://ecatalog.nbu.bg/default.asp?V_Year=2022&PageShow=programpresent&P_Menu=courses&Fac_ID=4&M_PHD=0&P_ID=3059&TabIndex=2&l=0, accessed on 12.04.23.
18. Open Society Institute - Sofia. (2023). Индекс за медийна грамотност 2023: България е най-уязвима към дезинформация сред страните в ЕС. (23.06.2023) [Media Literacy Index 2023: Bulgaria is the most vulnerable to disinformation among the countries in the EU] Available on: <https://osis.bg/?p=4449>, accessed on 30.06.2023.
19. SHU. Bachelor programme "Public Relations". Curriculum. Online resource, available on: <https://www.shu.bg/students/razpisi-i-grafici/uplanove/?ID=9529>, accessed on 30.06.23.
20. Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". Faculty of Educational Study and the Arts. Bachelor programs. Media Pedagogy and Artistic Communication. Curriculum. Online resource, available at: <https://fnoi.uni-sofia.bg/wp->

content/uploads/2021/02/4-UP-MPHK-bak-2017_new-ENG-13.02.17.pdf,
accessed on 30.06.2023.

21. Ucha.se. Уроци, тестове и преговори. Видео урок: Подвеждаща информация и фалшиви новини. [Lessons, tests and revisions. Video tutorial: Misleading information and fake news]. Online resource, available on: <https://ucha.se/watch/12999/podvezhdashta-informatsia-i-falshivi-novini>, accessed on 11.04.23.
22. UNiBit. Bachelor programme "Communications and Informing". Curriculum. Online resource, available on: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1YBc_U3G41wxSD5y0Fos9_4STzDsTrxCi/edit, accessed on 30.06.23.
23. UNiBit. Bachelor programme "Innovative Communications and Media Technologies". Curriculum. Online resource, available on: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1keJ_GvHb9QmOS1R17Ox4--tDI-7NV7Lt/edit, accessed on 30.06.23.
24. UNiBit. Bachelor programme "Print Communications". Curriculum. Online resource, available on: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/111pmWeADXnicTFMEfhvOI4wF9wMCt0/view>, accessed on 30.06.23.
25. UNiBit. Bachelor programme. "Media Information and Advertising" Curriculum. Online resource, available on: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1d-MfMOZqZNW6A34JuZ8z1nD2OK3iASsM/view>, accessed on 30.06.23.
26. Българска национална телевизия [Bulgarian National Television]. Official website, available on: <https://bnt.bg/> accessed on 17.7.2023.
27. Закон за радиото и телевизията. [Law on Radio and Television] Lex.bg, online resource available on: <https://lex.bg/laws/ldoc/2134447616> accessed on 6.6.2023.
28. Институт "Отворено общество - София". [Open Society Institute, Sofia]. Official website, available on: <https://osis.bg/> accessed 17.7.2023.
29. Лесенски, Марин. (2023). Индекс за медийна грамотност 2023 [Media Literacy Index 2023]. Институт „Отворено общество“ – София. Available on: <https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/MLI-report-in-Bulgarian-22.06.pdf>, accessed on 30.06.2023.
30. Лъжеш ли? [Are you lying?]. Online resource, available on: <https://www.lazheshli.com> / accessed 18.7.2023.
31. Наредба за изменение и допълнение на Наредба № 13 от 2016 г. за гражданското, здравното, екологичното и интеркултурното образование (ДВ, бр. 80 от 2016 г.) [Ordinance amending and supplementing Ordinance No. 13 of 2016 on civic, health, environmental and intercultural education]. Online resource, available on: https://web.mon.bg/upload/16759/izm_ndbr13_2016_GZEIObrazovanie_28_0918.pdf accessed on 12.06.2023.
32. Национална мрежа за децата. [National Network for Children]. Official website, available on: <https://nmd.bg/> accessed on 17.7.2023.
33. Университет за национално и световно стопанство. [University of National and World Economy]. Official website, available on: <https://www.unwe.bg/en/> accessed on 17.7.2023.

34. Фондация „Заедно в час“ [Teach for Bulgaria]. Official website, available on: <https://zaednovchas.bg/en/> accessed on 17.7.2023.
35. Фондация за предприемачество, култура и образование. [Foundation for Entrepreneurship, Culture and Education]. Official website, available on: <https://foundationece.eu/> accessed on 17.7.2023.
36. Център за изкуства, култура и образование „София“. [Centre for Arts, Culture and Education Sofia]. Official website, available on: <https://www.stcrd.com/> accessed on 17.7.2023.

Annexes

Questionnaire for expert interviews

1. According to the latest edition of the Media Literacy Index (2022, Open Society Institute, Sofia), our country ranks last in the EU. What do you think is the reason behind this?

Според последното издание на Индекса за медийна грамотност на Фондация “Отворено общество”, страната се нарежда на последно място в ЕС. Каква, според вас, е причината за този резултат?

2. The same Index shows that Bulgarian respondents believe they are very often exposed to disinformation and fake news – more often than any other group in the EU. From your point of view, what are the main contributing factors to this?

Индексът показва, че българските респонденти смятат, че много често са изложени на дезинформация и фалшиви новини - повече от всяка друга група от ЕС. Според вас, какви са основните фактори, които допринасят за това?

3. Who do you think is most vulnerable to falling victim to fake news and disinfo in our society and why?

Кой, според вас, е най-уязвим да стане жертва на фалшивите новини и дезинформацията в нашето общество и защо?

4. You work with [young people/students/media users/other target groups]. What would you identify as the biggest gaps in their knowledge and skills when it comes to fake news and disinformation?

Вие работите с (целева група). Какви, според вас, са най-големите пропуски в уменията и знанията им, свързани с фалшивите новини и дезинформацията?

5. What are the positive stories in light of this issue, if any?

Какъв е напредъкът по темата в последно време, ако има такъв?

6. Does the institution you represent do anything to address or limit the propagation of fake news and disinformation? If yes, what?

Институцията/организацията, която представлявате, прави ли нещо, за да адресира проблема и да ограничи разпространението на фалшиви новини и дезинформация? Ако да, какво?

7. Do you know of any good initiatives or projects that aim to tackle the spread of fake news and disinformation?

Бихте ли посочили добри практики, проекти, които таргетират проблема от България?

8. When we think of online disinformation, what could be the best solution to mitigating its impact? Educating/training citizens, raising awareness, holding disinfo propagators responsible, technical solutions or something else entirely?

Когато мислим за дезинформация онлайн, какво би могло да бъде решението за ограничаването на разпространението им: обучение/тренинг, дейности за повишаване на информираността, да се търси отговорност от разпространителите, технически решения или друго?

9. Do you think that skills related to media literacy, fake news and disinformation should be taught in the educational system curricula or rather – that they should be taught to those who take special interest in this? If yes, which education level and subject do you think would be the most appropriate?

Смятате ли, че въпросите, свързани с медийната грамотност, фалшивите новини и дезинформацията трябва да бъдат включени в образователните програми? Ако да, то на кое образователно ниво и в кой предмет?

10. If yes, who do you think should teach these skills – general teachers, journalists or other professionals?

Ако да, то кой трябва да го преподава - учители, журналисти или други професионалисти?

Questionnaire for target groups

- 1. Have you ever taken a class/course in media literacy?** (Някога имали ли сте курс или лекция по медийна грамотност?)
- 2. How about a course on fake news and disinformation?** (А за фалшиви новини и дезинформация?)
- 3. If yes, do you think they were practical enough?** (Ако да, бяха ли с достатъчно практическа насоченост?)
- 4. Do you think the course involved enough theoretical components?** (А теоретическа?)
- 5. Did it cover recent and relevant topics?** (Темите бяха ли актуални и релевантни?)
- 6. If not, would you take such a course and why?** (Ако не сте минавали такъв курс, бихте ли го направили и защо?)
- 7. Do you think media literacy, including knowledge how to recognize fake news and disinformation should be taught at educational institutions?** (Смятате ли, че медийната грамотност и в частност - как да се борим с фалшивите новини и дезинформацията - трябва да бъдат преподавани в образователните институции?)
- 8. If yes, at which level?** (Ако да, то на кое образователно равнище)
- 9. Should this be a separate school subject or a part of an existing subject?** (В кой предмет следва да се изучават или да бъдат отделна дисциплина?)
- 10. Who do you think is most vulnerable to falling victim to fake news and disinformation in our society and why?** (Кой, според вас, е най-уязвим в обществото към дезинформация и фалшиви новини?)
- 11. What kind of topics or tools should a training on media literacy, fake news and disinformation include?** (Какви теми или инструменти трябва да засегне такова обучение - проверка на факти, видове дезинформация, инструменти за проверка на достоверността, търсене на достоверни източници...?)

12. How confident do you personally feel in discerning fake news or disinformation in news articles online? (Вие лично колко уверен/а се чувствате да разграничавате фалшиви новини и дезинформация в онлайн статии?)

13. How about other media sources, including social media? (А в други медии, включително социални мрежи?)

14. What prevents you from being more confident in your media literacy skillset? (Какво ви пречи да бъдете по-уверени?)

15. Would you like to add anything else? (Бихте ли добавили нещо?)

16. Name

17. Gender

18. Age

19. Occupation

20. Highest educational level attained