

**Media literacy and disinformation response  
readiness in Romania**

**Needs assessment and state-of-play analysis**



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## **Editorial information**

### **Association Se Poate**

Se Poate Association (translated in English “It’s Possible”) was founded in 2014 as a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization that aims to involve the youth and young adults from our local community as active and responsible citizens. Se Poate's members work in specialized teams to design, develop, and execute international projects related to research, innovation, and exchange of good practices. These projects are often realized through seminars or training courses. The organization includes experienced trainers and facilitators, who hold Salto accreditation and are keen to participate in the implementation of proposed projects. Se Poate is committed to promoting and supporting the social inclusion of young people in Bucharest province and rural areas of Romania. The organization focuses on developing the personal and professional skills of young people and promoting values such as solidarity, multiculturalism, and volunteering for the benefit of society.

Our objectives are to enhance and facilitate the integration of young individuals into society and the workforce, foster the cultivation of civic competencies and active citizenship, promote the adoption of responsible and sustainable environmental practices, emphasize the significance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle, and encourage active involvement in non- formal education opportunities.

Vision of Se Poate envisions a society where young individuals are actively involved in creating positive change, promoting social inclusion, and adopting responsible and sustainable practices.

Mission of Se Poate is to empower young individuals by providing them with opportunities to develop their personal and professional skills, promoting active citizenship, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. We aim to achieve this mission by offering a range of educational and training services, promoting cooperation and exchange of good practices, and providing a safe and welcoming environment for young people to gather, socialize, and engage in activities.

Community development and youth participation are essential components for achieving the goals of increasing social and professional integration, promoting active citizenship and civic competences, underlining the importance of a healthy lifestyle, and promoting active participation through non-formal education among young people. To support these objectives, it's important to engage with local community organizations, foster a safe and inclusive environment, empower young people, create space for dialogue and participation, and promote non-formal education.

**Authors:****Melike Ozturk:**

Melike Ozturk, an accomplished professional with a strong educational background in Accounting and Auditing, is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in accounting, finance, and management at the University of Padova, Italy. Her portfolio speaks to her proficiency, having managed more than 50 projects across a range of sectors and programs, including KA1, KA2, KA3 (EYT), CERV, EFC, Alliance Innovation, and Horizon Innovation. Melike's involvement in Erasmus+ and other EU programs, financed by EACEA, attests to her extensive experience in project management. She is actively working with young people for 4 years in the field of Erasmus+ and other EU programmes, specially she has been working with people with fewer opportunities from rural areas. She is managing training courses and youth exchanges with the group of young people ages 16-29 with a subject of social entrepreneurship, climate change, digital skills, fair trade, healthy lifestyle, disinformation and media literacy. Melike Ozturk's involvement in disinformation and media literacy projects is marked by her strategic thinking and dedication to addressing critical societal challenges. Leveraging her academic background and project management expertise, she works on initiatives aimed at combating disinformation. Her ability to design, manage, and lead projects within the EACEA framework showcases her commitment to making a positive impact on information integrity and truthfulness.

**Anamaria Moisa:**

Anamaria Moisa is a dynamic professional with over 5 years of dedicated experience within the NGO sector. Her journey in the realm of non-governmental organizations began during her student years, where she actively engaged with youth and student organizations in Bucharest. Her impactful journey started with her presidency at the Society of Students Volunteer from 2018 to 2021, and her notable roles within the Federation Union of Students from Romania. In 2020, Anamaria served as the Regional Director of the Training Department, showcasing her commitment to skill development and education. Progressing further, she assumed the role of National Director of the Training Department in 2021, underscoring her leadership capabilities and dedication to enhancing learning experiences. Throughout her involvement in student-focused volunteer work, Anamaria acquired a diverse range of competences, including adept project management, comprehensive project writing, effective teamwork, strong leadership, and compelling public speaking. Her expertise was notably channelled into managing more than 15 projects, with a specific focus on training programs. Her proficiency as a trainer further blossomed when she became accredited by the Federation of Students in 2021, after initially becoming a trainer in 2019. She has since conducted over 40 training sessions, contributing significantly to the growth of others. Her experience with social media and involvement in research make her an invaluable asset in initiatives aimed at countering disinformation, fostering critical thinking, and promoting responsible information sharing.

**Editors:****Valeria-Maria Paraschiva**

Valeria-Maria Paraschiva is a dedicated professional with an academic background that underscores her commitment to psychology and national security. Armed with a Bachelor's degree in psychology and a Masters degree in clinical psychology, psychological counselling, and psychotherapy, she has honed her expertise in understanding and assisting individuals in various contexts. Currently pursuing a second Master's degree in applied psychology within the realm of national security, Valeria's academic pursuits reflect a deep interest in safeguarding societal well-being. Valeria's altruistic spirit and dedication to personal growth find expression through her extensive engagement in the NGO sector for over 9 years. She recognizes volunteering as a means to not only foster her own development but also to contribute positively to the lives of others in need. Since 2020, her influence has been particularly impactful as the National Director of the Non-formal Education Department at The National Union of Students from Romania (UNSR). In this role, she has steered the direction of non-formal education initiatives, championing growth through a diverse range of training programs. Given her substantial experience in education, training, and institutional quality, Valeria-Maria Paraschiva's involvement in a disinformation project influences her attitudes and behaviour in social media and research activities in other parallel projects. Her skill set in critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and personal development aligns well with the objectives of initiatives aimed at countering disinformation, promoting digital literacy, and cultivating a discerning mindset. She is responsible for delivering local university training for the Read Twice project in Romania.

**Alice Marin:**

Alice-Elena Marin is a committed expert with a strong academic grounding in sociology and community development, holding a Bachelor's degree in sociology and a Master's degree in anthropology and community and regional development. Her expertise lies in understanding social dynamics and fostering local progress. Currently pursuing a doctoral degree in sociology, her research centers on the influential role of young individuals in driving societal and community changes. With over 5 years of active engagement in youth-led initiatives, she has held diverse positions in national-level NGOs, including her leadership role as Secretary General at the Romanian Youth Council (CTR). Within UNSR, she serves as a trainer, showcasing her commitment to equipping youth with essential skills. Noteworthy is her managerial role at the "Virtute et Sapientia" Foundation at the University of Bucharest, highlighting her unwavering dedication to empowering marginalized youth through education. Furthermore, her involvement with Adfaber in digital education for youth adds an additional dimension to her expertise, reflecting her commitment to providing young individuals with vital digital literacy skills for today's evolving world. Alice-Elena Marin's dedication to media literacy is exemplified by her active participation in youth-focused initiatives and her engagement in the Shadowing program at the Romanian Parliament.

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## Objective

This document is part of the EU-funded project Read Twice. It aims at identifying the skills and knowledge gaps and needs of the project target groups regarding media literacy training.

## About Read Twice (R2)

The European Commission recognises that disinformation poses major risks to European democracies and societies, and it needs to be addressed 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 views. Considering this, it is crucial to teach people how to assess content critically, especially online, and make them more aware of the phenomenon of disinformation, how it can interfere with democracy and human rights.

### Project objective:

In this respect, the project READ TWICE will counter disinformation and limit the spread of fake news by enhancing citizens' skills to assess information critically, identify vicious and harmful media content and distinguish between facts and opinions, thus improving their media literacy competences.

The project consortium involves organisations coming from both countries with high and low media literacy capacity. To ensure exchange of knowledge and best practices, and transfer of know-how two international capacity building trainings are envisaged – in Portugal and in Germany. The events will aim at improving the capacity of 30 young media practitioners to identify disinformation and implement state-of-the-art practices for media literacy.

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 thus involving almost one thousand people.

In addition, an international webinar will increase the access and use of digital tools for countering disinformation and the social media campaign “Read twice, don't repeat lies” will encourage citizens to stop, read again 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 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:**

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Aseniya Dimitrova, Project Manager

## Executive Summary

The purpose of this document is to find out what skills and knowledge are missing (such as critical thinking, media literacy, source verification, digital forensic, emotional resilience, online ethics and citizenship, cybersecurity awareness, storytelling skills, civic engagement, peer education and communication skills etc) for different groups involved in the project: young people, local groups, and organisations in Romania. We want to see what they need to know about media literacy, fake news, and disinformation. We used online surveys, and interviews to figure out the main problems that young people have with online media. We also have some ideas as well as suggestions and recommendations to help with these problems.

This paper offers an examination of present methods concerning media literacy, disinformation, and fake news. It evaluates both local and international initiatives conducted by active organizations in Romania. As per the investigation, while numerous media platforms and groups have conducted research, there remains a notable need for increased awareness efforts.

The survey conducted found that young people in Romania are concerned about fake news and disinformation but lack the skills and knowledge to effectively identify and combat them. Respondents generally have a low level of media literacy, with only a minority having received any formal training on the topic.

Interviews conducted with journalists highlighted the pervasive danger posed by social media in disseminating emotionally charged false information. The pandemic-induced isolation intensified people's reliance on the internet as a source of connection and information, which malicious entities exploited to sow panic and discord. Although younger individuals generally exhibit better skills in identifying misinformation, the struggle remains in distinguishing credible sources. Journalists underscored the need for a centralised resource offering reliable information and fact-checking mechanisms for the benefit of the youth.

The survey also revealed that social media is the primary source of news and information for young people in Romania, which makes them particularly vulnerable to

fake news and disinformation. Respondents expressed a desire for more reliable sources of information and greater transparency from media outlets.

There were some notable gender differences in the survey results. Female respondents were more likely to express concern about fake news and disinformation, and to report feeling overwhelmed by the volume of information available online. Male respondents, on the other hand, were more likely to report having encountered fake news or disinformation and to express confidence in their ability to identify it.

Overall, the survey highlights the need for greater media literacy education for young people in Romania, as well as for better regulation of media outlets to prevent the spread of fake news and disinformation. Recommendations include incorporating media literacy into the curriculum at both secondary and higher education levels, as well as providing training and resources for educators and media professionals. Additionally, there is a need for increased public awareness campaigns and efforts to promote critical thinking and fact-checking skills among young people.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to our local network and the students who participated in our survey. Their valuable contributions and active involvement were instrumental in the success of our research project.

We extend our heartfelt appreciation to the members of University of Bucharest, University student associations, Bucharest Youth Centre, municipalities from rural areas and as well as NGOs in Bucharest who are working with young people, who generously supported our survey distribution efforts. Their assistance in sharing the survey through various channels, including social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, significantly expanded our reach and helped us connect with a diverse group of participants.

We are especially grateful to the young people and local journalists who took the time to complete the online questionnaire. Their willingness to participate and provide insightful responses played a crucial role in enhancing the quality and reliability of our survey data. Without their engagement, our research would not have been possible.

## Introduction

In Romania, legislation has been implemented to address the issue of disinformation and fake news. In 2018, the Romanian government enacted a law aimed at combating the dissemination of fake news and disinformation on the internet (Government of Romania, 2018). According to this law, **internet service providers are required to remove fake news and disinformation within 24 hours upon receiving a request from the National Audiovisual Council (CNA)**, the media regulatory authority in Romania (Government of Romania, 2018). Non-compliance with this law can lead to fines and other penalties (Government of Romania, 2018).

Furthermore, the Romanian Criminal Code includes provisions that specifically target the spread of false information. Article 360 of the Criminal Code criminalises the dissemination of false information that can cause harm to individuals or society (Romanian Criminal Code, n.d.). Offenders can face imprisonment for a maximum period of three years (Romanian Criminal Code, n.d.).

Nevertheless, concerns have been raised by certain groups regarding the potential misuse of these laws to restrict freedom of speech and the selective enforcement by authorities. Critics have also questioned the effectiveness of these laws in combating the proliferation of fake news and disinformation on the internet. It is important to acknowledge that the legislative landscape surrounding disinformation and fake news is subject to ongoing changes, and new laws and regulations may be introduced in the future.

## National Initiatives

In Romania, like in many other countries, the rise of digital platforms and social media has amplified the dissemination of disinformation. This has led to challenges in helping individuals, particularly young people, develop the skills necessary to differentiate between credible sources and misinformation. The spread of false information through social media has become a significant threat to informed decision-making and social cohesion.

Efforts to address this issue include integrating media literacy education into formal curricula and promoting critical thinking skills. Recognizing the need for a comprehensive approach, some organisations in Romania have launched initiatives to raise awareness about disinformation, providing tools for fact-checking and critical evaluation of online content. However, challenges remain in ensuring that these efforts reach a broad audience and effectively equip individuals to combat the spread of disinformation. National initiatives focusing on media literacy in Romania play a pivotal role in addressing the challenges posed by the digital age and the proliferation of information, both accurate and misleading.

Following projects have been selected as national initiatives due to their significant impact and alignment with the goals of promoting media literacy, fostering active citizenship, and combating disinformation. Each project addresses crucial aspects of media education and its role in contemporary society.

The project "["I Teach Media Literacy! – Media Education and Culture Lab"](#) aims to promote media literacy and support local communities in Romania. It involves 120 teachers and 12,000 students from across the country. The initiative, led by the *Center for Independent Journalism Romania (CIJ)* in partnership with the Rădăuți Civic Association and Norsensus Mediaforum, is financially supported by the Active Citizens Fund Romania, funded by Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway through the 2014-2021 EEA Grants. Given the prevalence of manipulated information and polarized politics in public spaces, media literacy is crucial. It equips young people with skills to identify relevant information, distinguish between various sources, and engage responsibly in their communities. The project seeks to enhance media literacy nationwide among high school students. Romanian Language and Literature teachers will incorporate media concepts into their classes to nurture critical thinking skills. Moreover, the initiative involves 80 high school students from Rădăuți in non-formal media literacy workshops. These students will become advocates for critical thinking and information verification within their communities. Ultimately, the project strives to empower students to become informed citizens capable of navigating media responsibly, countering the negative impacts of misinformation.

The program "["Teaching Media Literacy! – the Media Education and Culture Lab"](#)" has two directions of development:

1. know-how and support for the introduction of media literacy in the learning practice for high school students, in collaboration with teachers from humanistic disciplines;
2. **Advocacy for introducing media literacy into the common core of skills** that students acquire.

[The Mediawise4All project](#): **media education for children and young people through the community** is run by Mediawise Society and financed by the Effective Civic program, developed by FDSC - Foundation for the Development of Civil Society in partnership with RAF - Romanian American Foundation and with the support of CJI - Center for Independent Journalism. This year (2023), the Mediawise Society is launching **the first edition of the Training of Trainers program – Mediawise4All** – designed for professionals who already have training skills or knowledge in the field of communication and media education. The program will focus on learning **the skills of analysis and critical evaluation of media messages and online practices and digital creation** of media messages, familiarisation with the resources and training methods of the Mediawise Society, but also on ways of transposing them in learning situations with children and young people. All these media, digital and citizenship skills fit into the Key Lifelong Learning Competence Framework as defined by the European Commission.

[The MELIA OBSERVATORY – Media Literacy Observatory for Active Citizenship and Sustainable Democracy](#) is a project co-funded by the European Union (ERDF, IPA) through the Danube Transnational Program. It is carried out by a consortium of 23 members, including 16 project partners and 7 associated partners from 15 European countries. The main objective of the project is to enhance democratic governance in the Danube region by establishing a transnational observatory for promoting media education. This observatory serves as a mechanism to strengthen citizens' media competencies, thereby contributing to the development of sustainable democracy. Additionally, the project provides information about the media landscape, tools for media content analysis, and learning instruments aimed at developing media education competencies in relation to other civic competencies. Through participation in the project, the **Center for Public Innovation (Romania)** will expand its expertise into the specific domain of media promotion of media education. It will improve its research activities in a new field and enhance its capacity to work on transnational projects. The

MELIA Observatory will contribute to expanding knowledge, experiences, and best practices existing in Romania, enabling the creation of new tools and approaches to promote media education and active citizenship among youth. This will result in a higher level of political awareness and strengthen the principles of good governance.

["CommuniTIES – Media Literacy in Practice"](#) is a collaborative initiative involving schools from Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania. Led by *Fulbright TEA alumna Nadina C. Nicolici (Romania)*, the project aims to enhance understanding and cooperation among high school students and educators in Southeast Europe. It tackles disinformation in the digitalized world through two phases: student training sessions and educator events in each country. The project is supported by the U.S. Embassies in Greece, Romania, and Bulgaria. The “CommuniTIES” project addresses the need to strengthen ties and bonds of mutual understanding, respect and cooperation among High School students and educators from Southeast Europe in a joint effort to combat disinformation in a crisis era that education needs to play a crucial role in reassuring democratic values and sustainability in the 21st century digitized world.

The Ministry of Youth and Sports had been one of the main supporters of the Campaign [No Hate Speech](#) had been promoted in Romania as well both through grass-roots initiatives and also through the national initiative structured within the project the [Switch OFF / ONline Speech](#). This project was aligned with the global movement and aimed to enhance awareness about the causes and detrimental impact of hate speech while also working towards its reduction, particularly in online spaces. The project received funding from the EEA Grants – NGO Fund in Romania.

[The MedeaNET European project](#) has the goal of advancing media-based learning among organizations and professionals. This objective is achieved through local training sessions, networking events, online resources, and sharing of knowledge. Over a span of three years, the project facilitated networking opportunities for educators and researchers focused on media literacy in seven countries. The project also had a positive impact in Romania, where it provided valuable research and resources. Throughout the three-year duration, the project team produced annual research reports covering topics such as media literacy, skills in educational media creation, and the utilisation of



media-driven teaching materials. Notably, the project had ActiveWatch – Media Monitoring Agency as a partner in Romania.

## Media Literacy in Romania

Media literacy education is gaining importance in Romania, with numerous secondary schools and higher education institutions (HEIs) now incorporating courses or programs focused on media literacy. Some secondary schools offering media literacy education include the National College "Gheorghe Lazar" in Bucharest, which features a media literacy program as part of its curriculum, and the **"Spiru Haret" National College in Bucharest**, which provides an optional course in media literacy (National College "Gheorghe Lazar," n.d.; "Spiru Haret" National College, n.d.).

At the higher education level, several universities in Romania offer courses or programs related to media literacy. For instance, the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations at the National University of Political Studies and Public Administration in Bucharest offers courses on media literacy, media ethics, and media law (National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, 2018.). Similarly, the Faculty of Journalism and Communication Sciences at the University of Bucharest provides courses on media literacy and related topics, including fake news and disinformation (University of Bucharest, n.d.).

Apart from formal education, various non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Romania offer media literacy training and resources. For instance, the Center for Independent Journalism in Bucharest conducts workshops and training sessions on media literacy and fact-checking, while the Romanian Institute for Human Rights provides resources and training on media literacy and combating hate speech (Center for Independent Journalism, n.d.; Romanian Institute for Human Rights, n.d.). Media literacy education is an evolving field, and future initiatives and programs are likely to emerge to address the persistent challenges associated with fake news and disinformation.

### Survey studies and publications

There have been several survey studies and publications related to disinformation and fake news in Romania:

- ["Media Pluralism Monitor Romania 2020"](#) - This report, published by the European University Institute, provides an overview of the state of media pluralism in Romania, including an analysis of the country's legal framework, media ownership, and content production. The report also includes a section on disinformation and misinformation in Romania. Protection against illegal and harmful speech includes questions that have to do with hate speech and mis- or disinformation (**58% score, 63% last year, 2019**). Romania has several pieces of legislation that cover incitement to hatred or discrimination.
- ["Fake News or Disinformation 2.0? Some Insights into Romanians' Digital Behaviour"](#)— This paper published by Alina Bârgăoanu, Loredana Radu in the Romanian Journal Of European Affairs. This paper focuses on digital behaviour, self-assessment of vulnerabilities to digital disinformation, and patterns of trust as exposed by Romanian citizens. As found in this paper, in general, **Romanians lack the abilities to cope with the fake news phenomenon**. On the trust scale, legacy media is perceived more positively than the political actors or even than the government. Despite low confidence exposed in relation to political and government institutions, media still enjoys comfortable levels of trust, being positioned closer to the top trustworthy entities – the Church and the Army.
- ["The Business of Misinformation: Romania"](#) - This report, published by the Center for Media, Data, and Society (CMDS) at Central European University. The report summarises the findings of research that mapped a total of 108 misinformation sites identified for analysis, of which a sample of 50 were analysed in-depth. Mainstream media and government-funded organisations have not been included in the study, even if they frequently publish misinformation. According to the report, it is uncommon for these sites to reveal their location, their income, or the names of their staff members. However, research shows that most of them are financed through advertising.
- ["Fake News and the Third-Person Effect: They are More Influenced than Me and You"](#)— This paper is published by National University of Political Studies and Public Administration. This study sheds light on the perceived influence of fake news among Romanian people. Particularly, our study aimed at identifying if and how people perceive that the exposure to fake news has significant influence on themselves, on

in-group, and out-group members. This study proves that the TPE theory applies in this new and highly contested digital environment, in the sense that people **perceive that distant others are more influenced by fake news than themselves or people from their close groups** (family or friends).

- [“An Analysis of COVID-19 – Related Fake News from Romania. A Pilot Qualitative Study”](#) - Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. This pilot study aimed to analyze COVID-19 related fake news from Romania that were identified as fake by the Romanian mass-media and the informational characteristics of a COVID-19-related fake news article. The results emphasize the fact that the fake news articles varied concerning the author’s mention. Most of the articles were characterised by manipulated content. Also, most of the articles included content that needed to be cited, but it was not. Several articles mentioned treatment for the disease, and some mentioned the vaccine as a prevention measure against COVID-19. The articles were written in a colloquial language, and most of the fake news articles included criticism towards the government and their measures against the pandemic.

- [According to Media News & Survey 2022 Eurobarometer](#), in 16 Member States, the largest share of respondents reply that they use the website of the news source (e.g. website of a newspaper), and in 10 Member States, the top-ranking method is reading articles or posts that appear in their online social networks; in one country (Romania), these two methods are selected by an equal share of respondents.

## Methodology

The previous sections looked at national initiatives to address the issues with disinformation and to improve media literacy in Romania. In the following sections, we will be analysing the existing study curriculum in formal education and the needs of media literacy education, as identified by different project target groups. To do this, Association Se Poate and Read Twice consortium have conducted a desk research on study curriculum and created online questionnaires for the young people aged 18-25 and interviews for the stakeholders such as journalists. To target young people from all parts of Romania, we have used Google Forms to share surveys via our Association’s Facebook page and local stakeholders’ channels. To assure the wide range of representatives and both genders we have contacted some communication companies to

boost the posts, selected age range from 18-25, selected equal participation of both genders and selected all regions of Romania, not only major cities but also rural areas.

For reasons related to privacy concerns and high workload of journalists, we have sent them questions to be answered in writing, rather than one-on-one interviews.

The target group for the survey was youth aged 18-25 from different backgrounds in Romania. The number of respondents was 56 respondents. To ensure gender balance, the sample was stratified by gender, meaning that an equal number of male and female respondents were recruited. As well as for the stakeholder surveys, we have created a word document with questions and shared them by email and few of them was done in person.

Respondents were recruited through social media and email invitations. The survey was voluntary and anonymous. Respondents were assured that their responses would be kept confidential. The survey was conducted online using a survey platform. The survey included multiple-choice and open-ended questions about the respondents' experiences with media, their perceptions of fake news and disinformation, and their understanding of media literacy concepts. The questions were designed to avoid bias and to be gender neutral.

The collected data were entered into a spreadsheet for analysis. Descriptive statistics, such as frequencies and percentages, were used to summarise the results of the survey. Inferential statistics, such as chi-square tests, were used to test for differences in responses between groups. Open-ended responses were analysed thematically.

The survey was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and provided with an informed consent form. Respondents were assured that their participation was voluntary and that their responses would be kept confidential.

Some potential limitations of this methodology include the possibility of sampling bias, as the sample may not be representative of the broader population of youth in Romania, and the possibility of response bias, as respondents may not be willing to answer the

questions truthfully or accurately. However, by considering gender considerations and designing the questions to be gender-neutral, the survey attempted to mitigate some of these limitations.

## **Key Findings**

### **Media Literacy**

While there is an increasing recognition of the importance of media literacy in Romania, there are still significant gaps in terms of both policy and practice. For example, the National Strategy for Education and Digital Skills Development in Romania includes media literacy as a priority area, but there is no specific funding allocated for media literacy initiatives. In terms of practice, media literacy education is not yet widely integrated into formal education, and there is a need for greater support for educators and the development of media literacy curricula.

### **Disinformation Response Readiness**

There has been a growing recognition of the need to address disinformation and fake news in Romania, particularly in the context of elections and political campaigns. However, there are still significant gaps in terms of institutional capacity and coordination. For example, while there are several organizations and initiatives focused on fact-checking and media literacy, there is no central coordination mechanism for these efforts. In addition, there is a need for greater transparency and accountability in the media landscape, particularly in terms of media ownership and funding.

### **Civil Society Engagement**

There is a vibrant civil society in Romania that is actively engaged in promoting media literacy and combating disinformation. For example, organizations such as the Romanian Academic Society, the Center for Independent Journalism, and the ActiveWatch Media Monitoring Agency are all active in this area. However, there is still a need for greater collaboration and coordination among these organizations, as well as greater engagement with other stakeholders such as government and media organizations.

## Regulatory Framework

While there are some legal provisions in place to address disinformation and fake news in Romania, there are also concerns about the potential impact of these provisions on freedom of expression and media pluralism. For example, the Law on Audiovisual Media Services includes provisions for combating hate speech and incitement to violence, but there are concerns about the potential for these provisions to be misused to censor legitimate speech.

While there have been some positive developments in terms of media literacy and disinformation response readiness in Romania, there is still significant work to be done to address the ongoing challenges related to disinformation and fake news. This includes greater investment in media literacy education, stronger coordination and collaboration among stakeholders, and a balanced and transparent regulatory framework.

## Findings

### Overview of curriculum related to media literacy

In the Romanian educational system, the media literacy competence is not aimed in any educational curriculum. Few efforts have been made in the past ten years, efforts initiated by the civil society experts and not adapted to the national curriculum yet. From the Romanian National Curriculum, the competencies are structured assemblies of knowledge, abilities and attitudes that are trained and developed due to the learning process. They allow the identification and the solving of specific problems of any field or of general issues for different particular contexts. The specific competencies are trained during a school year, they are derived from general competencies and represent steps in achieving the general ones. These specific competencies are accompanied by learning activities organised by learning strategies and ways. The school level curriculum offers as examples, different types of learning activities that integrate didactic strategies together with the real student experience. The teacher has the freedom to use the examples offered by the curriculum, to add or to change them to achieve the educational objectives. ( I. Rotaru, 2019).

According to one study produced under the [Combating Media Illiteracy](#) project, on internet usage by children conducted by Save the Children Romania, only 20% of children aged 9-17 in Romania have received media education in school. Additionally, a report by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that trust in news is low in Romania, with only 28% of respondents saying they trust the news.

The lower ranking of our country in the Media Literacy Index can be attributed to a convergence of factors. Media literacy is a multifaceted aptitude involving the critical evaluation of media content, especially in the current era of widespread disinformation and fake news.

The assimilation of media literacy into civic education curricula resonates harmoniously with the essence of democracy and the pivotal role of media within it. Such an integration bestows a cohesive synergy, fostering a sense of conscientious citizenship that remains integral to a thriving society.

Comprehensive solutions are requisite to address these challenges. Initiatives like the READ TWICE project play a pivotal role in augmenting citizens' capacity to critically assess information and differentiate credible sources from misinformation. By enhancing media literacy skills, we empower society to partake in informed and constructive discourse, ultimately reinforcing our democracy and upholding our values and liberties. In alignment with their shared perspective, which echoed a consistent theme, a prominent issue emerged concerning the susceptibility of Romanian society to the dissemination of false information. This concern becomes particularly pronounced within the intricate backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

This intricate interplay between distrust, corruption, and the amplification of misleading information within the Romanian context underscores the significance of addressing these multifaceted challenges to safeguard the accuracy and integrity of public discourse. As the expert insights consistently reveal, the implications of this issue reverberate through various sectors and demand a comprehensive approach to bolstering media literacy and critical thinking among the populace.

The susceptibility to fake news and disinformation is a pervasive concern across different segments of society. While factors contributing to vulnerability vary, certain groups may be more prone to these threats. Youth and digital natives, despite their digital savvy, can fall victim to manipulation due to their trust in online information. Individuals with low media literacy skills may struggle to critically evaluate sources, making them more likely to accept false information uncritically. Busy lifestyles can also lead people to accept information without thorough verification.

Addressing this vulnerability necessitates a comprehensive approach. Media literacy education, critical thinking skills, fact-checking resources, diverse information sources, and awareness of disinformation tactics are crucial components of the solution. Recognizing that susceptibility knows no bounds, cultivating these skills across society is essential.

In addition, certain segments, including the elderly, those with limited education, and children, are particularly susceptible. The elderly's relative novelty to the internet can lead to a belief in online information without proper scrutiny. Tailored news stories designed to attract their attention can contribute to this vulnerability. Overall, a combination of education, critical thinking, and awareness efforts is essential to build a more informed and resilient citizenry.

The vulnerability of young people, students, media users to fake news and disinformation is a complex issue influenced by several gaps in their knowledge and skills. Key challenges include difficulties in critically evaluating information sources, distinguishing between facts and opinions, detecting misinformation tactics, and cross-referencing information across sources. Moreover, limited awareness of personal biases, inadequate digital literacy, unfamiliarity with disinformation tactics, and challenges in verifying visual content contribute to susceptibility.

Addressing these gaps demands tailored educational initiatives centred around media literacy, critical thinking, digital skills, and ethical online behaviour. Particularly concerning is the impact of social media platforms, where rapid misinformation dissemination occurs. Understanding algorithms, echo chambers, and the effects of social media on information consumption becomes crucial for responsible engagement.



Despite a promising ability to differentiate truth from falsehood, young people's struggles in identifying reliable sources highlight the need for a dedicated platform offering verified information sources for fact-checking purposes. By equipping [young people/students/media users] with the necessary tools to navigate the information landscape critically and responsibly, we can empower them to make informed decisions, contributing to a more resilient and well-informed society.

Efforts to combat the scourge of fake news and disinformation have seen a range of promising initiatives and collaborative actions emerge. Media literacy has been championed through comprehensive programs introduced by educational institutions, NGOs, and governments. These programs empower individuals with the critical skills needed to evaluate information sources discerningly. Fact-checking organizations and platforms have emerged as powerful gatekeepers, diligently debunking false claims and upholding the mantle of accurate reporting. Leveraging technology's prowess, digital tools have been developed, enabling the identification of disinformation patterns. From AI algorithms to browser extensions, these tools aid users in flagging misleading content and promoting informed decision-making. The strength of online communities shines through crowdsourced verification, where collective efforts engage in real-time fact-checking, countering the rapid dissemination of false information. Notably, major social media platforms have taken proactive steps, labelling or restricting false information and forging partnerships with fact-checkers to uphold accuracy.

The emphasis on critical thinking has found its place within education, enabling young people to navigate the digital terrain with acumen and thoughtful discernment. Transparency initiatives undertaken by select media outlets have fostered trust by sharing editorial processes, empowering readers to make informed judgments. Governments, technology companies, and civil society entities have embraced collaborative efforts, uniting globally to confront disinformation's pervasive impact. Individuals are empowered by their access to diverse information sources, nurturing critical thinking and fostering resistance against the allure of false narratives. Public awareness campaigns, spearheaded by governments and organisations, play a pivotal role in educating citizens about the perils of fake news, promoting vigilance and active participation in information verification.

Scholars and researchers contribute through in-depth studies, conducting rigorous research to comprehend the mechanics and implications of disinformation. This knowledge forms the bedrock for effective strategies to counter its effects. During critical events like the Covid-19 pandemic, crisis response mechanisms swing into action, ensuring accurate information dissemination to counteract false narratives and safeguard public welfare. Collectively, these multifaceted efforts epitomise a resilient response to fake news and disinformation, steering society towards a more informed, discerning, and digitally proficient future.

While challenges persist, these advancements reflect collective efforts to counter fake news and disinformation. Leveraging these positive developments can lead to a more informed and resilient society adept at navigating the complexities of the information age. Additionally, major social media platforms have taken significant measures to curb the spread of fake news and disinformation. These actions include labelling disputed content, reducing visibility of false information, and suspending malicious accounts to limit the propagation of misleading content. An encouraging trend is the critical thinking exhibited by individuals in the technology era. They quickly verify information, notice mistakes, and are sceptical, stemming from their ability to fact-check information rapidly. Overall, these positive aspects underscore the progress made in combating fake news and disinformation, indicating a hopeful trajectory towards a more informed and vigilant society.

The institution, representing the esteemed Faculty of Journalism and Communication Sciences, stands at the forefront of combating the proliferation of fake news and disinformation. Employing a multifaceted approach, it deploys a wide range of strategic initiatives to address these contemporary challenges. Central to these efforts are meticulously designed media literacy programs, finely honed to enhance critical thinking capabilities. These programs empower individuals with the skills to effectively assess information sources, enabling them to discern the subtle tactics often employed in disinformation campaigns.

Furthermore, the institution's commitment is exemplified through regular workshops that equip participants with practical skills, enabling them to adeptly navigate the complex digital information landscape. Collaborations with reputable fact-checking

organizations provide a robust defence against false information, adding an extra layer of protection. A wealth of thoughtfully curated online resources empowers users not only to identify fake news but also to respond proactively. Strengthened by impactful public awareness campaigns, the call for discerning information consumption and responsible sharing resonates powerfully.

Leveraging the potency of social media, the institution directly engages its audience by sharing credible information, dispelling myths, and guiding the identification of fake news. This commitment extends further through collaboration with educational institutions, seamlessly integrating media literacy into curricula and equipping young minds with essential tools for critical information analysis.

Active engagement within online communities fosters discussions grounded in facts, effectively countering the spread of misleading information. The institution's unwavering vigilance, involving continuous monitoring and reporting on diverse online platforms, ensures the swift identification and rectification of instances of fake news. A steadfast dedication to researching and analysing disinformation trends fortifies the institution's stance against evolving tactics employed by purveyors of fake news. This approach empowers individuals with the knowledge and abilities needed to responsibly navigate the digital information landscape, thereby contributing to a well-informed and resilient society. Upholding the utmost integrity of information is paramount. The institution meticulously verifies data from primary sources before disseminating it through social media channels, underscoring its commitment to accuracy and authenticity.

The institution emerges as a beacon of dedication within the realm of Journalism and Communication Sciences. The presence of a comprehensive Fake News course within its esteemed curriculum reflects a forward-thinking approach that equips students with essential skills to navigate the complexities of today's information landscape. Beyond the confines of traditional classroom instruction, the institution's commitment is evident through its diverse array of initiatives. The inclusion of workshops, discussions, and collaborative projects, such as dynamic summer school programs, underscores its proactive stance in nurturing the invaluable trait of critical thinking. Through these coordinated endeavours, the institution actively contributes to the cultivation of a

society fortified with the ability to discern, analyse, and verify information, thereby fostering an environment of knowledge and resilience.

From an external perspective, it is evident that the online landscape is witnessing a concerted effort to counter the dissemination of fake news. Numerous materials and resources have emerged to address this modern challenge, reflecting a growing awareness of the detrimental impact of disinformation. Notably, there is mention of a dedicated course on fake news within an academic institution, underscoring the significance of imparting media literacy skills. This development aligns with a broader trend wherein non-governmental organizations (NGOs), online communities, and civil society at large are actively collaborating to combat the spread of false information.

The recognition of the need to confront disinformation is palpable, as various stakeholders work collectively to promote accuracy and responsible information sharing. While the specific course mentioned is a notable effort, there is a genuine curiosity about other similar initiatives that may exist beyond the confines of a single institution. This curiosity is underscored by the willingness to extend support to these endeavours, indicating a shared commitment to fostering a more informed and resilient society in the face of the challenges posed by fake news and disinformation.

To effectively confront the intricate challenge of online disinformation, the imperative lies in orchestrating a multifaceted strategy that intricately interweaves several interconnected facets. Algorithmic transparency, as an initial pillar, assumes paramount importance, compelling online platforms to unveil their algorithms while demonstrating a conscientious prioritization of content. Anchoring this strategic edifice is the steadfast support for quality journalism, an indispensable cornerstone that not only champions meticulous reporting but also nurtures reliable reservoirs of information.

Further fortifying the strategy is the proactive empowerment of individuals through the cultivation of critical thinking and digital literacy competencies within the educational milieu. This fortified cognitive arsenal equips them with the discernment required to adroitly navigate the multifarious intricacies of the digital domain. A parallel imperative is the conscious embracement of ethical design paradigms within digital platforms,

thereby engendering an ecosystem that steadfastly prioritizes accuracy over sensationalism.

In the exigent context of crises, the strategy necessitates a rigorous blueprint for clear, cogent, and official communication channels, which serve as a potent countermeasure against the dissemination of misinformation. The operationalization of these pivotal components, particularly within the precincts of educational institutions, exhibits a promising avenue towards mitigating the deleterious impact of misinformation. The steadfast commitment of RFI Romania to eradicating disinformation underscores the synergy between concerted endeavours and effective outcomes.

However, the peak of effectiveness lies in a comprehensive coordination that brings together various strategic elements. This inclusive approach comes to life through the alignment of complementary initiatives, which include accessible educational resources, televised informative programs, and carefully tailored promotional campaigns. The undeniable factor that amplifies this approach is the implementation of strict legal measures against the spread of false information, creating a deterrent environment. Ultimately, the overarching goal of this comprehensive strategy is to foster a societal culture that values the dissemination of accurate information and respects the development of astute critical thinking. This harmonious integration, as a whole, aims to shape an informed and resilient digital landscape.

The Microsoft Partners for Education program, with collaboration from Save the Children, the Ministry of Education, the General Police Inspectorate, and the Focus Center (Romanian Center for Missing and Sexually Exploited Children), has translated and adapted "Youngsters' Safety on Internet" into Romanian. This marks the initial version of an online training resource available in Romanian. The service incorporates comics and an Internet usage guide. The cartoon characters are tailored to children's and adolescents' concerns, and the narratives intertwine real-life scenarios with online experiences.

The platform is designed for primary and secondary school students, as well as teachers, parents, and legal guardians. Save the Children, backed by the Ministry of Education, introduced "The Internet Hour," a program that encourages creative, useful, and safe

Internet use among children and adolescents. As part of this initiative, the first Online Safety Guide in the Romanian School Environment has gained recognition and endorsement as an educational tool within the Romanian school network, endorsed by the Ministry of Education.

The Computer Science High School in Iasi, Romania has always been a top tier school, where the teachers have always been involved in supporting their students during their learning process. We are a Cisco Academy (since 2001), and ORACLE Academy (since 2006). We have been awarded the Excellence Certificate by the Ministry of Education (in 2002, 2007, 2018), the MaST Top School Certificate (2011), the Eco-School certificate (2014, 2016, 2018, 2020). They have been a member of the Democratic Schools network (since 2019), a pilot-school in the media literacy network (since 2021).

The study titled 'Countering Online Disinformation In Romania: Media Literacy As Part Of A Wider Framework' depicts disinformation as a multifaceted occurrence involving various actors driven by financial and political motives. It indicates a shared consensus among experts about the concept, its manifestations in the digital public sphere, and the societal harm it causes. Experts also concur that more proactive measures are required, including initiatives like Media Literacy projects, fact-checking, and the cultivation of critical thinking skills to aid citizens in navigating the virtual landscape replete with manipulated content. Educational policies, regulations, and professional standards further contribute to this endeavor. Collaborative efforts among academia, public institutions, and decision-makers could yield valuable projects, public policies, and enhanced control over the phenomenon. The article concludes that, in tackling this intricate issue, Romania must expedite its actions against disinformation through education, institutional backing, and extensive research on false news.

The task of imparting knowledge about media literacy, fake news, and disinformation can be effectively shared among various stakeholders, creating a comprehensive and impactful approach to education. A variety of stakeholders in Romania play vital roles in advancing media literacy education. Educators can seamlessly incorporate media literacy concepts into existing curricula, fostering critical thinking and source evaluation. Media professionals and journalists provide practical insights through workshops and real examples. Librarians equip students with research skills, while

specialized media literacy educators delve into topics like disinformation tactics and ethical journalism. Digital literacy experts guide safe online navigation. Collaborative efforts involving teachers, journalists, and specialists enhance learning. Online platforms can offer real-time credibility assessments. NGOs and advocacy groups develop educational content, and governments support media literacy initiatives. This collective approach empowers students with comprehensive skills for informed and discerning media consumption. Teachers, journalists, content creators, and activists drive transformative change, fostering responsible information sharing. To ensure effective media literacy, continuous updates and adaptations are needed to address these evolving challenges. Furthermore, collaboration among stakeholders at various levels is essential to create a holistic approach that covers all aspects of media literacy. This includes not only formal education settings but also online platforms, government policies, and public awareness campaigns.

### General overview of the needs and skills gaps

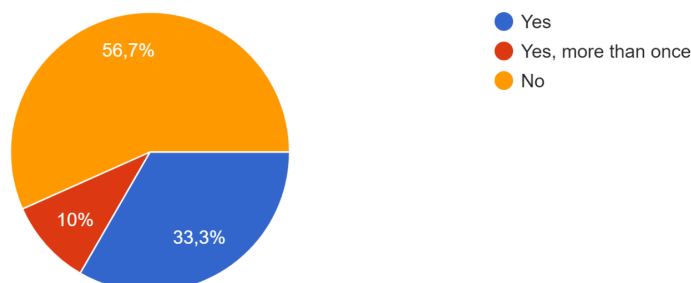
The survey findings reveal several important insights regarding the perception of fake news and disinformation among Romanian citizens. The data indicates that a considerable majority, 75% of respondents, consider fake news a major issue, encountering it at least once a week. Social media emerges as the primary source of such misinformation, with Facebook being the most popular platform for accessing news. Interestingly, a significant proportion of Romanian young people, 71% of respondents, exhibit a relatively high level of media literacy by fact-checking news stories before sharing them on social media. However, the survey also identifies gaps in media literacy education, with only 42% of respondents reporting having received such education in school. In response to the prevalence of fake news, respondents express a desire for increased regulation of social media platforms. Additionally, the survey highlights the influence of political affiliation on perceptions of fake news, with supporters of specific political parties more inclined to believe in conspiracy theories and distrust mainstream media. To address this pressing issue, the findings emphasise the importance of bolstering media literacy education and implementing stricter regulations on social media platforms in Romania.

The responses endeavour to capture a broader spectrum of viewpoints pertaining to literacy perceptions, revealing a notable extent within which individuals have not

undertaken coursework in this domain. The subsequent analysis delves into the extent of the educational system's engagement in overseeing this matter.

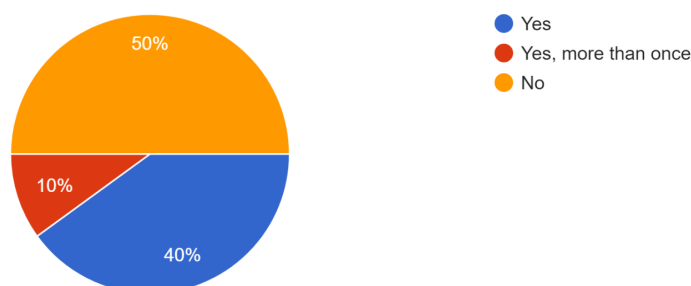
Have you ever taken a course, class, lecture related to media literacy?

60 de răspunsuri



Have you ever taken a course/class/lecture related to disinformation and fake news?

60 de răspunsuri



The interviewees were asked whether they had opportunities beyond formal education to learn how to deal with fake news and disinformation. Their responses varied, with some indicating that they had not received any additional learning outside of formal education. Others mentioned participating in various initiatives, workshops, and projects aimed at understanding and combating fake news. Some individuals emphasised self-teaching and analysing credible sources, while others referred to online training sessions, social media posts, and articles on the topic. Overall, the responses highlighted a mix of self-initiated learning, participation in projects, workshops, and exposure to information on social media and the internet as ways the interviewees have acquired knowledge about dealing with fake news and disinformation.



When asked whether they would consider taking a course on dealing with fake news and disinformation, the interviewees expressed a variety of reasons for their interest. Many emphasised the importance of media literacy in the digital age, where reliance on social media has become pervasive. They highlighted the need to develop skills to distinguish between credible information and misinformation. Some respondents noted that the course would help enhance their critical thinking and analytical skills, providing a valuable tool to navigate the abundance of information available online. Others mentioned the prevalence of fake news today and the potential for manipulation, leading them to prioritise gaining the ability to discern between reliable and misleading information. Several interviewees recognized that staying informed and protected against misinformation was essential, and they believed such a course would contribute to their personal development and information security. Overall, the responses reflected a strong interest in acquiring the skills to effectively handle fake news and disinformation in the modern media landscape.

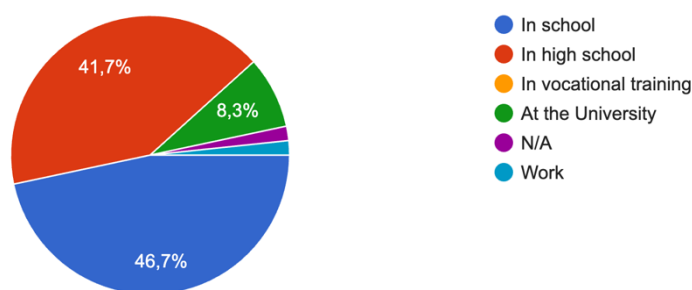
When asked about the frequency with which they encounter fake news and disinformation, the interviewees provided a range of responses. Many respondents indicated that they come across fake news on a regular basis, with some encountering it almost every day or weekly. Some mentioned that they actively seek out information online to verify the accuracy of claims they hear from friends or other sources. Others noted encountering fake news less frequently, either monthly or from time to time. Several interviewees mentioned encountering fake news in relation to major events or incidents. A few individuals, particularly those working in fields related to cybersecurity, expressed a level of awareness and caution about fake news and disinformation due to their professional backgrounds. Overall, the responses indicated a widespread awareness of the prevalence of fake news and the need to critically assess information encountered in daily life.

The consensus among the interviewees is that media literacy education, specifically focusing on combating fake news and disinformation, should be integrated into educational institutions. Most respondents believe that this topic should be taught in schools, particularly in high school. Many emphasised the relevance of media literacy education to the lives of today's generation, noting the prevalence of fake news and the

need to equip students with the skills to critically assess information. Some suggested that media literacy could be an optional course or even a full discipline in high school. A few respondents mentioned that teaching media literacy at the university level could also be valuable, as it would help students develop the necessary skills to distinguish between credible and misleading information. Overall, the interviewees recognized the importance of media literacy education in addressing the challenges posed by fake news and disinformation in the digital age.

**If yes, at what educational level**

60 de răspunsuri



The interviewees hold diverse opinions on whether media literacy and combating fake news and disinformation should be integrated into existing subjects/courses or taught as separate disciplines. A significant portion of respondents advocate for a separate discipline dedicated to this topic, emphasising its importance and complexity. Others suggest that it could be studied as part of various subjects, such as Civic Education, Social Sciences, Communication, History, Psychology, and Technology. Some propose that media literacy should be included in existing courses, while a few mentions the need for a specialised course on recognizing and dealing with fake news. Overall, the interviewees display a range of viewpoints on how and where media literacy education should be incorporated in the curriculum.

The interviewees provide a range of suggestions for the topics and tools that should be covered in media literacy and fake news training. Some of the commonly mentioned topics include:

- Fact and credibility checking tools.
- Types of misinformation
- Algorithms and distribution methods

- Mechanisms of influence
- Search for credible sources
- Historical development of disinformation

The respondents' opinions are varied when it comes to identifying the most vulnerable group in society to misinformation and fake news. However, the consensus seems to highlight the following groups as particularly vulnerable:

- People with a lower educational level
- Young people
- Middle-aged people
- The older generation

Overall, the interviewees emphasize the importance of providing comprehensive training that covers a wide range of topics related to media literacy and the recognition of fake news and misinformation.

### Stakeholders' interviews

This section of the analysis is founded upon a series of comprehensive expert interviews involving individuals who hold prominent positions within the domains of education, civil society, and media. Expert journalists' viewpoints are pertinent for media literacy analysis due to their in-depth understanding of the media landscape, news production processes, and the nuances of credible reporting. Their extensive experience equips them with the ability to identify potential sources of misinformation, recognize biased reporting, and assess the reliability of news stories. Their insights into how news is researched, verified, and presented provide valuable perspectives for educating individuals about media literacy.

These interviews were meticulously conducted with the overarching aim of elucidating the prevailing viewpoints regarding media literacy training and the effective counteraction of fabricated news and misleading information. Furthermore, these conversations sought to unearth the fundamental challenges, impediments, and necessities encountered by the distinct target groups that the respondents are actively involved with.

The experts we engaged with unanimously highlight a noteworthy observation: a **pervasive lack of trust in governmental entities**, particularly those responsible for

health and justice matters, coupled with a growing number of documented instances of corruption, has effectively paved the way for the unchecked propagation of fake news and disinformation among the citizens of Romania.

During the interview, a comprehensive exploration of media literacy, fake news, and disinformation took place. The conversation delved into the reasons behind the low ranking of Romania in the Media Literacy Index, attributing it to factors like insufficient education emphasis, digital disparities, awareness gaps, regulatory shortcomings, and age-related differences. **Vulnerability to disinformation was found to transcend specific demographics**, but factors such as youth, low media literacy, and busy lifestyles were highlighted as increasing susceptibility.

An expert in the field of media highlighted that Romanian respondents perceived themselves as **frequently exposed to disinformation due to factors like digital media prevalence, lack of media literacy, confirmation bias, echo chambers, sensationalism, and political manipulation**. Addressing these vulnerabilities through media literacy education and critical thinking skills was seen as essential. The discussion underscored the gaps in young people's knowledge and skills concerning fake news, including source evaluation, differentiating facts from opinions, misinformation detection, cross-referencing, bias understanding, digital literacy, awareness of disinformation tactics, and responsible sharing.

**Positive advancements in tackling disinformation were recognized**, encompassing initiatives like media literacy programs, fact-checking organizations, digital tools, crowdsourced verification, and social media awareness campaigns. Institutional efforts to counter the spread of fake news were detailed, involving media literacy programs, workshops, collaborations with fact-checkers, online resources, social media engagement, and monitoring/reporting systems. Notable projects combating disinformation, such as First Draft and FactCheck.org, were highlighted.

Strategies to mitigate disinformation's impact were discussed, **including media literacy education, awareness raising, accountability, fact-checking, transparency, and technological solutions**. The integration of media literacy education into study curricula across education levels was advocated, suggesting subjects like social studies,

communication, and journalism as suitable avenues. Lastly, a collaborative teaching approach involving teachers, journalists, librarians, media literacy educators, and digital literacy specialists was proposed as a holistic means of imparting media literacy skills. Throughout the conversation, the overarching theme emphasised the significance of education, collaboration, and multi-faceted strategies in combating the challenges posed by fake news and disinformation.

Through these insightful conversations, a multifaceted understanding of the landscape surrounding media literacy and the propagation of accurate information has emerged. The diverse perspectives offered by experts from the educational, civil society, and media sectors have contributed significantly to the comprehensive assessment of attitudes, gaps, and requisites that guide our recommendations for advancing media literacy initiatives and combating the dissemination of falsehoods and disinformation.

In their shared viewpoints, the experts concurred that a systemic challenge within the Romanian context lies in the **lack of formal integration of Media Literacy across all educational levels** – primary, secondary, and higher education. Their responses, consistently aligned, shed light on this critical concern and underscore the need for comprehensive curricular incorporation.

The attached annex provides detailed insight into the specific questions posed to these experts, eliciting their valuable perspectives on the matter. Their collective input underscores the urgency of addressing media literacy within our educational framework. Illustrating the current state, the recent Media Literacy Index (2022, Open Society Institute, Sofia) ranks Romania at the 36th position among the 41 nations that underwent evaluation. This ranking serves as a sobering reminder of the work ahead to enhance media literacy practices and bridge the existing gaps in our country.

Based on their collective perspective, which was consistently aligned across all respondents, the systematic nature of decisions made by the National Authority for Administration and Regulation in Communications (ANCOM) serves as a notable point of consideration. These decisions, influenced by the list of sites blocked by ANCOM, have yielded significant implications, particularly during states of emergency. These outcomes are evident through the 21 documented decisions available on the ANCOM

website. These decisions encompass the closure of specific sites and the identification of information deemed erroneous, contributing to the systemic dissemination of misinformation to the public.

The compilation of blocked sites, along with ANCOM's corresponding decisions, underscores the substantial influence of regulatory actions on media and communication within the context of emergencies. The data provided reveals a consequential interplay between regulatory measures, media content, and public perception, highlighting the complex dynamics at play in contemporary information dissemination. As we delve deeper into this analysis, it becomes evident that a comprehensive understanding of these processes is vital for the development of effective strategies to counter misinformation and uphold the integrity of public information channels.

The imperative to address the multifaceted issues surrounding media literacy, fake news, and disinformation has garnered substantial attention and resonance within the realm of education, spanning a spectrum of academic tiers. At its core, the essence of media literacy transcends narrow confines, advocating for a universal accessibility that fosters a profound understanding of the intricacies within our information-rich environment. The orchestration of these fundamental principles reverberates with profound ramifications, encompassing various dimensions: First and foremost, the intrinsic significance of media literacy permeates diverse spheres, positioning it as an indispensable compass for navigating the intricate digital landscape. These competencies are not merely desirable but essential for navigating the labyrinthine evolution of the information panorama, deftly spanning occupational boundaries with adeptness. The proposition of introducing media literacy principles in the early stages of education is not only a pedagogical strategy but a visionary endeavour. By nurturing the seeds of critical thought during the formative years, students develop a sturdy framework for discernment, enabling them to engage with information judiciously. This foundational aptitude resonates throughout their educational journey and extends its influence into the broader fabric of life.

Furthermore, the role of **media literacy is pivotal in serving as a shield against the deluge of disinformation.** Equipping students with the tools to decipher and debunk fabricated narratives creates a formidable defence against the proliferation of misleading

information, thereby enhancing individual decision-making, and enriching societal discourse. The interdisciplinary nature of media literacy underscores its prominence, rendering it a ubiquitous cornerstone that could be seamlessly woven into subjects ranging from language arts to social studies, from science to civics. Beyond fostering practical contexts for critical reflection, such an integration nurtures a culture of principled digital citizenship, fostering virtuous online conduct.

When students reach high school, media literacy becomes really important. It helps them handle lots of different sources of information and get better at forming their own opinions. Whether it's part of subjects like social studies or civics, including media literacy helps them understand complicated political and social issues. This makes it easier for them to take part in their community and have a stronger impact.

Moving forward to the realms of higher education, media literacy assumes a specialised mantle within diverse fields such as communication studies, journalism, the social sciences, and the expansive domain of STEM disciplines. Graduates adept in media literacy contribute to the foundation of an astute and discerning populace, embodying societal responsibility in its truest sense. Central to the overarching strategy is the continuum of education, which extends its influence beyond traditional boundaries. The formulation of bespoke programs catering to adults, professionals, and the broader public, serves as a robust armour in the relentless combat against misinformation.

There is a strong agreement about the importance of teaching media literacy, and this view is echoed in various circles. The idea is to start teaching this from the 5th grade onwards. This approach fits well with the current time where young people are heavily exposed to technology. The goal is to provide them with essential skills to judge information carefully. Similarly, teaching media literacy in middle and higher levels of education is also supported. Introducing new possibilities at these important points in education improves the knowledge of students and also helps adults. This is done through well-planned vocational training programs.

Understanding the important job of journalists as sharers of information, getting them involved in these discussions can be very helpful. Working together with teachers, we can create good ways of teaching that make sure information gets to the public well.

This teamwork uses the trust people have in journalists to make a society that knows more about media and can understand it better.



## Validity/Constraints

The study's validity stems from its targeted focus on individuals aged 18-25 hailing from diverse backgrounds, offering unique insights into the perceptions of this demographic regarding media, fake news, and disinformation as well as over 25 years older stakeholders. By encompassing a range of backgrounds, the survey captures a spectrum of viewpoints that enrich the analysis. Moreover, the consideration of gender differences within the survey design adds an extra layer of depth to the findings, facilitating the identification of potential variations in perceptions based on gender.

The adoption of an online survey format represents a strength as well, as it enables a broader reach and more efficient data collection. The digital approach can tap into a wider pool of respondents and facilitate faster response times, potentially enhancing the robustness of the data collected.

However, certain constraints are worth acknowledging. The number of responders of 56 respondents might restrict the generalizability of the study's conclusions to the broader youth population in Romania. While the online method's efficiency is commendable, it can inadvertently limit access to individuals without reliable internet connectivity or who do not engage with social media platforms. Although the survey included respondents from diverse backgrounds, there could still be a potential bias towards a specific city like Bucharest, impacting the representativeness of the results.

Furthermore, the survey's exclusive use of the Romanian language could be a limiting factor, potentially excluding respondents who are not proficient in that language. This linguistic boundary could influence the inclusivity of the survey and affect the diversity of perspectives collected.

In sum, while the study brings valuable insights through its targeted focus and online methodology, its limitations concerning sample size, potential biases, and language choice should be considered when interpreting and applying its findings.

## Recommendations

Here are some recommendations for the different stakeholders based on the needs and gaps identified in the desk research, best practices, online questionnaires for young people and interviews with journalists:

### **Decision-makers at the local, national, EU level:**

1. Develop and implement comprehensive policies that seamlessly integrate media literacy and robust strategies to combat disinformation. This integration should span educational institutions from primary to higher education, with specific focus on individuals aged 18-25.
2. Enhance financial investments in research initiatives aimed at creating advanced tools, resources, and innovative solutions that bolster media literacy capabilities and readiness to counter disinformation.
3. Forge robust collaborations with educational institutions, civil society organizations, and media entities to drive impactful public awareness campaigns advocating for media literacy and the fight against disinformation.
4. Establish and enforce regulatory frameworks that impose accountability on media organizations and social media platforms. This regulatory approach will curtail the dissemination of false information and underscore the significance of maintaining credibility in communication platforms.
5. Secure dedicated funding and unwavering support for comprehensive media literacy programs and initiatives that are strategically designed to counter the pervasive influence of disinformation.
6. Actively engage in the formulation and observance of regulatory structures that emphasize accountability and responsibility within media entities and social media platforms.
7. Cultivate collaborative partnerships that transcend boundaries among a diverse array of stakeholders. These alliances span educational institutions, civil society organizations, media bodies, and decision-makers, collectively fostering the advancement of media literacy efforts.
8. Spearhead influential public awareness campaigns that highlight the intrinsic value of media literacy and the critical importance of preparedness in combatting disinformation.

**Educational institutions – secondary, HEI:**

1. Integrate media literacy and disinformation response readiness into the curriculum, including courses on critical thinking, media ethics, and fact-checking.
2. Encourage students to engage in media production, including creating and sharing their own content to promote responsible digital citizenship.
3. Provide training and resources for educators on media literacy and disinformation response readiness.
4. Develop partnerships with media organizations and civil society to provide students with opportunities for real-world experience in media literacy and disinformation response readiness.

**Civic sector working with young people, media:**

1. Develop and implement programs that promote media literacy and disinformation response readiness, including workshops, training sessions, and mentorship programs.
2. Foster partnerships with educational institutions and media organizations to provide resources and support for media literacy and disinformation response readiness.
3. Encourage young people to be media creators and responsible digital citizens, by producing and sharing content that promotes accurate information and critical thinking.
4. Raise public awareness of the importance of media literacy and disinformation response readiness through public events and social media campaigns.

**Activities to respond to the needs identified:**

1. Develop training programs for educators on media literacy and disinformation response readiness.
2. Organize workshops for youth on media literacy and disinformation response readiness.
3. Create online resources and toolkits for media literacy and disinformation response readiness.
4. Conduct research on the effectiveness of media literacy and disinformation response readiness initiatives.

5. Foster partnerships and collaborations between educational institutions, civil society, and media organizations to create a comprehensive approach to media literacy and disinformation response readiness.

**Areas for improvement:**

1. Increase access to resources and training on media literacy and disinformation response readiness for educators and young people.
2. Develop comprehensive and sustained media literacy and disinformation response readiness programs that target all levels of education.
3. Create opportunities for young people to produce and share their own content, promoting responsible digital citizenship.
4. Encourage collaboration and partnerships between different stakeholders, including educational institutions, civil society, media organizations, and decision-makers.

## Conclusion

The document highlights several key findings regarding the perceptions and challenges faced by young people in Romania concerning fake news and disinformation. Firstly, it reveals that these individuals express genuine concerns about the prevalence of fake news and disinformation, yet **many lack the necessary skills and knowledge** to effectively identify and counteract them (Point 1).

Furthermore, the study underscores the prevailing low level of media literacy among respondents, where only **a minority have received formal training** on the subject (Point 2). This lack of media literacy becomes particularly concerning due to the prominent role that **social media plays as the primary source of news and information** for young people in Romania (Point 3). This reliance exposes them to a heightened vulnerability to the influence of fake news and disinformation.

Respondents express a clear desire for **more reliable sources of information and greater transparency** from media outlets (Point 4). Addressing these concerns necessitates a **comprehensive approach** that includes enhancing **media literacy education and regulating media channels** to curb the dissemination of false information (Point 5). To achieve this, the study suggests practical recommendations, such as **integrating media literacy into the curriculum** across secondary and higher education levels and **providing training and resources for educators and media professionals** (Point 6).

Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of bolstering **public awareness campaigns and promoting critical thinking and fact-checking skills** among young people (Point 7). By engaging in these strategies, it becomes possible to equip the younger generation with the tools needed to navigate the digital landscape responsibly and effectively combat the spread of fake news and disinformation.

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## Annexes

### Annex 1: Questionnaire for target groups

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your age?
3. How often do you encounter fake news or disinformation online?
4. How do you typically access news and information online?
5. Have you ever shared a news story online without fact-checking it first?
6. Have you ever encountered a news story that you suspected might be fake, but were not sure how to verify its accuracy?
7. How confident do you feel in your ability to distinguish between real news and fake news or disinformation?
8. Have you ever been personally affected by fake news or disinformation (e.g. by believing false information about a political candidate)?
9. How important do you think it is for social media companies to take action to combat fake news and disinformation?
10. Have you received any media literacy education in school or through other sources?
11. Do you think that media literacy education should be a mandatory part of the school curriculum?
12. Have you ever encountered political ads on social media that you suspect might contain false information?
13. How much do you trust traditional news sources (e.g. newspapers, TV news broadcasts)?
14. Do you feel that your political views are represented fairly in the media?
15. Have you ever encountered conspiracy theories or extremist content online?
16. Have you ever engaged with or shared extremist content online?



17. How concerned are you about the impact of fake news and disinformation on democracy and the political process in Romania?

## Annex 2: Questionnaire for stakeholders

### Questionnaire for interviews

1. According to the [last edition of the Media Literacy Index](#) (2022, Open Society Institute, Sofia), our country ranks [Bulgaria – last in the EU/Romania – last but one in the EU/ Croatia – 25<sup>th</sup> out of 41.] What do you think is the reason behind this score?
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? [Alternative formulation: *The same Index identifies fake news and disinformation as an ever growing threat to our societies, since the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. From your point of view, how exposed our society is and what are the main contributing factors?*]
3. Who do you think is most vulnerable to falling victim to fake news and disinfo in our society and why?
4. You work with [young people/students/media users/other target groups]. What would you identify as the biggest gaps related to their knowledge and skills, when it comes to fake news and disinformation?
5. How about the advances or positive sides on the topic?
6. Does the institution you represent do anything to address or limit the propagation of fake news and disinformation? If yes, what?
7. Do you know of any good initiatives, projects that aim to tackle the spread of fake news and disinformation?
8. When we think of online disinformation, what could be the best solution to mitigating its impact? Educating/training citizens, raising awareness, holding whoever spreads them responsible, technical solutions or something else?
9. Do you think that issues related to media literacy, fake news and disinformation should be taught in the study curriculum or rather – that it is more for those who take special interest in it? If yes, which education level and subject do you think would be the most appropriate?
10. If yes, who do you think should teach it – general teachers, journalists or other professionals?