

COMBATTING DISINFORMATION: THE NEED TO ADAPT THE KEY COMPETENCES TO CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

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Abstract. Disinformation has become a defining challenge of the digital age, affecting democratic processes, social cohesion, and public trust. This article examines disinformation as a structural phenomenon of contemporary online media environments and explores education as a long-term societal response. Drawing on education sciences literature and competence-based frameworks, the study analyses the role of media literacy, critical thinking, and the European Union’s Key Competences for Lifelong Learning in mitigating the effects of disinformation. Particular attention is given to primary education as a strategic intervention point. The article further examines grassroots pedagogical practices in Moldova and Romania, illustrating how age-appropriate educational strategies can be integrated into existing curricula. The findings suggest that education, when grounded in theoretical analysis and adapted to local contexts, can play a crucial role in strengthening societal resilience to disinformation in the digital era.

Keywords: Disinformation, Digital Media, Media Literacy, Key Competences, Primary Education, Digital Citizenship.

COMBATEREA DEZINFORMĂRII: NECESITATEA ADAPTĂRII COMPETENȚELOR CHEIE LA ACTIVITATEA DIN SALA DE CLASĂ

Abstract: Dezinformarea a devenit una dintre provocările majore ale epocii digitale, cu impact semnificativ asupra proceselor democratice, coeziunii sociale și încrederii publice. Acest articol analizează dezinformarea ca fenomen structural al mediului online contemporan și examinează educația ca răspuns societal pe termen lung. Pornind de la literatura din științele educației și de la cadrele bazate pe competențe, studiul explorează rolul educației media, al gândirii critice și al Competențelor-cheie pentru învățarea pe tot parcursul vieții ale Uniunii Europene în combaterea efectelor dezinformării. O atenție deosebită este acordată educației primare, considerată un punct strategic de intervenție. Articolul analizează, de asemenea, practici pedagogice de tip grassroots din Republica Moldova și România, evidențiind modalități prin care strategii educaționale adecvate vârstei pot fi integrate în curriculumul existent. Concluziile indică faptul că educația, atunci când este fundamentată teoretic și adaptată contextului local, poate contribui semnificativ la consolidarea rezilienței societale în fața dezinformării în era digitală.

Cuvinte cheie: dezinformare, media digitală, competențe mediatice, competențe cheie, învățământ primar, cetățenie digitală.

Introduction

We live in an era of constant interaction with the digital world. And, as we become increasingly accustomed to the effects of the constant digitisation of the world, the younger generations are forming together with the technology. As such, they are also more prone to the dangers of the new medium of information if not properly guided. Disinformation and propaganda have been issues throughout history, but they have now reached

unprecedented heights in the new era of technology. As such, there is also an increasing need to reach out and help society to cope with these new problems not by eradicating the symptoms, but by battling the disease. This is why, throughout this article, I aim to present the scale of the problem regarding disinformation, the role of education in this equation, and show how we can translate educational policy into practical classroom activities.

I. Technology and Disinformation in Today's World: A Growing Problem

Today, we live in a world saturated by digital technology, surrounding us at every step. And this rapid expansion of digital communication technology (referred to as ICT from hereon) has profoundly altered how information is produced, disseminated, and consumed. While it has many benefits across the board, especially through eliminating spatial gaps between people and facilitating communication and learning if used properly, it also has downsides. While it allows the participation of members of the public in public discourse, it also makes it easier to circulate false or misleading information. Thus, disinformation has emerged not only as a separate episode, but as a systematic phenomenon that affects entire societies [31].

Before analysing what can be done in the classroom, an overview of the overarching problem is necessary to begin with. First of all, it is essential to distinguish between the terms of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Misinformation refers to false or inaccurate information shared without the intention to deceive, whereas disinformation is deliberately produced and disseminated with the intention of misleading audiences. Malinformation, by contrast, involves the use of genuine information in a misleading or harmful context [31]. These distinctions are crucial for our understanding of how this whole mechanism works on the internet and how it may affect our society.

While it is true that these mechanisms existed throughout history through propaganda, they evolved to unprecedented levels with the advent of the internet. The online environment intensifies the spread of disinformation through several interrelated paths. Firstly, the algorithm that each of us curates every day has an important role. This system is built to prioritise engagement over accuracy and is specifically designed to gather reactions and emotions, to react or comment online. This in turn makes way on our devices, depending on our perceived digital preferences, to emotionally charged or polarising material [24]. Social Media platforms also reduce traditional gatekeeping and critical ethics of professional journalism, allowing unverified or manipulative content to circulate uninterrupted on the path of likes and comments [17]. Furthermore, the participatory nature of digital platforms transforms users from passive recipients into active disseminators of information, which starts a strikingly rapid path for false narratives.

Because of this, it would be wise for us to think that disinformation in this case is not an individual cognitive failure, but a socio-technical phenomenon. It is indeed true that

individual susceptibility plays a role, but research is consistently showing the fact that exposure to disinformation is shaped on the one side by platform design and designs and on the other, by social networks and broader political and cultural contexts [30]. This perspective is especially important for the Eastern European context, in which there is a historical experience of propaganda, institutional trust is low, and media market vulnerabilities intersect with contemporary digital challenges [1].

And especially in such contexts, it is important to note that disinformation has a measurable effect on democratic participation, social cohesion, and public trust. Exposure to false or misleading content has been linked to increased political cynicism, polarization and disengagement from civic life [8]. And during periods of crisis (such as the global pandemic that we have been through or the wars that are sadly affecting the globe), disinformation can exacerbate fear and undermine compliance with public policy, furthermore creating polarisation and “camps” inside the society [8]. And these effects are felt strongly because in Eastern European contexts there is already a trust issue between media and the populace, as political meddling and uneven levels of professionalisation had been developed across this region [4]. At the same time, with this lack of trust, media consumption has begun to rise quickly, especially among younger audiences, as access to information expands, but critical thinking is lacking [6].

Against these effects, responses to disinformation that are reactive only, like platform moderation, retaliatory regulation, or fact-checking initiatives, appear to be insufficient and, in some cases, as each of us has perhaps experienced on the web, even cause further polarization. Now, a growing body of literature has argued that even if such measures are necessary, they are to be complementary to long-term strategies, most important of which is education. Through this, underlying cognitive and social competencies required to deal with information are developed, as we will further see in this paper [9]. Even so, the educational response to disinformation must be theoretically grounded and developmentally appropriate. In particular, primary education occupies a strategic position, as it is during early schooling that foundational habits of inquiry, trust, and critical reasoning begin to form. Understanding disinformation as a structural societal challenge thus leads inevitably to the question of how educational systems can equip future citizens with the competencies needed to navigate complex media environments. Thus, we will see that the role of education, specifically media literacy and other key components, can be used to mitigate the effects of disinformation on today’s society.

II. Key Competences for Life-Long Learning and Their Role in Combating Disinformation

The structural nature of disinformation that affects especially this region raises a question for the educational sciences: how can educational systems contribute to

strengthening individuals' capacity to navigate complex and sometimes manipulative information environments? While technological and regulatory interventions address disinformation at the level of content circulation, education operates at a deeper level, shaping cognitive dispositions, interpretative frameworks, and social norms related to knowledge as a whole [2]. Thus, education might be a cure to the disease, not a policy to end some symptoms.

From an education science and policy perspective, the response to disinformation is most effectively framed through the development of transversal competences rather than affecting the transmission path of isolated pieces of knowledge. Competence-based education emphasises the integration of knowledge, skills, and attitudes, enabling learners to apply what they know in diverse and unpredictable contexts [26]. This approach is particularly challenging in the digital media environment, where information is abundant and rapidly changing in quality.

Media literacy has emerged as a central conceptual pillar in educational responses to disinformation. Before, it was associated with the ability to access and interpret media texts; how media literacy has expanded to encompass critical evaluation, ethical reflection, and participatory competencies, also in digital environments [11]. Contemporary definitions stress not only the decoding of media messages but also an understanding of production processes, economic incentives, and power relations underlying media systems [14].

However, there is a caveat to take into consideration: the effectiveness of such interventions depends on their integration into a broader educational framework and not isolating them as optional subjects that deal only with technical skills or marginalising them into unimportant subjects [15].

Taking a look at the European context and educational policy, a competence-based approach has been formalised through the framework of Key Competences for Lifelong Learning. This framework, building on the original OECD framework from the 90's, identifies a set of essential competences required for personal fulfilment, active citizenship, and dealing with uncertain situations and futures, intending to offer a transversality to the population of Europe through education [5]. Several of these competences are directly relevant to the challenge of disinformation, particularly literacy, digital, or civic competences.

Furthermore, specific documents have been put in place for certain competences, like the digital one. The Digital Framework for Citizens (DigComp) includes many aspects that help digital critical thinking, like information and data literacy, communication and collaboration, digital content creation, safety, and problem solving [30]. The information and data literacy dimension explicitly addresses the ability to evaluate the credibility and reliability of sources, identify bias, and understand how digital systems shape information

visibility. As such, DigComp is a key reference point for educational strategies aimed at countering disinformation.

As for the other competencies that can add an edge to countering disinformation, civic competence also plays an important role. It complements digital literacy by situating information evaluation within a democratic and societal context. It encompasses knowledge of the democratic process, critical understanding of social issues, and the capacity for responsible participation in public life [12]. Disinformation usually undermines these capacities by distorting public debate and eroding trust, thus fortifying the need for strengthening civic competence to indirectly combat such trends and forming a resilience against such manipulation. But there are things to take into consideration when discussing the European framework of the competencies. In the educational process, as education science literature seems to prove, there needs to be an interdependence between the cognitive and the affective elements. Critical thinking skills alone are not powerful enough if not complemented by attitudes and values, such as responsibility, respect for evidence, and reflective judgement [32].

Furthermore, even if the framework system is strong conceptually, implementation in the national educational systems remains uneven. Even if the European Union puts emphasis on media literacy and critical thinking, classroom practices are often due to curricular overload, insufficient teacher training, and limited pedagogical resources. This gap is even more pronounced in countries where the educational infrastructure is constrained, and it has a strong content-based tradition, using the *talk-and-chalk* method [3].

As such, approaches need to be made to ground this competence-based education in the day-to-day classroom experience, especially at the level of primary education. Early schooling offers an important window for developing foundational interpretive habits, such as questioning sources, distinguishing fact from opinion, and reflecting on intentions behind messages [21]. As these habits are cultivated from a young age, they can form a basis for more advanced critical engagement in later educational stages. As such, a practical, grassroots perspective is also needed, not a continent-wide one, but a regional one that takes into account the contexts of Moldova and Romania.

III. From Policy to Classroom: Ways to Bring the Competences into Day-to-Day Classroom Activities

As we have seen, education plays an important role in mitigating the effects of disinformation throughout society. A major problem lies in actually translating these frameworks that put them at risk into educational practice and breathing life into them. All of this requires a localised approach, however, taking into account the national curricula, institutional constraints faced, and social contexts of each class. And, primary education

represents a strategic window for putting some of these into effect, as it coincides with stages of cognitive development and, at the same time, is a time when children start being exposed to media [16].

Statistics regarding the latter have surfaced, showing that children in Eastern Europe are encountering and consuming media at increasingly early ages. According to EU Kids Online research, a significant proportion of children aged 9-11 in Romania and Moldova report regular access to the internet, often without systematic guidance on evaluating online content [26]. This early exposure, combined with high levels of social media use within families, creates an environment in which unverified or misleading information can circulate across generations.

Education-wise, national policies in both Romania and Moldova acknowledge the importance of critical thinking and digital skills. In Romania, there is an emphasis in primary school on competence-based learning, including communication skills, civic awareness, and basic digital competencies [18]. In Moldova, the curriculum framework highlights the development of autonomous learning, ethical judgment, and social responsibility [19]. The question is how to convey policy recommendations and curriculum guidance into the classroom practice to combat misinformation.

To begin with, the primary level learning should be strictly adapted to their learning needs, and as such, it should not be too heavy, including complex political or ideological content. Instead, indirect and effective practices should focus on cultivating habits related to knowledge in general, such as curiosity, source awareness, and reflection on the internet. One widely supported approach involves teaching the pupils to discern and distinguish the different types of information, such as facts, opinions, and stories. As such, analysing short texts or images and discussing their aim will show if the pupils can differentiate between the different intents that can be found on the internet: informing, entertaining, or persuading [13].

Another effective strategy involves guided questioning techniques. Teachers can encourage pupils to ask simple but powerful questions: Who created this message? Why was it created? How do I know if it is true? Such questions align with age-appropriate critical thinking models and can be integrated into language, civic education, or environmental studies classes [7]. Over time, repeated exposure to these questions helps normalize sceptical inquiry as a routine cognitive practice rather than an exceptional skill.

Project-based learning offers additional opportunities for addressing disinformation indirectly. For example, pupils can work in small groups to create posters, short presentations, or digital stories based on verified information from teacher-selected sources. Through this process, children not only practice content creation but also learn about verification, responsibility, and carefulness. In contexts with limited digital

infrastructure, these projects can be conducted offline, demonstrating that media literacy does not depend exclusively on technology [10].

At the community level, schools can also play a mediating role between children and their families. Educational activities that involve parents (such as workshops, open lessons, or take-home discussion tasks) can help extend media literacy practices beyond the classroom. This is particularly relevant in Moldova, where trust in interpersonal networks often exceeds trust in formal institutions [23]. By positioning the school as a trusted source of guidance, educational interventions can contribute to broader societal resilience.

Importantly, the goal of primary education interventions is not to eliminate exposure to disinformation, which is neither realistic nor desirable in an open society. Rather, the objective is to equip children with foundational interpretive tools that will evolve their cognitive development. When embedded consistently within everyday teaching practices, these tools can form the basis for more advanced media literacy and civic engagement in later educational stages [22].

In this sense, grassroots pedagogical strategies serve as the practical instruments to the theoretical and policy-oriented approaches discussed earlier. By aligning competence frameworks with classroom realities, primary education can contribute to long-term efforts to counter disinformation, particularly in societies facing heightened informational vulnerabilities.

Conclusion

Even if disinformation is a problem that plagues entire societies and may become more dangerous to others, there is a way to stop it and mitigate its effects through a long-term solution: education and the implementation of the key competencies for lifelong learning. However, as I have stated, these need to be introduced taking into account the contexts of the classroom, and most importantly, grassroots initiatives that complement state policy.

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