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Divina Frau-Meigs, Nicoleta Corbu and Sara Osuna-Acedo

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Fighting disinformation through media literacy: From current practices to policy making in Europe

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Introduction

- 1 The digital environment provides new ways for producing and customizing information, but also for manipulating and disrupting information flows. Terms such as “information disorders” or “fake news” have come to represent both the growing supply of disinformation across media and the receding trust in democratic institutions, be it in politics, health or media.¹ Disinformation, defined as “all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit”,² has disrupted elections and referenda, increased the spread of conspiracy theories and cast doubts on scientific research (as exemplified by the recent disinfodemic concerning Covid-19).
- 2 The public and private response to this concerning situation has been the promotion of fact-checking and of media education. Many initiatives and networks exist that provide verification tools and websites dealing with the first wave of disinformation. But, as with Covid-19, we must be ready for a series of waves and a continuous presence of viral fakes as Artificial Intelligence, algorithmic data mining and advanced image-manipulation technologies become more sophisticated. This points to the need to step up new types of media and information literacy skills and tools and to train the general population so that quality information remains the main source for knowledge construction, critical thinking and decision-making for all.

- 3 Of particular interest are the public policies that can support and buttress those societal needs and face those challenges, currently and in the future. To address the challenges brought by disinformation and its successive waves, we argue that it is important to build on current tools and research and capitalize on previous advances by democratizing access to them and spreading them as widely as possible, with the help of the appropriate public policies at national and European level. EU Project YouVerify therefore integrated a whole work package on finding out about policy-making and policy-makers, with the purpose of establishing some recommendations for future-proofing democracies against disinformation. With a cross-country comparison (namely, France, Romania and Spain), it purported to provide evidence for country readiness in establishing policies for disinformation in the EU, along three lines of inquiry: the diagnosis of the effects of disinformation, the assessment of current policies and practices and the projection into future solutions.

Theoretical framework and research questions

- 4 Research in the area of European public policy for media and information literacy (MIL) tends to date back to the 2010s, with a series of research projects funded by the EU or national programs. In effect, over the last three decades a significant amount of literature has examined MIL in terms of a specific set of critical competences,³ and in terms of reflexive practices of social media in the digital era.⁴ But MIL in relation to public policies *per se* still remains under-researched.⁵
- 5 In the last decade, a few comparative studies have been conducted by the European Association for Viewers' Interests,⁶ the European Audiovisual Observatory,⁷ and the COST network on Transforming Audiences, Transforming Society together with French ANR TRANSLIT.⁸ The EAVI EMEDUS survey tends to focus primarily on curricula and competences, country per country, pointing at gaps within schools and across school systems.⁹ The European Audiovisual Observatory survey insists on the composite definition of MIL, its heterogeneous actors, and considers its shifting perimeter as a problem for effective policy-making and regulation.¹⁰ By contrast, and in order to bridge those gaps, the research produced by COST and TRANSLIT was the only one whose scope was fully cross-comparative and proposed solutions for a European governance of MIL.¹¹
- 6 The project purports to map the interconnection between public decision-makers and non-governmental actors, inside and outside schools. It points to a characteristic of governance situations,¹² where the bottom-up emergence of *good practices* in MIL requires coordinated implementation among various types of stakeholders. Its main results show that there were six major areas for policy frameworks to be effective: standard-setting tools, link with other actors in private and civic sectors, training, resources, funding and evaluation. Among the weakest areas, across all countries, were interministerial mechanisms, fund allocation and regular reporting. Only Nordic countries were fully represented in all areas while recent post-communist countries lagged behind in most areas. The research warned about the risks of poor implementation, with the private and civic actors taking over training and creation of resources, with little oversight from authorities and public institutions.¹³
- 7 Since these studies, the situation of MIL governance has been largely improved, due to the crisis of online media radicalization of youth and the rise of Salafist terrorism in

Europe, in 2013-2015, and to the disinformation crisis, with the concomitant rise of polarization and distrust in public institutions, from 2016 onwards. The top-down approach took over, with a series of decisions affecting MIL, as it suddenly became one of the ramparts against disinformation and radicalization. Accordingly, the EU has stepped up its policies: the 2018 Audiovisual Media Services Directive makes it an obligation for member states to implement media literacy and report about it; the 2018 EU Action Plan compels social media platforms to adopt anti-disinformation guidelines; the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) fights against disinformation via fact-checking and media literacy research.¹⁴ This set of initiatives has been transposed in national legislations and organizations, such as the fourteen EDMO hubs that cover all EU countries.¹⁵ This coordinated action has led to unusual amounts of funding for MIL, as exemplified by the “Media Education for all” program by DG-connect from which project YouVerify was made possible.

Effects of disinformation in the new media environment

- 8 Much research has been carried out on disinformation, especially on the definition, scope of the problem, causes, and impact of proposed solutions. Many studies point to the negative effects among various audiences and communities. In general, “fake news” tends to generate xenophobia, hate speech, discrimination, to name a few, all of them producing undesirable effects on democratic societies.
- 9 Research by Tandoc Jr.¹⁶ identifies that confirmation bias, selective exposure, and lack of analytical thinking are cognitive processes making people more vulnerable to the influence of fake news. Törnberg associates the viral spread of digital misinformation with “echo chambers”, although the author himself concludes with the difficulty of establishing the causal nature of this relationship due to the hypernodal nature of social networks.¹⁷ Such studies are inclined to assert that “echo chambers” could be instrumental in initiating the viral amplification of disinformation.
- 10 Other studies point to different negative effects of disinformation, such as issues related to engagement and virality of misleading information,¹⁸ persuasion/manipulation effects,¹⁹ and threats to democracy.²⁰ Additionally, some research ties the medical COVID-19 pandemic with the infodemic or production of false and contradictory health information.²¹
- 11 To date, most of the studies focused on disinformation effects concentrate on audiences’ beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. In this study, we are interested in finding out experts’ insights and stances on individual and societal negative effects of disinformation, in a comparative setting, including their knowledge and use of research evidence. Hence our first research question (RQ1): What are the experts’ insights and stances on the main negative effects of disinformation in France, Romania, and Spain?

Practices to fight disinformation: fact-checking, media and information literacy, public policies

- 12 Research on practices to combat mis- and dis-information are mainly based on fact-checking²² and media and information literacy (MIL) initiatives from the educational, communication and governmental spheres.²³ They tend to reduce MIL to news literacy and journalism to fact-checking.²⁴ Research findings on MIL show that news literacy

messages can alter disinformation perceptions and beliefs.²⁵ However, they suggest that it cannot be done as a quick fix, and that tailored programs and campaigns are required for full effectiveness of MIL interventions. This is coherent with previous MIL research that embeds news literacy in a larger set of competences and skills, that is not merely an instrumental approach.²⁶ With respect to disinformation, media illiteracy can have very real negative political and social consequences. Citizens' media skills alone are not enough to resist media manipulation, and it becomes necessary to develop initiatives among media practitioners belonging to different structures and institutions, including ministries and municipalities, and to appeal to multiple stakeholders to advance MIL.²⁷

- 13 Among the actors in presence, new ones have emerged, like Audiovisual Media authorities (such as ARCOM in France) but also state-wide support operators like CLEMI (France), or the Media Council for Children and young people (Denmark). Other stakeholders are also involved, like librarians and fact-checkers, to foster user awareness, to raise information resilience and to produce effective counter-narratives. New pedagogical strategies like serious games or sending journalists in classrooms rely on media professionals to interact with educators.
- 14 Most of the practices to combat disinformation tend to be supported by public policy but they can also emanate from the media themselves. They tend to focus on how to detect “fake news” in order to develop online fact-checking systems that debunk disinformation in its early stages. Vo and Lee²⁸ developed “The Rise of Guardians” system, with open-source code and open dataset, to combat disinformation and encourage educators to use it. Like these authors, many other institutions have developed their own fact-checking system. This is the case of Agence France-Presse, with the InVID-Weverify news verification plugin, or the schema.org ClaimReview structured markup.
- 15 Governments, in general, and their public policies, in particular, react by trying to control the flow of information in social networks and counteract erroneous information with reliable information through their official channels in social networks. Likewise, social networks intervene in different ways (moderation, demonetization) to stop untruthful and harmful information through Artificial Intelligence techniques, Deep Learning, etc. However, current practices show that, despite these verification systems, the problem has not been eradicated: citizens continue to share “fake news” and bots continue to amplify them. In this sense, Graves and Amazeen²⁹ reflect on the fact-checking work internally performed by the media and propose to go a step further, with external fact-checking, involving data scientists for example. Research about the effectiveness of fact-checking is not very conclusive: there is little evidence that it changes the behavior of citizens at large or of politicians in particular. When fact-checking corrects political disinformation, its impact is weakened by a person's pre-existing beliefs and ideology.³⁰ Fact-checking also appears as an “echo chamber” for journalists³¹ and some fact-checkers are suspected of selection bias and partisanship, especially when their projects are heavily financed by Facebook, via its Third Party Programme.³²
- 16 It appears that the role of MIL in strengthening citizen resilience in the face of disinformation remains key, with sustained research, in policy and academic discourses and within collaborative projects.³³ In this context, we attempt to identify the experts' assessment of current solutions, hence our second research question (RQ2): What are

the experts' insights on current policies and practices to fight disinformation in France, Romania, and Spain?

Solutions to fight disinformation actively

- 17 Research on future solutions to fight disinformation is still budding. Little is known about the effectiveness of governmental measures, such as the “Law against the manipulation of information” in France. At the societal level, some interest is shown for online repositories containing comprehensive fake news datasets though they still are scarce and most of the time do not provide the news content, their social context, and spatio-temporal information.³⁴ Some initiatives are appearing like FakeNewsNet, Anti-Fake in Romania or in Spain the work operated by fact-checking organisations like Maldita or Newtral.
- 18 Some researchers approach the problem on the individual level. Lewandowsky and Van Der Linden³⁵ explore proactive measures against disinformation based on the psychological theory of “inoculation”. According to them, inoculation is based on the idea that people are likely to become more immune to disinformation if they are exposed to weakened examples of ways in which they can be misled. The authors test their approach via games such as the Bad News game.³⁶ Other models suggest strategies for “prebunking” to pre-warn audience amplification by creating new mental heuristics.³⁷ However, other researchers warn that these models tend to recall earlier theories on effects research, like the “magic bullet” or “hypodermic needle theory,”³⁸ according to which media have direct influence on behaviour. Such views tend to suggest to policy-makers that there is a quick fix against disinformation and they ignore the demands of educational preparedness and more pedagogically sustainable MIL approaches, sensitive to competences, context and culture.³⁹
- 19 In the European projects “YouCheck!” and “YouVerify,” gamification has been used as a MIL strategy within massive, online and open actions for the education of citizens throughout their lives. Two serious games, “YouCheck! detectives” and “BotBusters: Fake News Game,” have been developed in each of the languages of the partners of each project. Such educational games have been complemented by adequate pedagogical materials not for purposes of “inoculation” but to foster resilience against disinformation amongst the public, especially young people. In this study, we seek to establish the way experts assess the current situation and to understand their stances on solutions against disinformation and in favour of MIL, hence our third research question (RQ3): What are the experts' insights on solutions to fight disinformation actively in France, Romania, and Spain?

Methodology

- 20 To provide evidence-based solutions to actively fight disinformation, we conducted a cross-country qualitative research, based on in-depth expert interviews. The use of experts was intended to avoid a quantitative methodological approach in public policy research, following Morçöl and Ivanova,⁴⁰ who warn against using only quantitative analyses as they are “not suitable for governance and policy-making in the dynamic and complex world of today.”⁴¹ Additionally, “using national experts as networked agents allowed the collection of reliable data and information while at the same time

integrating their tacit and explicit assumptions about MIL as they were asked to explicitly comment on them.”⁴² The qualitative approach captures interpretive and deliberative dimensions that are better suited for policy analysis because of the “continuous give and take in networks of actors.”⁴³

Sampling

- 21 To be effective, the method requires “consideration of the experts themselves, especially their diversity and connectedness to other actors in their national setting, for if public policies embody particular values, so does their analysis.”⁴⁴ The field of disinformation and MIL lends itself to this multi-stakeholder approach, with experts having different levels of engagement and civic agency.⁴⁵ The choice of experts needs to reflect a balance between those invested in policy-making *per se*, and those engaged in critical advocacy and policy-shaping. Hence, the break-up of the experts into three categories, from policy makers (P) to disinformation/MIL fighters (D) to journalists (J). They were chosen because of their long-standing participation in issues related to MIL and disinformation and their public stance on such issues. They were also chosen to ensure a certain amount of reliability in the validation of the qualitative results, so that there would be confrontation of more than one single source of information. This, in turn, makes it possible to aim for “confirmability”, so that the interpretations of the results matched the available data.⁴⁶ The interview methodology consisted in experience and context-based probing, so as to ensure that the experts would articulate their engagement while inviting them to take a stance on their own actions, identifying gaps, successes and obstacles.⁴⁷

Data collection and analysis

- 22 The 30 interviews were conducted during January-March 2022, in three countries, France, Romania, and Spain. Beyond being partners in project YouVerify, these three countries were deemed interesting because they belong to EU areas with different stages of integration in the Union⁴⁸ and different stages of advancement in MIL and disinformation.⁴⁹ France tends to show a high level of advancement and integration whereas Spain tends to show to a moderate level of advancement and integration while Romania is still in transition in advancement and integration. The comparison should thus yield insights on the EU dynamics as they evolve between early EU entrants (France and Spain) and later entrants (Romania), with various strengths and fragilities, with a view to encourage further collaboration across Europe and extended transfers and collaborations in the future. All three countries had in common their high levels of public concern about disinformation and MIL, due to the covid-pandemic and various electoral contexts.
- 23 All experts were informed about the project, its purposes, and signed a written consent or were registered consenting orally to being recorded and contributing to the study, with guaranteed anonymity. The interviews lasted between 21 minutes and 1h and 30 minutes and were conducted over the Zoom platform (19), Microsoft teams (10), or over the telephone (1). Verbatim transcripts were done before data was coded and analyzed.
- 24 Ten interviews were conducted with policy makers, that is experts working in either Ministries of Education or Culture and affiliated entities such as institutes of education,

or key institutions from each country, such as the main media regulators, and politicians in media or education committees in the national Parliaments (4 in France, 3 in Romania, and 3 in Spain).

- 25 Twelve interviews were conducted with experts involved in the fight against disinformation and the promotion of MIL, such as those belonging to fact-checking organizations, NGOs with media literacy specificity, or academics working in the field of disinformation and MIL (4 in France, 4 in Romania, 4 in Spain).
- 26 The last 8 interviews dealt with journalists specialized in political and social news, at the head of journalism organizations or initiatives, with a track-record of supporting MIL initiatives and fighting disinformation (2 in France, 3 in Romania, and 3 in Spain).
- 27 We opted for a thematic analysis of interviews to identify trends and patterns consistent with our 3 research questions.⁵⁰ Verbatim quotes were translated into English by the researchers involved in the project. We adopted a common coding scheme for all three countries and used it to present the results (Table 1). To ensure anonymity, we coded respondents with country code (FR, RO, SP), type of expert (P – policy makers; D – disinformation fighters; J – journalists), and number (01, 02, 03, 04). We also strove to attain an acceptable degree of gender balance overall (16 women, 14 men).
- 28 Table 1. Codes of interviews and their institutional affiliation

No.	Code	GENDER	INSTITUTION	PLATFORM
1	FRP01	F	French National Senate	Zoom
2	FRP02	M	Ministry of Culture, France	Zoom
3	FRP03	M	French National Assembly	Zoom
4	FRP04	F	French audiovisual authority	Zoom
5	ROP01	F	Romanian National Council of Audio-Visual	Zoom
6	ROP02	M	Institute of Education Sciences, Romania	Zoom
7	ROP03	M	Romanian Parliament	Zoom
8	SPP01	M	Direction of Educational Programs of the Community of Madrid	Microsoft Teams
9	SPP02	F	Cortes of Castile and León (Senate of the autonomous community of Castile and Leon)	Microsoft Teams
10	SPP03	M	Cortes of Castile and León (Senate of the autonomous community of Castile and Leon)	Microsoft Teams
11	FRD01	F	Ministry of Education, France	Zoom
12	FRD02	F	Ministry of Culture, France	Zoom

13	FRD03	F	Public Library of Information, France	Zoom
14	FRD04	F	Ministry of Culture, France	Zoom
15	ROD01	F	National University of Political Studies and Public Administration (SNSPA)	Telephone
16	ROD02	M	University of Bucharest	Zoom
17	ROD03	F	Media Research Center	Zoom
18	ROD04	F	Funky Citizens (fact-checker)	Zoom
19	SPD01	F	Association for the Defense of the Public Image of Women	Microsoft teams
20	SPD02	F	Market Real Consultores S.L.	Microsoft teams
21	SPD03	M	Valladolid University	Microsoft teams
22	SPD04	M	WordPress	Microsoft teams
23	FRJ01	M	Radio France Internationale, Assises du journalisme	Zoom
24	FRJ02	M	Association for Media literacy, APEM	Zoom
25	ROJ01	F	Antena 3 TV	Zoom
26	ROJ02	M	TVR1 (public broadcaster)	Zoom
27	ROJ03	M	B1TV and Radio Europa FM	Zoom
28	SPJ01	M	COPE Radio	Microsoft teams
29	SPJ02	F	Communication Office of the UNED	Microsoft teams
30	SPJ03	F	“El Objetivo” and “El Español”	Microsoft teams

- 29 The total sample of experts showed some modicum of discrepancy in the interviewees' affiliations. For example, among the sample used for France, the French National Senate was consulted, while in the case of Spain, the Cortes of Castile and León (Senate of the autonomous community of Castile and Leon) was consulted, which is not representative of the Spanish global context. In the case of Romania, the public broadcaster (TVR1) was consulted, in the case of France, Radio France Internationale was consulted, but in the case of Spain, no publicly owned media was included. These affiliations show that the sample was not completely balanced between the three

countries. Overall, it was not possible to obtain full equivalency of positions and affiliations across the three countries. The main objective was to identify experts that were deeply involved in disinformation and /or MIL, in the three sectors of interest. This level of involvement of the national experts as “networked agents” was thus expected to show some variation without totally affecting the consistency of the results.

Findings

Negative effects of disinformation

- 30 When discussing the negative effects of disinformation, experts agree that there are both societal and individual effects.
- 31 At the societal level, all types of experts view disinformation as a threat to democracy. One avatar of this effect is the erosion of public trust and institutions (FRP01, FRP03, FRJ02, FRD02; ROP01, ROD03, ROJ02; SPP03). On the other hand, some experts, especially from France, discuss the key role disinformation plays during election times, when “fake news” is weaponized (FRP01, FRP04). During the interviews, the context of the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, some experts discussing the negative social effects of disinformation on health issues. (FRP03; ROD02; SPD02). The French and Romanian respondents discuss such effects: from the emergence of false experts, including doctors, which leads to a fake equivalence between the voice of real experts and other opinion-makers (FRP03), to various other comments about public health policies and measures taken during the pandemic: “It can affect the individual and public health” (ROE02), can impact health policies like with the COVID vaccine (FRD02, FRD01), “can hinder the following of governmental guidelines meant to protect the individual” (ROD01), “can have radical and serious effects when we are looking at the false information about COVID-19 that in Romania was translated into a low vaccination rate and a high number of deaths” (ROD03). Another social effect is a strong polarization of society on salient issues on the public agenda (FRF03, FRF04, SPF02).
- 32 At the individual level, the effects mentioned by respondents in each country are related to physical and psychological well-being, everyday life decision-making, feelings of alienation and anxiety, and radicalization (including hate speech). As far as people’s health is concerned, there are vivid debates about cases of life and death situations in all countries, during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, in Spain, one example invoked the internet hoax that affected people to the extent that a teenage girl even committed suicide because she did not know how to handle the information given on social networks (SPJ01). In Romania, experts considered that people who are most vulnerable to “fake news” ended up by making poor choices for their personal, but also collective health during the pandemic. Examples of effects that create a general uncertainty feeling are given by experts in all countries: “Fake news can cultivate a feeling of generalized suspicion and, again, without a minimum of trust in both personal and social interactions, you are blocked, in my opinion” (ROD01); “In individual terms, the unease generated by a fake news story conditions people’s attitudes and the way they react” (SPSJ01). In France, experts believe that a real insidious and important problem at the individual level is that exposure to fake news provokes high levels of anxiety and negative thinking that develops and grows in

online communities, polarizing (FRD03) and contributing to online harassment, which can have very serious consequences (FRD02). A particular attention is paid to effects of radicalization, lack of dialogue and increased tensions in society: “If we talk about other types of false or partially true or hyper-partisan information at the political level, we can see a rise in social antagonism, the increase of division between people with different visions, which creates a rather strong social conflict and I think it tends to lead, little by little, to a radicalization of the people” (ROD03), the most dangerous effects are intolerance, radicalization, and extremism (ROD02, FRD01, FRD04), but also polarization of opinions (as mentioned by the Spanish respondents). Some experts also mention hate speech as a negative effect of disinformation (FRP04; ROD02).

Current practices to fight disinformation

- 33 When asked about the current practices to fight disinformation in their country, experts discuss two main aspects: the current state of research about disinformation in each country (as source of evidence-based policy making) and current countermeasures (such as media literacy programs, educational and media policies, fact-checking tools and platforms).
- 34 As far as research is concerned, both Romanian and Spanish respondents invoke the rather scarce and unstructured research being conducted in their respective countries. In Romania, for example, they report having “a small group of people who reflects on fake news, but I would not call them experts in disinformation. (...) But we do not have an analysis that monitors the fake news or how the false information is shared, not even studies on the psychological and sociological profile of those spreaders” (ROP03). Additionally, research remains confined to academic circles, and “you have to put in the effort to talk to Parliamentary members to convince them that this must be done” (ROP03). In Spain, experts talk about a proposal defended in the Senate concerning the media and the use of social networks by young people (SPP02). In France, on the other hand, experts see current research as solid and consistent, having a high potential to be used as a diagnostic tool (FRP01). Examples include the Bronner commission report on disinformation (FRP03, FRD02), CSA/ARCOM reports on platform behaviour on elections or MIL (FRD04), Ministry of Defence report on disinformation (FRD03), The think tanks of Generation Numérique (FRD04), or NGOs like Reporters Without Borders (FRP03) and CNN (National Council for digital matters) report on digital culture (FRD03), to name a few.
- 35 Current countermeasures are mainly related to 1. Media literacy initiatives; 2. (social) Media regulation; 3. Fact-checking; and 4. Awareness campaigns. Media literacy initiatives are mentioned by experts in all countries, but there are significant differences in terms of the level of penetration of media and information literacy (MIL) programs in the three countries. Romania has seen in the last years many initiatives, but they are rarely conducted on a large scale, and the education curricula still lacks mandatory classes of digital literacy of any kind: “In high school, we have ‘Media Education’, where they develop fact-checking abilities and understand how to spot fake news” (ROP02); “Our colleagues from the Independent Journalism Center have a pilot program that covers 100 schools. They train the teachers who will incorporate media literacy concepts in their subjects.” (ROD04). In Spain, experts rarely mention media literacy programs, which is rather seen as a much-needed grassroots endeavour: “Who

is going to be interested, which government is going to be interested, which state is going to be interested in educating in criticism and freedom and in the capacity to protest because we are still playing the game of anything goes?” (SPD03) In contrast, French experts discuss many MIL activities and initiatives, many of them as part of ministerial initiatives. The Ministry of Education from France has a specific structure to deal with MIL as a whole, including disinformation, the CLEMI, an operator that proposes teacher training, educational resources, tools, and communication campaigns such as the “Semaine des médias et de la presse à l’école” which is a very important event. A specific effort is made toward young publics (FRD01). The Ministry of Culture is one of the driving forces of MIL efforts in France: it has developed a MIL training programme (EMILE) for its agents and high-ranking decision-makers in all sections and missions of culture (FRD04). It has developed a plan for libraries, often in cooperation with schools, but also with their own publics including adults and seniors, with workshops, events, and publications (FRD02, FRD03). The Ministry of the Interior also supports MIL initiatives via its MARIANNE Fund (FRD02). These are just a few of the many actions cited by the French respondents.

- 36 Social media regulation is discussed by experts in all countries. In France, experts emphasize both European and national level measures: It is at the European level that policies and rules are adopted to then be enshrined in national legislations. This is the case with platform regulation, e-commerce directive, or copyright law directive (FRP01). The European level is important for some issues like taxation and “dismantling” of platforms. It also makes negotiations with the US government possible, “to make the platforms change their positions” (FRP01). The European legislation is changing, to incorporate AI and to regulate platforms that have moved “from being small cottage industries to giant mastodons to monsters because they swallow everything that stands in their way” (FRP01). In Romania, social media regulation is considered rather a desideratum than a real fact: “Maybe the National Audio-Visual Council can regulate social media, but it will be hard. The emphasis should be put on the youth and its competencies” (ROP03). The pandemic helped in this regard, as the National Authority for Management and Regulation in Communication closed several websites that published verifiable fake news. The results were limited, as many of these websites re-emerged under slightly different names, and their claims continued to be shared and discussed on social media (ROJ03). In Spain, respondents only mention some general media regulation measures to fight disinformation, without providing concrete details.
- 37 Fact-checking is rarely mentioned, and only by experts in France and Romania. In France, respondents believe that fact-checking needs to be properly funded (FRP01), since it can help journalism and the press, considered as the best or second best “bulwark against disinformation” (FRP02). Romanian experts mention some fact-checking organizations, with no further discussion about the role they play: factual.ro, veridica.ro, Anti-Fake. Fact-checking platforms are not a common tool used by the citizens of Romania, but more and more investigative journalists tend to integrate them into their writing process.
- 38 Spain, on the other hand, is the most active country in terms of awareness campaigns against disinformation. Here are just some examples of such campaigns: there are awareness-raising campaigns carried out by the Bar Association and international consultancy firms (SPJ02), the Sub delegation of the Government of Segovia has an

agreement signed with the Ministry of Education and the schools that are carrying out this type of campaign. The Town Council, together with the Guardia Civil, has also developed workshops for the elderly and senior citizens on this type of information (SPP02) and awareness campaign about disinformation regarding climate change were also conducted (SPJ01). Some awareness initiatives are also discussed by Romanian experts: “We have an awareness campaign going on and, so far, we have had the involvement of advertising agencies, audio recording companies, and film companies that worked pro-bono with us” (ROP01). In France, respondents rather emphasize advocacy, as led by many associations, such as Savoir*Devenir, MIL associations in the formal and non-formal education sector, and journalists, all of whom develop actions and tools to fight against disinformation (FRD04).

Solutions to fight disinformation actively

- 39 All current practices to fight disinformation are seen as adequate, but not good enough to make a real change. It is not uncommon that experts in each country propose a normative perspective even when asked about *current* practices: what needs to be done is more important than what is currently done.
- 40 Generally speaking, respondents in Romania and France express doubts about the effectiveness of the current measures to fight disinformation, while Spanish experts believe that they are effective, but they do not reach all sectors of society. Experts in all countries are convinced that disinformation will be fought much more effectively in the future.
- 41 Beyond the current practices and laws, some alternative solutions are proposed in each country. French experts believe that journalists should do fact-checking “as part of their job”, while being guaranteed their independence (FRP03) and influencers need to be also involved in this activity, as drivers of awareness on social media (FRP03). Regulation is needed first of all at the EU level, while social media moderation is still in its infancy and needs to be developed (FRD01). Additionally, there is a need for an extensive dialogue on information, on its contribution to the common good, to the individual good, to better knowledge, beyond MIL in the classroom (FRJ02).
- 42 In Romania, key proposals focus on the needed bridge between academia (studying disinformation) and the Parliament (ROP02, ROP03) to ensure real evidence-based policy making, constant and intensive media literacy trainings (ROD04), and education as the main driver of resilience to disinformation (ROJ02).
- 43 In Spain, the experts cite education as the main solution against disinformation, especially of the young people “to provide criteria [to fight disinformation] and critical thinking” (SPP02). Awareness-raising campaigns are also considered very positive, but they cannot reach everyone. Special care must be taken with the most vulnerable groups, such as older people or immigrant groups, who are more exposed to manipulation. Connecting with them through awareness-raising or educational campaigns can be key to solving this problem.

Discussion and conclusions

- 44 The findings confirmed the value of using experts' views on the issue of disinformation and MIL implementation. Based on their experiences, the respondents shed light on how policy-making and policy-shaping around disinformation and MIL is being constructed, at national level. As far as the main negative effects of disinformation are concerned (RQ1), there is a full consensus that there are many social and individual level negative effects of disinformation and that addressing this problem is not just a matter of personal solutions but of regulatory intervention. Specifically, in line with other studies,⁵¹ disinformation is seen as a threat to democracy, as it erodes trust in national institutions and the media. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic became part of the discussion, with experts considering that disinformation played a negative part in affecting citizens' health.⁵² At the individual level, the main negative effects perceived by experts in the three countries are personal well-being (both physical and psychological), everyday life decision-making, feelings of alienation and anxiety, and radicalization (including hate speech).
- 45 When discussing current practices to fight disinformation (RQ2), there is a sense that there are many practices being conducted in many fields and sectors of society, lacking maybe in directionality. These practices could be summarized as media literacy initiatives (both national and European), (social) media regulation, fact-checking initiatives, and awareness campaigns. This is only partially in line with the recommendations of the European Commission (2018), of which experts only pointed toward media literacy interventions and social media regulation.
- 46 When taking a more normative perspective on the solutions to fight disinformation, there is a general sense of the need for scaling up actions and enforcing stronger solutions, for the long term. One important addition to what is currently being implemented in the three countries is evidence-based policy making, that is fighting disinformation based on what science has proven to be effective, which responds to the plea for continued research on the impact of disinformation in Europe.⁵³ Education is seen as the key answer to the disinformation problem; not only media literacy as part of both official curricula at the middle and high school levels, but also life-long learning education with regards to media literacy. Fact-checking should be, in the views of the experts, part of journalism's current practices.
- 47 The cross-country analysis reveals some discrepancies among the three countries under scrutiny, especially in relation to MIL. This has to do with their history with the media as much as with their educational system. France seems to be the most advanced country in both areas, with many initiatives and operators addressing the issue of disinformation and MIL both in school and in society and the media at large, mostly from the top-down (ministries, media authorities, etc.). Spain adopts a more mixed approach, with a focus mostly on what happens outside school, with a citizenship-based approach and awareness campaigns conducted in partnership with local and regional policy-makers. Romania seems to favor education and evidence-based research to inflect policy-making that is still non-extent but emerging as a necessity.
- 48 Across the three countries, the public policy strengths and weaknesses show several trends, in the six major areas for policy framework: standard setting tools, link with other actors in private and civic sectors, training, resources, funding and evaluation.⁵⁴

- 49 In terms of strengths, there appears to be an interconnection between public decision-makers and non-governmental role-players, inside and outside schools. The focus on good practices does indeed require some coordination across multiple stakeholders, especially in the case of MIL, where media tend to be involved in the strategies, especially via journalists and fact-checkers.
- 50 In terms of weaknesses, interministerial mechanisms, funding and reporting are seldom mentioned or perceived as lacking. The experts regret the lack of link between research and policy and express a desire to strengthen that dimension. This can be problematic in terms of efficiency of implementation as it shows risks of discontinuity and lack of coordination between EU-overall regulation and national application, in spite of the stepped-up policies put in place by the EU.
- 51 Additionally, these results also underline the persisting gaps, especially in terms of the use of research and evidence so as to sustain evaluation. The experts reflected on the reliability of some reports and multiple sources while others deplored the absence of research in their country.
- 52 These findings resonate with prior comparative research and confirm that indicators need to be built along the six major policy areas for policy, with special attention to interministerial mechanisms, funding and reporting for evaluation. Among the indicators that should stand out for mechanisms, there seems to be a need for monitoring the link with all stake-holders (for reasons of independence and transparency) and the exploration of co-regulatory frameworks (considering the role of the private sector and in particular the social media platforms in both disinformation and MIL). Among the indicators for funding, much is needed, as the experts lack in information about specific allocation for MIL and disinformation in government bodies, in regions and municipalities, not to mention the link with the EU provisions. As for the indicators for evaluation, the efficiency measures of both disinformation and MIL policies are necessary, as well as the performance of all the resources and practices at work, including among their various publics.
- 53 These findings are also consistent with the notion of MIL governance and they suggest that such governance is crucial for deploying effective policies while maintaining national agency and diversity in the EU. Research that lies at the intersection of public policy, governance and information and communication sciences can contribute to understanding the current obstacles to scaling up the fight against disinformation and the role MIL can play in deploying policies. The way the experts deploy their expertise and evaluate the situation point to the way governance operates both in the collective and individual levels of intervention.
- 54 Ultimately, what emerges from this project is how experts as “networked agents” derive their knowledge and base their actions to shape synergies and harness various societal actors. This can vary according to their professions and competences and the way they identify and interact with other actors in society. While the sample collection is too small to generalize to all EU countries and to be fully conclusive as to the gaps and weaknesses, the findings nonetheless point beyond these limitations to more work in this under-researched topic.
- 55 There are limitations to our study. First of all, the qualitative nature of the inquiry does not allow for generalizations; however, the high-prominence and diversity of the experts interviewed account for a solid overview of the current situation in fighting

disinformation in the three countries. Second, even though diverse from many points of view (including MIL practices, media systems, and political systems), the three countries considered in this study do not account for the heterogeneity of MIL and disinformation fighting practices across the EU.

- 56 The issues that are important to analyze in future research have to do with the means of implementation of policies to fight disinformation and foster MIL. All three countries show strong intent but less robust deployment inside each country and across them. The possibilities for transfer of competences and expertise and the actors and conduits to facilitate such transfers remain fragile and largely under-studied and under-funded. Among the potential solutions, co-regulatory frameworks as well as governance bodies should be a priority at EU level, to establish more feedback, from the bottom-up.
- 57 To conclude, the findings point to policy-making lessons that show how experts' contributions make for a complex cartography, with adjustments needed at all levels of policy-making, in an EU-wide distributed manner, that needs to be incremental and scalable if it is to bring about change and transformative actions. This study can serve as a diagnostic tool and an inspirational guide to evaluate public policies about disinformation and MIL in European countries. It also points to the need for coordinated supra-national, cross-country synergies, to ensure the long-term success of existing practices and solutions across the European Union.

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ABSTRACTS

The new media ecosystem has deeply transformed the way online disinformation spreads and multiplies in the last few years. Consistent efforts have been made at national and European levels to find efficient ways to fight disinformation and raise public awareness about the dangers associated with it. In this context, the current study gathers expert opinions about current practices and possible ways to intervene through public policies in fighting disinformation, with a focus on media literacy solutions. In European-funded project YouVerify, in-depth interviews were conducted with disinformation fighters, journalists, and policy makers (N=30) in three European countries (France, Romania, and Spain), to find solutions that could actively contribute to implementing public policy in this area. The main results show similarities and differences between the three countries, especially in projected future solutions. All respondents see the enhancement of current practices as mandatory in the future. Additionally, in France, interviewees see fact-checking, quality journalism, and media regulation as the main drivers of the fight against disinformation, while in Romania experts focus on research and education, and in Spain on education and awareness campaigns. Experts in all countries consider media literacy as key instrument of the future policies to fight disinformation.

Ces dernières années, l'écosystème des nouveaux médias a profondément transformé les modes de propagation de la désinformation en ligne. Au niveau national comme européen, de nombreux efforts ont été déployés pour élaborer des stratégies de lutte efficace contre la désinformation et sensibiliser le public à ses dangers. Dans ce contexte, la présente étude recueille les avis d'experts sur les pratiques actuelles et les politiques publiques de lutte contre la désinformation, en considérant en particulier la question de l'éducation aux médias. Dans le cadre du projet YouVerify financé par l'Union européenne, des entretiens approfondis ont été menés avec des spécialistes de la lutte contre la désinformation, des journalistes et des décideurs politiques (N=30) dans trois pays européens (France, Roumanie et Espagne) pour déterminer les solutions susceptibles de contribuer activement à la mise en œuvre de politiques publiques en la matière. Les principaux résultats montrent des similitudes et des différences entre les trois pays, notamment en ce qui concerne les solutions envisagées pour l'avenir. Toutes les personnes interrogées considèrent qu'il est impératif d'aller vers une amélioration des pratiques actuelles. En France, les personnes interrogées voient dans la vérification des faits, le journalisme de qualité et la régulation des médias les principaux moteurs de la lutte contre la désinformation, tandis qu'en Roumanie, les experts mettent l'accent sur la recherche et l'éducation, et en Espagne sur l'éducation et les campagnes de sensibilisation. Mais l'éducation aux médias reste pour tous un instrument clé des futures politiques de lutte contre la désinformation.

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Keywords: disinformation, media and information literacy, public policy, fact-checking, cross-country comparison

Mots-clés: désinformation, médias et éducation aux médias, politiques publiques, fact-checking, comparaison entre pays

AUTHORS

DIVINA FRAU-MEIGS

 <https://idref.fr/035191023>

Divina Frau-Meigs is professor of media sociology at Sorbonne Nouvelle University, France. She is a specialist of Media and Information Literacy, Cultural Diversity and Internet Governance. She is a worldly renowned researcher in the media uses and practices of young people as well as information disorders (radicalization, disinformation, hate speech...). She holds the UNESCO chair “Savoir Devenir in sustainable digital development: mastering information cultures” (2013--). She is an expert with UNESCO (MIL, AI, social media), the Council of Europe (MIL, Digital Citizenship Education) and the European Union (MIL, digital education, online disinformation). She is the author of more than 300 research articles and 40 books among which *Faut-il avoir peur des ‘fake news’?* (Documentation française, 2019), *The Handbook of Media Education Research* (Wiley, 2020) and *Disinformation Debunked: Building Resilience through Media and Information Literacy* (Routledge, 2024). She produced the policy brief on AI and MIL User empowerment through Media and Information Literacy to the evolution of generative Artificial Intelligence (UNESCO, 2024).

NICOLETA CORBU

 <https://idref.fr/166038105>

Nicoleta Corbu is professor of political communication at the Faculty of Communication and Public Relations, National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania. She currently coordinates, as an executive director, the Center for Research in Communication, and serves as Vice-Rector of the university. She is Vice-Chair of ECREA Political Communication section. She holds a PhD diploma in sociology; she is the recipient of a Fulbright grant in the United States (University of Georgia, 2008-2009), and was visiting professor at Florida Gulf Coast University (2012). Nicoleta Corbu coordinated and participated in strategic and research grants, covering disinformation, political communication, education policies, and media effects. She is currently part of BROD EDMO hub (European Media Digital Observatory). She published books in the fields of political communication, media effects, and education policies. She published more than 100 articles and book chapters. She has been a member of Network of European Political Communication Scholars (NEPOCS) since 2018.

SARA OSUNA-ACEDO

 <https://idref.fr/285346121>

Sara Osuna-Acedo, professor at the National University of Distance Education (UNED) in Communication and Education. She has coordinated the “Social Media and Inclusive and Ubiquitous Media Education” Research Group (SMEMIU). Some of the most important research projects she has coordinated as main researcher have been the “Elearning, Communication and Open-data: Massive Mobile, Ubiquitous and Open Learning” (ECO) Project — European

Commission — and the "Smart and Accessible Virtual Education. Integrated intelligent virtual spaces" (EVIA) Project — Ministry of Science and Innovation — State Research Agency. The most important positions assumed in educational management have been Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Lifelong Learning, Coordinator of Institutional Courses and Director of the Paulo Freire Chair of Educommunication, in agreement between the Higher Ministry of Science and Technology (MESCYT) of the Dominican Republic and the UNED, providing a transnational impetus to Media and Information Literacy.