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**Baltic Research Foundation
for Digital Resilience**

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D1.5. Media policy suggestions

Building Digital and Resilient Citizenship:
Policy Guidelines

DIGIRES

D1.5. Media policy suggestions

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Draft version	January 2023	Kristina Juraitė Auksė Balčytienė	Draft policy guidelines were outlined and the main roles between the working group members shared.
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Executive Summary

With accelerating digital transformations, intensified information disruptions (an influx of disinformation and misinformation), and growing malign information campaigns, such as instigations to conflict, the upswings towards radical and populist politics, hate speech, etc., knowledge of who (which interest groups, businesses, and countries) controls digital media and digital technological infrastructures/platforms becomes of primary significance in today's Europe and globally.

Still, when observing how digital disinformation gets accelerated and amplified, also the audiences' preferences to choose social networks as their first news channel and source of news, and their reluctance to verify it, also considering the ongoing restructurings in the news media sector, it calls to be alarmed and to take decisive steps in making "digital media" literacy competencies a concern of increased priority.

Based on existing experience and available research (DIGIRES, IREX, MPM projects), several arenas have been identified for further action in the field of media literacy and digital resilience to information disruptions, focusing on the existing challenges and demands. The recommendations provided are suggested to address the main stakeholders: academic and research institutions; media industry and journalists; education, cultural institutions, and civil society; policymakers.

It is expected that the policy guidelines provided will benchmark the level of societal resilience against disinformation, to counter disinformation and protect its citizens from its damaging effects.

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1. Introduction

The digital media and information ecosystem appears to be particularly vulnerable to disinformation, hate speech, false narratives, xenophobia, racism, populism, and other types of hybrid threats[1]. During the Russian war in Ukraine, we can observe how strategic narratives and disinformation campaigns are exploited to justify the country's aggression against Ukrainian people. It is therefore essential for citizens to become aware of the dangers of information disruptions and to develop media literacy skills to protect themselves from harmful content[2]. One must possess certain skills and abilities to navigate through complicated, ever-changing media and communication landscapes that are both chaotic and blended. These include the capability to maneuver through intricate and constantly evolving technological platforms and media tools.

As the speed of information and communication increases, initiatives have been launched to counter disinformation through media-backed projects (e.g., fact-checking, debunking, pre-bunking, registering false claims and narratives) and scientific studies on how democratic societies can withstand harmful content[3]. Although media literacy and media awareness are proposed as effective ways to build the capacity of individuals, groups, and communities to combat false claims and narratives that are meant to manipulate and deceive, these reactions are often seen as reactive responses.

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[1] Bayer, J., Bitiukova, N., Bard, P., Szakacs, J., Uszkiewicz, E. (2019). Disinformation and Propaganda – Impact on the Functioning of the Rule of Law in the European Union and its Member States. Study. European Parliament. Hannan, J. (2018). Trolling ourselves to death? Social media and post-truth politics. *European Journal of Communication*, 33, p. 214–226.

[2] Frau-Meigs, D. (2022). How Disinformation Reshaped the Relationship between Journalism and Media and Information Literacy (MIL): Old and New Perspectives Revisited, *Digital Journalism*, 10:5, 912-922, DOI: 10.1080/21670811.2022.2081863. Bennett, P., McDougall, J., Potter, J. (2020). *The Uses of Media Literacy.* Routledge. Carlsson, U. (2019). *Understanding Media and Information Literacy in the Digital Age: A Question of Democracy.* Gothenburg: Nordicom.

[3] Balčytienė, A, Juraitė, K. (2022). Baltic Democracies: Re-configuring Media Environments and Civic Agency, *Journal of Baltic Studies*. Doi: 10.1080/01629778.2022.2117833. Kreiss, D. (2021). Social Media and Democracy: The State of the Field, prospects for Reform. The *International Journal of Press/Politics*, 26(2), p. 505–512. Hofmann, J. (2019). Mediated democracy – Linking digital technology to political agency. *Internet Policy Review* 8 (2). doi: 10.14763/2019.2.1416. Grabe, M., Myrick, J. (2016). Informed Citizenship in a Media-Centric Way of Life. *Journal of Communication*, 66, 1-21. 10.1111/jcom.12215.

Research and policy studies show that gaps in the resilience assurance system can be found at all levels (macro, mezzo, micro) of analysis[4]. Although a macro-level institutional awareness exists on several issues of heightened concern (for e.g., in combating cyberattacks or naming disinformation as a threat to national security), there is little analysis on future strategies or impact of performed actions in relation to implementations of (risks assessments, research and analysis) projects and (public education and trainings) programs[5].

In comprehending possible gaps and facilitating long-term planning, the role of social and digital resilience as the protection mechanism (an immunity of certain kind) is more important than ever, and it will be valuable for constructing the allied policy of disinformation pre-bunking and debunking.

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[4] Barrett, B., Dommett, K., and Kreiss, D. (2021). The capricious relationship between technology and democracy: Analyzing public policy discussions in the UK and US. *Policy & Internet*, 13(4), 522–543. Humprecht, E. et al. (2021). The sharing of disinformation in cross-national comparison: analyzing patterns of resilience. *Information, Communication & Society*, Doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2021.2006744. Boulliane, S., Tenove, C., Buffie, J. (2022). Complicating the Resilience Model: A Four-Country Study about Misinformation. *Media and Communication,* 10(3), 169–182. doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i3.5346.

[5] Tenove, C. (2020). Protecting democracy from disinformation: Normative threats and policy responses. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 25(3), 517–537. McDougall, J. (2019). Media Literacy versus Fake News: critical thinking, resilience and civic engagement. *Medijske Studije / Media Studies,* 10(19), 29-45. Doi: 10.20901/ms.10.19.2 / SUBMITTED: 14.05.2019.

2. Policy guidelines

Based on existing experience and available research (DIGIRES, IREX, MPM projects), several arenas have been identified for further action in the field of media literacy and digital resilience against information disruptions, focusing on the existing challenges and demands. The following recommendations are suggested to address the main stakeholders:

- Academic and research institutions
- Media industry and journalists
- Education, cultural institutions, and civil society
- Policy makers

2.1. Academic and research institutions

Advancing research and technology innovations in universities and research institutions

The role of the academic and research community is important in promoting social and digital resilience in the long run. It has the potential to be the principal driver in this process due to its interdisciplinary background which encompasses communication and journalism, sociology, psychology, philosophy, law, IT, and political science. Even more, academia is not restricted by political obligations or the need to cater to public opinion, and so can freely explore strategic policies in sensitive areas in a secure intellectual environment, where human capital and subject knowledge is concentrated. Available know-how specialized technical and linguistic tools, capacity to store, process, and analyze large datasets, and numerous opportunities for exchanging, debating, and reevaluating knowledge potentially make the universities and research institutions the key actors in enforcing these processes[6].

To build a better understanding of the dynamics of disinformation and to reinforce the role of academia, the following recommendations are proposed:

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[6] Report on disinformation landscape and anti-disinformation actions in Lithuania, and the broader Baltic states region was provided in State-of-the-art: A report on current issues, methodologies, and needs in anti-disinformation actions in a small state (https://digires.lt/en/testtt). DIGIRES research outcomes are also available in the Deliverables **D1.3. Report on the research activities of the Baltic regional research foundation** and **D2.1. Report on disinformation detection methodology development (M15).**

- Though there is a growing body of research on social and digital resilience against crises and emergency situations, there is a lack of evidence on social response to disinformation based on sociocultural factors (values, knowledge, and experience). Researchers should come up with new approaches and conceptualizations that would address not only the micro-level of individuals, but would also encompass societal and organizational resources of different stakeholders.

- A comprehensive knowledge base of media literacy should also take into account the latest scientific advancements in media literacy training, and make recommendations on how such initiatives can be improved and better tailored to the needs of the target audience. Additionally, the study should provide an overview of the current funding of media literacy initiatives and what can be done to increase funding and ensure that they have the necessary resources to be successful.

- To provide relevant and transparent data, new research should focus on the development of rigorous research designs and methods to measure and monitor the impact of disinformation on society as a whole and on individual groups. New types of qualitative assessment tools rather than quantitative data collections must be developed.

- Research outputs should be made available to researchers and practitioners, as well as to the public, to help build a better understanding of the dynamics of disinformation. Policy makers and other stakeholders should be informed of the findings to ensure that relevant and most efficient decisions are taken to counteract the effects of disinformation. Open access policies will provide greater transparency and accountability for research, enabling greater public engagement in the process.

- New approaches must be designed on how to track the long-term impact of disinformation campaigns and their possible consequences on social resilience, to assess whether there is a cumulative effect of disinformation on society, why the vulnerable groups are more vulnerable (and how to mitigate that vulnerability), and so on. This should include gathering data to assess whether there is a cumulative effect of disinformation on society, understanding why certain vulnerable groups are more susceptible to disinformation, and developing strategies to mitigate potential risks posed by disinformation.

- The research should be conducted in cooperation with the governments, media, and civil society actors to ensure the knowledge transfer and cooperation between a wide range of stakeholders and to identify the most effective and up-to-date techniques for responding to and countering disinformation, in order to ensure that the public is adequately protected from any potential harm.

2.2. Media industry and journalists

Consolidating and strengthening professional media, journalism and fact-checking

The media industry has a responsibility to promote media literacy and to counter disinformation. In Lithuania and other democratic countries, fact-checking, debunking, and pre-bunking is used to not only produce new journalistic formats, but also to counteract disinformation already circulating in the information ecosystem. Even though there are two fact-checking editorial newsrooms in Lithuania, and fact-checking is an integral part of daily operations in leading news media, DIGIRES project experience and results from public opinion polls confirm that fact-checking activities are too poorly known to the general public[7]. As fact-checking and debunking disinformation, a kind of investigative journalism, require significant financial and human resources, smaller news media channels are not able to engage as much in such activities.

To improve public awareness of fact-checking and to foster active engagement of audiences in the verification of information, media organizations should consider the following recommendations:

- News media should adopt innovative formats that combine traditional journalism with fact-checking and debunking activities. Digital tools should be developed and used to automate fact-checking processes and facilitate effective and efficient debunking of disinformation.

- Develop strategies and public information campaigns for promoting fact-checking activities and disseminating fact-checking findings to wider audiences. This should include the use of multiple communication channels and platforms (such as social media, radio, newspapers etc.), as well as different education settings to reach a larger audience.

- Create an interactive platform to allow the public to contribute to fact-checking activities. This could include the use of crowdsourcing, where the public is invited to submit potential false claims for fact-checkers to verify and correct.

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[7] An assessment of the level of media literacy and fact-checking skills is provided in the **Deliverable D3.6. Report on media literacy assessment, campaign and events (M15)**, as well as State-of-the-art: A report on current issues, methodologies, and needs in anti-disinformation actions in a small state (https://digires.lt/en/testtt).

- Invest in training and capacity-building for journalists and fact-checkers to ensure that they are equipped with the necessary skills to conduct effective fact-checking activities[8].

- Increase the level of collaboration and sharing of resources between media organizations, civil society organizations, and the public, to ensure that fact-checking activities are conducted in an open and transparent manner and that the public is informed about the results.

2.3. Education, cultural institutions, and civil society

Engaging educators and cultural industries, such as libraries, high schools, and museums, also youth workers and NGOs in scaling media literacy and digital resilience

There are many programs and initiatives implemented around media literacy education and raising critical awareness competences[9], still, many of these programs are often short-term projects, and their impact and sustainability (financial and human resources) is uncertain[10]. It appears that the issue is mainly due to the lack of strategic vision and cooperation among the multiple stakeholders, and limited scope of interventions, which are focusing mostly on critical thinking and evaluation/understanding of the content being shared (i.e., representations in digital media). Furthermore, the impact of media literacy activities (programs, trainings, testing of created products) has not been properly assessed.

To foster a sustainable, democratic, and resilient citizenship, the following steps are recommended on media literacy education level:

- Media literacy standards should be expanded to focus more on the social, political, and cultural contexts in which digital media are created, used, and shared. This would include topics such as algorithmic logic, media and communication ethics, social

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[8] The need for journalists' professional development is well explicated in the **Deliverable D3.5. Report on training to media outlets (M15)**.

[9] More information on the media literacy interventions and initiating institutions is available in the State-of-the-art: A report on current issues, methodologies, and needs in anti-disinformation actions in a small state (https://digires.lt/en/testtt).

[10] Juraitė, K., Balčytienė, A. (2023). Accelerating News Media Use and MIL Environment Amidst COVID-19 in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In: Yonty Friesem et al. *Routledge Handbook of Media Education Futures Post-Pandemic*. Routledge. Jolls, T. (2022). Building Resiliency: Media Literacy as a Strategic Defense Strategy for the Transatlantic. A State of the Art and State of the Field Report.

justice, civic engagement, propaganda, disinformation, as well as information verification and fact-checking.

- Media literacy programs should be designed and tailored according to the demands of different groups of citizens of all ages, expertise, professions, and social standings. To spread digital media and information literacy, information verification and fact-checking should be trained at different educational levels (high schools and universities) while integrating these into the formal/non-formal learning activities and linking them to different subjects (eg., history, languages, civic education, social studies, arts, etc.) and whole school curriculum (interdisciplinary approach).

- Peer education and active learning should be promoted in media literacy curriculum providing trainees with a cognitive framework necessary to develop their critical analysis skills and build resilience to online misinformation/disinformation in an innovative and engaging way.

- Relevant resources, such as IT, media, education, and cultural services, should be provided to ensure that citizens have necessary and user-friendly tools to effectively create and maintain this force. Also, professional development and teaching/learning resources should be available for the educators, journalists, youth leaders, librarians, parents, and peers willing to engage in media literacy scaling.

- A comprehensive evaluation system should be established and implemented to properly assess the scope and impact of media literacy programs. This should include a thorough analysis of the goals and objectives of each program and initiative, their scope and effectiveness, the resources, and measures taken to monitor the change. Furthermore, the results of the evaluations should be used to inform future action and initiatives, and to ensure long-term sustainability.

- Finally, media literacy and information verification initiatives should be established as a collaborative and transparent process to ensure that the citizens are aware of their rights and have a say in the development and implementation of these programs.

2.4.   Policy makers

Policy elaborations towards development of resilience

Policy aims to address information disruptions are expressed in a significant number of strategic documents on the national level. Still, as reported by the DIGIRES project team[11],

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[11] See State-of-the-art: A report on current issues, methodologies, and needs in anti-disinformation actions in a small state (https://digires.lt/en/testtt).

there is a lack of coordination and hence effectiveness in the ways different aspects of the general anti-disinformation policy is implemented and coordinated in Lithuania. What is missing is a strategically focused national policy framework that would outline how to strengthen and sustain professional media and journalism, how to improve media education programs in schools, or how to use a wide network of stakeholders, for example, public libraries to reach different groups of people with quality content.

A strong political commitment and will is essential to effectively address social and digital resilience through macro level strategies aimed at systemic change. To assure that different stakeholders are well-prepared to deal with the digital encounters, a comprehensive policy approach that focuses on informed and educated citizenship is required. To reach the overall goal, the following recommendations are suggested on the policy level:

- Media literacy focused thinking should become a guiding philosophy while developing evidence-based media policy framework that supports the promotion of digital literacy and media literacy skills, to enable individuals to identify and assess the reliability of media sources to recognize and avoid manipulation. Such a framework should also address potential harms caused using digital technology and enable individuals to make informed decisions about how to use digital technology safely and ethically.

- A comprehensive national policy framework is needed to support and sustain professional media and journalism, to improve media education in schools, and to use library networks to provide quality content to diverse audiences. Such a framework should be strategically focused, considering different social and economic contexts, the needs of different social groups and a wide network of available stakeholders. It should also consider the implications of digital media and technology, and the roles of both public and private sectors in providing access to quality news and information. This framework should be backed by the necessary resources to ensure its successful implementation.

- A holistic strategy that focuses on risk assessment, research and analysis, public education, and training is needed. Such a strategy should include the efforts of identifying potential risks, mapping potential stakeholders and actors, promoting collaboration between these, and developing action plans to mitigate the risks. Additionally, the strategy should promote research and analysis to understand current and potential risks, as well as public education and training to help citizens understand these risks and how to protect themselves. Finally, the strategy should include mechanisms for monitoring, evaluating, and revising the strategy when needed.

- Government, together with civil society and the private sector, should strive to create an inclusive and open digital environment, which respects and protects the rights of all individuals to access, create, and share information and knowledge. Such an environment should be based on the principles of freedom of opinion and expression and should focus on the capacity of citizens to exercise their rights in the digital age, as well as on the need to create a safe and trusted digital environment.

- Government should ensure that digital infrastructure, the legal framework, and the public services provided are designed in a way that allows all citizens to access and use the online information safely and securely. This should be done through providing digital literacy training, education, and support to ensure that everyone can access and use the digital environment in a safe and secure manner.

- Finally, the experience of all three Baltic countries should be considered when formulating policies. These countries have a shared history and have developed varying approaches to cyber security, media policy, and the disinformation campaigns they have faced. Also, the involvement of partners within the framework of NATO-EU, as well as Ukraine, is valuable from the point of view of a common European future and identity[12].

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[12] See Policy brief developed by NORDIS and DIGIRES representatives in Annex 2.

3. Conclusions

With accelerating digital transformations, intensified information disruptions (an influx of disinformation and misinformation), and growing malign information campaigns, such as instigations to conflict, the upswings towards radical and populist politics, hate speech, etc., knowledge of who (which interest groups, businesses, and countries) controls digital media and digital technological infrastructures/platforms becomes of primary significance in today's Europe and globally.

Still, when observing how digital disinformation gets accelerated and amplified, also the audiences' preferences to choose social networks as their first news channel and source of news, and their reluctance to verify it, also considering the ongoing restructurings in the news media sector, it calls to be alarmed and to take decisive steps in making "digital media" literacy competencies a concern of increased priority.

It is expected that by taking these steps Lithuania will be better equipped to benchmark the level of societal resilience against disinformation, to counter disinformation and protect its citizens from its damaging effects.

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Glossary

Debunking is the process of exposing and disproving false information or ideas. It is typically used to refer to the public refutation of claims or beliefs that are considered false or exaggerated.

Digital media and information ecosystem is a system of interconnected digital media and information sources that share data and content, enabling users to create and consume information in a variety of formats. This ecosystem can include social media, websites, blogs, podcasts, streaming services, search engines, and more. It is a growing, constantly evolving ecosystem that provides individuals, businesses, and organizations with access to a vast amount of information.

Digital media and information literacy is the ability to understand and critically evaluate information from digital media sources, such as the internet, social media, and multimedia, and to apply that knowledge to solve problems. It is also the ability to use digital media tools to create and communicate information.

Digital and resilient citizenship is the ability of individuals to leverage digital tools, networks, and platforms to protect themselves and their communities against the threats posed by digital disruption and to promote the interests of society. This includes developing skills and knowledge to actively participate in digital spaces, understanding the implications of digital technologies, and using digital tools and platforms to advocate for social change.

Disinformation is false information that is spread deliberately to deceive. It is a complex and multi-layered phenomenon (eg. fabricated stories, manipulated videos and photos, false news articles, conspiracy theories, etc.), which requires a contextually focused, deeply engaged, and critical awareness supported analysis backed with varied sources of expertise.

Fact-checking is the process of verifying the accuracy of a statement or claim by researching and examining evidence. It is done to ensure that facts are reported accurately in media, journalism, and other forms of communication.

Information disruptions refer to an influx of disinformation, misinformation and other types of interruptions to the flow of digital information, such as data loss, hacking, or other forms of cyber crime. These disruptions can have serious consequences for individuals, businesses, and government organizations.

Misinformation is when false or inaccurate information is shared, but no harm is meant. Intentional misinformation is called disinformation.

Prebunking is the act of proactively debunking misinformation before it has a chance to spread. It involves researching and addressing rumors or false claims before they can become accepted as truth.

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Annexes 1 and 2

1. Discourse Quality Identification (DQI) – **Informed Deliberation and the Digital Age: A Question of Quality of Media Texts**

2. DIGIRES-NORDIS Policy brief