



BECID

DIGIRES methodology on fact-checking and information verification strategies and scenarios for informed media use and media awareness

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Executive Summary

This Report provides an overview of the theoretical and practical work that was led by the BECID partner VMU and associated member DIGIRES¹ also in collaboration with partner colleagues in Latvia and Estonia. The Report provides details of steps and activities that were organized to synthesize the available experience into a special training methodology that was developed and validated with various groups of representatives from public organizations as well as news media. The goal is to design simple strategies to be applied in various daily media use situations.

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¹ DIGIRES (Contract Number: LC-01682259), was a pilot initiative carried in 2021-2022. More information about the activities of the Baltic Research Foundation for Digital Resilience is available at <http://digires.lt>.

1. Introduction and Background

With accelerating digital transformations, intensified information disruptions, 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.

However, equipping media users with adjustable skills for information verification and fact-checking who (which agents, what narratives, and what strategies) is behind various digital information operations remains a challenge.

Observing how digital disinformation gets accelerated and amplified, 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.

In this Report, the Team of BECID experts presents several frameworks/exercises in the broad area of "media awareness", which are critically significant for individuals' further actions in the field of digital resilience. These frameworks are expected to benchmark the level of individual and group resilience against manipulative content, counter disinformation, and protect citizens from its damaging effects.

Four institutions from the three Baltic countries are directly engaged in Task 4.2., representing research and education organizations (Vytautas Magnus University, Tallinn University, Tartu University, Vidzeme University College) and media excellence center/NGO (BCME). In the different stages of the project, over 20 people were engaged in the Task and even more of them will be joining in Autumn 2024 when the actual training will take place in the three countries.

We present the methodological framework, practical media awareness training-focused exercises, and communication and trainings' activities in the following sections.

2. Methodological Framework for Building Resilient Citizenship through Information Verification

New training methods are needed to adapt to the ever-changing dynamics of modern media and digital communications dynamics in today's rapidly evolving digital information ecosystem.

There have been many studies focused on interventions centered on media literacy to assist media users in the informed consumption of digital content (Paciello et al., 2023; van Zoonen et al., 2024). However, there are not enough analyses on how media education should tackle the rising change; the theoretical argument for the development of “resilient civics” was grounded in media literacy methodologies that could be applied in educational environments to inform and train future journalists, as well as teachers, librarians and social media activists in verifying information and fact-checking.

In Task 4.2, the theoretical argument for the development of “resilient civics” was grounded in a normative and discursive strategy that adopts a “media awareness” capacities enhancement approach (for more details, see Balčytienė, 2024²).

The proposed approach to developing resilience jointly involves several requirements. It looks at digital information users as “mediatized actors” whose decision-making towards information verification and expressionism (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017) are pressured by (a) infrastructural power (van Dijck, 2020, 2021; Helberger, 2020; Mansell, 2023a, 2023b) and digital information accessibility, (b) individual capabilities and skills (Bandura, 2006), as well as (c) conceptions of transmedial journalism and alternative content circulation (Chadwick, 2014; Kantola, 2014).

As can be seen in Figure 1, the theorization relies on recent thinking about hybridization and transmediality in digital media ecologies and digital expressionism, as well as socio-psychological backing of the self-efficacious development of responsible and epistemically equipped citizenship.

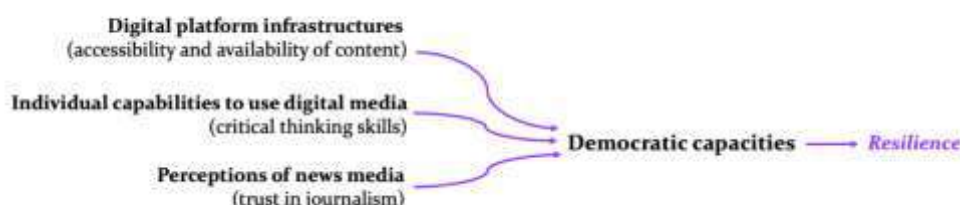


Fig. 1. The “Media awareness” focused approach rests on three factors: the accessibility and availability of information, media literacy skills, and trust in journalism. All three, in combination, contribute to the development of resilience.

² The article “Building Civic Resilience with Digital Verification Skills: Media Literacy Lessons from Lithuania” (see Appendix) is currently being prepared for publication in the online book “**Adapting to the Changing Tides: Media & Information Literacy New Trends and Challenges**” (EKOME).

With this theoretical grounding, we seek to expand the idea of “responsible communication” and resilient civics as a collective and collaborative process of multilayered negotiations. Essentially, we argue that the features of responsible information use and verification along with digital civics arise not as the linear product or aggregation of digital contents. Rather, these manifest as the result of an ongoing process of “internal dialogues”, i.e., negotiations between digital platforms’ affordances, epistemic resources needed to manage and check digitally sustained discourse, and normative ideals and visions about what resilient citizenship is.

To promote resilient citizenship, this Report refers to the DIGIRES method, in which media literacy-focused interventions on **enhancing self-efficacious learning** (described here as “media awareness”) were tested with representatives of public institutions in Lithuania, and pilot versions of the developed methodology were reviewed by experts in Latvia and Estonia.

3. DIGIRES Method and Practical Exercises

The designed training methodology comprises several frameworks (exercises) to be applied in strategically focused situations to develop media awareness capacities.

DIGIRES’ experience in mobilizing experts, organizing training for selected groups, raising public awareness, and advocating for responsible communication and information use reveals a need for more structured activities to engage audiences in information verification practices and self-awareness development without requiring extensive prior knowledge.

For Task 4.2., the VMU team and DIGIRES present an innovative set of engaging practical activities with examples and detailed scenarios that can be easily adapted to a variety of everyday media-related situations and learning subjects. The examples provided in this Report specifically aimed at meeting the teacher’s needs to engage young students in using journalism and fact-checking. The exercises and the style of their presentation with scenarios can be flexibly adapted to the needs of journalists, librarians, or youth workers.

These activities aim to make media literacy education more relatable to people’s experiences, involve and communicate with them, and listen to their perspectives. The best media literacy education is a conversation about everyday life issues. That is why the DIGIRES activities are designed to engage and empower all participants to think, to question the information that appears in the public domain, and to encourage them to step out of their comfort zone because that is where real learning happens. It also highlights the importance of reflecting on participants’ experiences. Only through reflection, i.e., through ‘internal dialogues’, can one draw accurate conclusions and develop “media awareness”.

The practical activities in the provided methodology (see the Appendix) include a detailed step-by-step plan, tips and guidelines, and discussion questions to fully support the teacher's preparation for media literacy lessons in a timely and high-quality manner.

The Four exercises:

1. The interactive activity **Media Walkshop** encourages individuals to notice and recognize the “world of media” and to understand the meaning of information and media objects in the everyday environment.
2. The **Lateral Reading** method teaches students to identify the elements of a reliable source, evaluate textual and visual information in terms of credibility, develop text analysis skills and attention to detail, and understand the importance of slowing down content consumption.
3. The interactive activity **Categorizing Opinions** helps to understand how dichotomous thinking and categorizing things as “black” or “white” divide society and push it towards conflict, confrontation, polarization, and hate speech.
4. The **Understanding Uncertainty** method helps to recognize emotions, behavior, and information-seeking tendencies during uncertain times. It also enhances the ability to resist manipulation and disinformation, such as fake news and propaganda, which are especially prevalent during crises and periods of uncertainty.

4. Communication and Training Activities

Various activities such as training sessions, seminars, panel discussions, and scholarly debates were organized to gain practical experience from theoretical ideas.

Examples of initiatives organized within BECID framework to popularize media awareness approach to information verification and fact-checking:

- 27.02.2024: Junior researchers Rimgailė Kasparaitė and Patricija Lenčiauskienė presented the method **Media Walkshop** at the digital and media literacy conference “Media Literacy Matters” organized by the Flemish Knowledge Centre for Digital and Media Literacy Mediawijs in Brussels. Scholars received feedback that this method is inclusive and seems to be quite simple to implement – it does not require additional preparation (this is especially important for media literacy practitioners, teachers, librarians, and all educators in general, who often lack time for consistent preparation), also that it is a method that strengthens the knowledge and perception and creates a dialogue at the same time. Read more: <https://becid.eu/news/becid-junior-researchers-presented-the-media-walkshop-method-in-brussels/>
- In two sessions organized in February and April 2024, Aukšė Balčytienė and Kristina Juraitė, together with the Creative media NGO “Nepatogus kinas” (media education

platform), to update and strengthen the knowledge of teachers, educators, and youth workers, organized a virtual seminar “Visual Media: Divides or Connects?” Read more: <https://becid.eu/news/becid-invited-to-see-the-world-of-images-in-a-different-way-lithuania/>

- 01.12.2023: A seminar/training for regional journalists was held – Brigita Sabaliauskaitė, Aukse Balčytienė and Kristina Berksun were involved in studying the needs of regional journalists regarding new practices to engage audience in news journalism. Link: <https://digires.lt/digires-surenge-seminara-regionu-zurnalistams-drauge-ieskome-metodu-kaip-stiprinti-ziniasklaida/>
- 19.10.2023: Remote media literacy trainings were held in all three Baltic countries at the same time. Seminars were dedicated to teachers, librarians, youth workers and regional journalists. During the seminars in Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian languages, the focus was on the topics of disinformation, critical thinking and fact-checking. In Lithuania, the seminar “Information Literacy: why do we think critically in the gray zone?” was conducted by Darius Remeika, an expert in information and psychological operations and disinformation and author of two MIL methods: **Categorizing Opinions** and **Understanding Uncertainty**. During the training, he talked about one of the most common cognitive biases – dichotomous thinking, which unconsciously pushes society towards confrontation, polarization, and hate speech. Read more: <https://digires.lt/en/warming-up-before-mil-week-media-literacy-trainings-were-organized-in-three-baltic-countries/> According to Darius Remeika, these two methods can be widely applied. He constantly trains and tests methods with various groups of people and groups (communities, NGOs, and companies). Also, one of the methods was tested with a wide group of people in the discussion festival “BŪTENT!” on 26.08.2023. Link: <https://digires.lt/kaip-nebuti-isdurtiems-atsako-digires-informaciniu-operaciju-ekspertas-dariaus-remeika/> According to D. Remeika, in training, different audiences can be included based on their professional or demographic information consumption criteria. Playful audience engagement allows the instructor to keep the audience's attention, and most importantly, the audience already receives skills (tools) and not just theoretical constructs. According to him, this is important in strengthening the resilience and multiliteracy of society.
- 11.04.2023: A remote professional development seminar for teachers, “How to recognize the truth: recipes of a fact-checker,” was organized, during which experts shared the methods of checking information and presented methodical material prepared by the experts for media literacy classes. The seminar attracted the interest of more than 160 participants. Read more: <https://digires.lt/en/digires-organized-a-seminar-for-teachers-and-presented-the-methodology-developed-for-media-literacy-classes/>
- 03.03.2023 During the international scientific conference “Media Literacy and Information Technology: Challenges and Solutions for the 21st Century” Aukse Balčytienė presented the **Lateral Reading** method and all Media Literacy Toolkit.

Read more: <https://digires.lt/en/at-the-international-media-literacy-conference-digires-researchers-presented-a-model-of-cooperation-and-training-guide/> Conference
record: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ypTWTCUqK1A>

The importance of such methods and training was also expressed during the focus groups and individual interviews, which Rimgailė Kasparaitė, Kristina Berksun and Brigita Sabaliauskaitė conducted with different vulnerable groups – youth workers, youth leaders, teachers and librarians. Personal interviews with youth leaders showed that youth workers lack training and knowledge on how to work with young groups on MIL and what methods could be applied to them when; at the same time, it is noticed that some of the young people lack basic digital skills. It is observed that the youth workers themselves not only lack knowledge, since they are coming from different spheres, e.g. art, pedagogy, and clinical psychology, and are not necessarily related to MIL education, but also, they lack time to acquire knowledge in the field of MIL, since priorities are given to other topics considered as more important to youth.

According to interviewees, interactive methods and youth-to-youth training would be the most effective for the youth's development of media literacy.

5. Timeframe of Performed and Planned Activities of the Task

For Task 4.2, the methodological guidelines were prepared based on the experience of DIGIRES practices. The new methodological scheme was developed to meet the needs of informed information for knowledge-focused citizenship. For that specific aim, a unique system of exercises was created, based on offering learning situations that reveal information users' epistemic biases.

The key steps in the Task 4.2. are:

- **The DIGIRES approach to fact-checking and responsible information use** was tested in learning situations with VMU journalism students (for more details, see Balčytienė, 2024³). Fact-checking lessons were organized, tested, and updated with

³ The article "Building Civic Resilience with Digital Verification Skills: Media Literacy Lessons from Lithuania" (see Appendix) is currently being prepared for publication in the online book "**Adapting to the Changing Tides: Media & Information Literacy New Trends and Challenges**" (EKOME).

the assistance and involvement of fact-checkers from Delfi.lt, freelancers, and professionals working with special information operations.

- **Four exercises** were selected to be prepared for teaching purposes and adapted as lesson plans. Teachers (also regional journalists, librarians, and youth workers) are a unique target group that is highly engaged in learning and reveals high self-reflective capacities, which are specifically beneficial when testing new learning materials.
- The VMU team organized **three types of focus groups and interviews** with teachers, librarians, and youth workers to analyze the needs and reflections on the gained experience. A special “dialogic communication” methodology was used in these sessions, allowing the sharing of respondents’ personal life stories, and achievements and struggles in media literacy training.
- The four exercises were **adapted to the needs expressed** by the respective users and later reviewed by teachers and librarians in Latvia and Estonia. In Spring 2024, the versions in national languages (also considering translations in minority languages, like Russian, Ukrainian) are being prepared to be tested in actual learning situations.
- As initially foreseen, the **practical testing of the DIGIRES methodology (Four exercises)** is planned to take place in Autumn 2024. For that action, the national teams will select groups of mentors (teachers, librarians, youth workers) to test the methodology and transfer the acquired experience to other learning situations. The mentors will use the Four exercises with scenarios and specially prepared materials (PowerPoint slides, notes).

6. Conclusion

With accelerating digital transformations, intensified information disruptions, 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. On the side of digital media users, informed information use, development of information verification skills and media awareness capacities, and motivated practicing of responsible communication are becoming essential competencies required for democratic life.

When observing how digital disinformation gets accelerated and amplified, 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 both – “digital media” literacy competencies and a more general “media awareness” – a concern of increased priority.

“Media awareness” focused interventions and scenarios outlined in this Report involve providing practical and applicable exercises that lead to self-efficacious learning situations.

We anticipate that the following experience will better equip people in the Baltic countries with needed awareness capacities to assess the level of self-conscious media use that will guide them towards resilience against disinformation and its damaging effects.

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Appendixes

DIGIRES Methodology (English version), media versions, and supplementary materials in national languages are available on the BECID website (<http://becid.eu>).

The article **“Building Civic Resilience with Digital Verification Skills: Media Literacy Lessons from Lithuania”** by **prof. Auksė Balčytienė**, UNESCO Co-Chair on MIL for Inclusive Knowledge Societies, Department of Public Communications, Vytautas Magnus University, Lithuania, to be published in the edited online volume **“Adapting to the Changing Tides – Media and Information Literacy: New Trends and Challenges”** edited by Karpouzis, K. (Idea-Ekome Publications, Athens).

DIGIRES

Baltijos skaitmeninio
atsparumo tyrimų centras



Baltic Engagement
Centre for Combating
Information Disorders

DIGIRES HANDBOOK FOR TEACHERS

*How to creatively integrate
media and information
literacy exercises in the
classroom?*

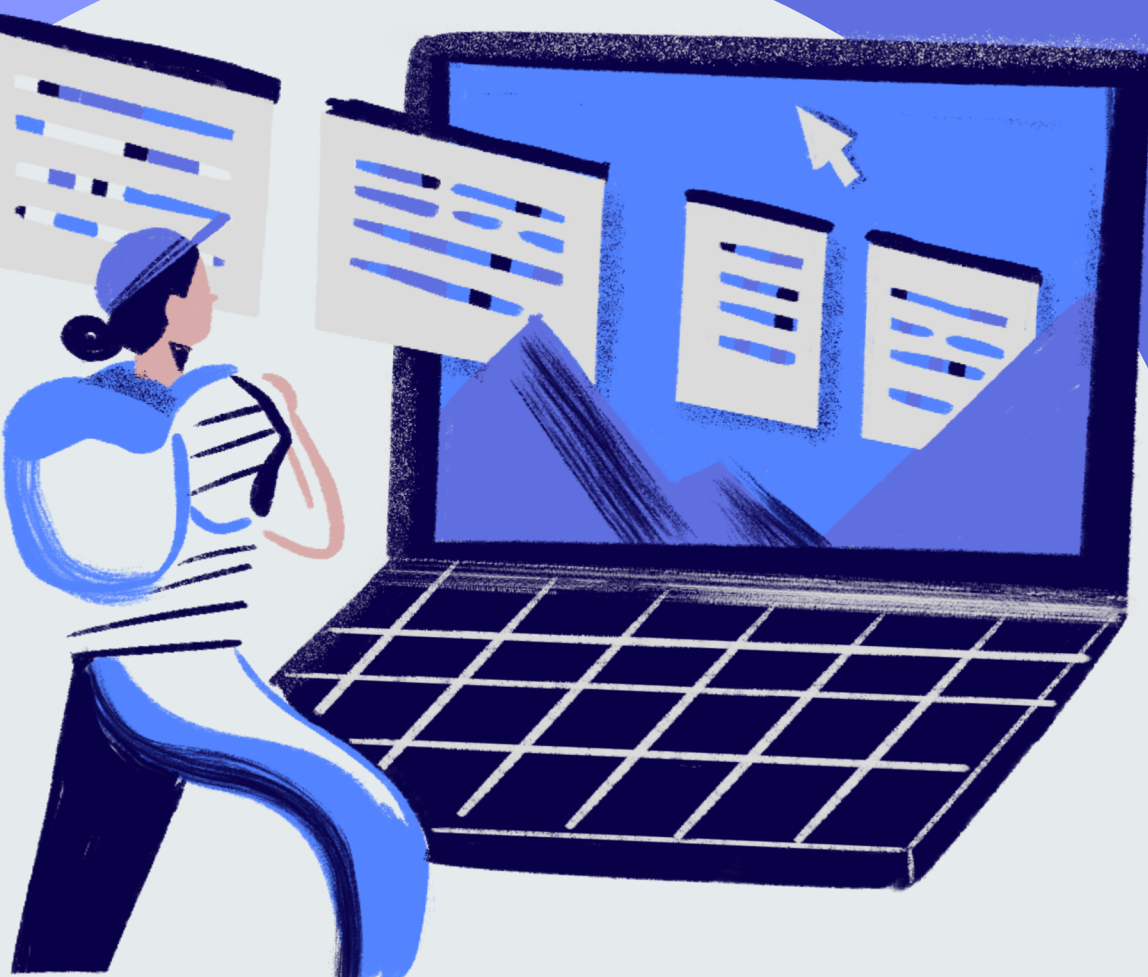


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PREAMBLE

We live in a time of global digital communication and intensive information flow, where we are exposed to a wide range of information through modern media, ranging from high-quality content that can be trusted to content that is misleading or produced by artificial intelligence. As digitalization accelerates, the volume of false, deceptive, and often hostile content grows exponentially. Such content poses a significant challenge to democratic sustainability, disrupts decision-making processes, and generates public discontent. Although different media have become part of our daily lives and identities, **do we know how to search for the truth and distinguish a reliable source from a false or manipulative one? How do we make sense of the endless clutter of images, sounds, texts, symbols, data, and the human and machine communications that go with it?**

Amid inexhaustible information and data, we need clarification and know what or who to trust. Therefore, we need to learn to see the world around us differently, a world saturated with information and all kinds of distractions and manipulations – to ask ourselves every time **if what we see on our smartphone or computer screen is accurate?**

The teacher is the guardian of knowledge and the nurturer of human creativity, possessing extensive expertise in the subject matter.

However, they often struggle to communicate this knowledge from the perspective of the media world. There is a need for more structured activities to engage students without requiring extensive prior knowledge.

We, therefore, present an innovative **set of engaging practical activities** with examples and detailed scenarios that can be easily adapted to a variety of subjects, developed by the Baltic Digital Resilience Research Centre **DIGIRES**, a team of media literacy and media experts, as well as improved and tested by the **BECID** Baltic Engagement Centre for Combating Information Disorders.

These activities aim to make media literacy education more relatable to students' experiences, involve and communicate with them, and listen to their perspectives.

The best media literacy education is **a conversation about everyday life issues**.

PREAMBLE

That is why the DIGIRES activities are designed to engage and empower all participants to think, to question the information that appears in the public domain, and to encourage them to step out of their comfort zone because that is where real learning happens.

It also highlights the importance of reflecting on participants' experiences. Only through reflection can one draw accurate conclusions.

The practical activities include a detailed step-by-step plan, tips and guidelines, and discussion questions to fully support the teacher's preparation for media literacy lessons in a timely and high-quality manner.

The **Lateral Reading** method will teach you to identify the elements of a reliable source, evaluate textual and visual information in terms of credibility, develop text analysis skills and attention to detail, and the importance of slowing down on the content consumption.

The interactive activity **Media Walkshop** will encourage you to notice and recognize the world of media around you and to understand the meaning of information and media objects in the everyday environment.

The interactive activity **Categorising Opinions** will help to understand how dichotomous thinking and categorizing things as “black” or “white” divide society and push it towards confrontation, polarisation, and hate speech.

The **Understanding Uncertainty** method will help you recognize your emotions, behaviour, and information-seeking tendencies during uncertain times. It will also enhance your ability to resist manipulation and disinformation, such as fake news and propaganda, which are especially prevalent during crises and periods of uncertainty.

Join us and tap into the collective knowledge and experience to foster a culture of learning and sharing!



1. Text comprehension: did you know that we read vertically?

Detecting and debunking manipulative content is enhanced by reading and analysing the text, which can be effectively developed through various techniques that are easily applied to everyday life. A crucial habit that accompanies internet browsing is **lateral reading**.

Lateral reading is an essential media literacy skill that involves searching for information within a source and exploring multiple perspectives and sources simultaneously. This method allows each person to assess the credibility and validity of the information they encounter. By comparing data on different platforms and analysing the professionalism and bias of different sources, students are better able to understand complex issues and distinguish between credible and misleading information. Lateral reading promotes critical thinking and enables students to navigate the wide landscape of digital media effectively.

Lateral reading is an effective strategy for determining a source's reliability. By comparing the information it contains with other sources, you can verify claims and gain more contextual information about the source. This method, used by professional fact-checkers, is a key tool in their daily work to check a source's credibility.

Processing information this way involves spending relatively little time on the same website about which more information is to be found. Instead, one steps back from the page and looks at what other reliable sources have said about the site. For example, opening multiple browser tabs, combining different information from across the internet, and comparing different sources to better understand the site under study.

Many of the questions asked by professional fact-checkers are the same as those asked by vertical readers scrolling up and down the source pages being evaluated. Unlike these readers, however, they understand that the truth is more likely to be found in the web of links to (and comments about) a site than on the site itself.

Lateral reading helps the reader to assess the quality of the site he or she is visiting in terms of the accuracy of the information, provides a broader perspective on the content published there, and helps to understand whether the site has an editorial process or an expert reputation that would allow it to accept the accuracy of the site's facts.



1. Text comprehension: did you know that we read vertically?

LESSON TOPIC

Lateral reading method for reliable information search.

GRADE (YEAR)

9–12

SUBJECTS FOR WHICH THIS LESSON PLAN CAN BE INTEGRATED

Native language lessons (Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian), English or other foreign languages, history, civics, information technology (IT), or as a non-formal education activity.

AIM OF THE LESSON

Introduce the concept and method of **lateral reading** and show how to apply this technique to everyday life.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1 Identify the characteristics of a reliable source.
- 2 Learn how to evaluate textual and visual information in terms of credibility.
- 3 Develop skills in text analysis, pay attention to detail, and understand the importance of slower content consumption.

APPLIED ACTIVITY

Lateral reading.

DURATION

45 min.

MATERIALS NEEDED

- 1 Different text-based examples of disinformation (e.g., an article on a specific website, a post on a specific social networking group).
- 2 A computer.
- 3 A projector (or a smartboard).

PREPARATION

The teacher prepares a presentation on the lateral reading method, which can be used when consuming information online. The presentation can be prepared using teaching materials provided by Stanford University (in English).

Before the lesson, the teacher selects several examples of disinformation (e.g., an article on a particular website or a post on a specific social networking group).



1. Text comprehension: did you know that we read vertically?

Variations of suitable examples include an article posted on a website actively spreading disinformation; a fraudulent website mimicking a credible media channel and copying the attributes of a credible website, such as the logo, name, style of articles, etc.; a post in a controversial group on a selected social network. The chosen examples can include textual and visual material. Still, the most important thing is that they are in the form of an article, i.e., the text material makes up a large part of the example.

STRUCTURE/ACTIVITY

INTRODUCTION (~ 10 MIN.)

The teacher gives a presentation on the lateral reading method, explaining its importance and real-life applicability.

GROUP WORK (~ 10–15 MIN.)

Students are given a practical task that can be done individually or in small groups of 2–3 people.

Each student, individually or as a group, opens the example of disinformation provided by the teacher on their computers (or any other electronic device).

The **aim of the task** is to use all available open sources to find out:

- as much information as possible about the website where the example was posted,
- the author of the article or message,
- identify which information in the example is correct and which is not,
- assess the credibility of the example.

If the task is carried out individually, students may be given the same example of disinformation, or if in groups, each group may be given a different example of disinformation. Regardless of the approach, the task encourages collaboration and mutual support. After completing the task, students should provide as many references and arguments as possible to support their conclusions, fostering a sense of shared achievement.



1. Text comprehension: did you know that we read vertically?

ASSESSMENT AND REFLECTION

DISCUSSION (~ 10 MIN.)

After the activity, the teacher facilitates a discussion on the examples of disinformation provided, the conclusions reached by the students, and the difficulties they encountered in completing the activity. The following questions are proposed to guide the discussion:

- Tell us what you found out about the example – the website on which it was posted, the author of the text, the illustrations (if any) in the example, the article's content, the people, places, and events mentioned in the article.
- Which sources did you use and why?
- Would you recommend reading the information on this website, in a social network group, to a friend, and why?
- What difficulties did you encounter in analysing the example given?

REFLECTION (~ 10 MIN.)

Students can be asked to summarize their experience of the activity by briefly answering the following questions (they can also be asked to write their feedback on different sheets of paper):

- How did I feel doing the activity?
- What knowledge/skills would have helped me to do this task better?
- What difficulties did I encounter?
- What did I like about doing this task?

FOLLOW-UP (HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT)

For homework, students could be encouraged to find out which websites or social networking groups their relatives or friends browse the most and to analyse the information on them for reliability using the lateral reading method.

PLACE FOR YOUR THOUGHTS AND IDEAS



2. Surrounded by media: the role of information objects in everyday life

According to UNESCO and other well-known experts worldwide, **literacy** is a set of different abilities to use data and information to understand, analyze, interpret, create, and communicate with all that travels through and within the media. **Media literacy** grows when at least three types of “tools” are effectively employed: knowledge (knowing how we think), the ability to recognize feelings (how we feel), and the skills to act.

The ability to use the tools and applications offered by technologies such as internet search engines and personal social networking accounts is a direct reference to skills. At the same time, the willingness to understand, analyze, and evaluate content and one’s progress refers to epistemic knowledge and expertise. Thus, developing **media literacy** is about more than just knowing how to check facts, which online tools to choose, where to look for a trustworthy source, how to say “I understand what journalism is”, etc. All of this has to be used and applied: constantly monitoring and reading quality journalism, analyzing social media posts, and not spreading or sharing unreliable and unverified information.

As can be seen, analytical and critical reflection on one’s experience with information is crucial to interpreting the concept of literacy and achieving such an outcome. This is precisely the essence of critical thinking. Media-enabled awareness is thus born in the totality of these three steps – thinking, evaluating, and experiencing the information; recognizing and evaluating what is happening; capturing a new thought, and taking the next step.

LESSON TOPIC

The role of information and media objects in everyday life.

GRADE (YEAR)

9–12

SUBJECTS FOR WHICH THIS LESSON PLAN CAN BE INTEGRATED

Native language lessons (Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian), English or other foreign languages, history, geography civics, information technology (IT), or as a non-formal education activity.

2. Surrounded by media: the role of information objects in everyday life

AIM OF THE LESSON

To develop the ability to observe and understand information objects in the school, city, or other environment, in the media, or online. This requires moving from passive to active observation interpreting the clues and meanings in the environment and various forms of information.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1 Identify information objects in the surrounding environment and try to understand their meaning in the wider media context.
- 2 To develop the ability to think critically about the information environment.

APPLIED ACTIVITY

Interactive method “**Media Walkshop**” (“slow learning” approach).



“Slow learning” strategy refers to using tasks and methods that allow participants to spend more time learning about, observing, and reflecting on the environment, its phenomena, and objects.

We live in a fast-paced information age with little time for the practice of awareness. This learning strategy, therefore, allows us to stop and try to understand what feelings, thoughts, and reflections are triggered by the current environment or the objects in it.



DURATION

45 min. (the activity can also be extended into two lessons / 90 min.).

MATERIALS NEEDED

- 1 For capturing the signs of the environment: a map of the city/locality (if outside the school) (can be a plan of a larger building), notebooks, pens, and smartphones.
- 2 For reflection on the experience in the chosen media format (homework): the work (media product) produced by the group can be a photo-narrative (photos with explanations/quotes, diary, drawing). If the assignment is a preparation for the next lesson, podcast, or video, all creative methods are suitable.

STRUCTURE/ACTIVITY

INTRODUCTION (~ 5-10 MIN.)

- 1 Students work in pairs or small groups to discuss the questions:
 - What is media to you?
 - What do you consider as information objects?



In contemporary contexts, the word **“medium”** or **“media”** does not only refer to the traditional type of media, such as the press, radio, and television, but also to all information and communication media and the means of communicating and hosting information content. Media can be photography, cinema, and the internet. Everyone from ordinary people to political, business, scientific, sporting, and popular culture figures actively uses social media. Media can be used to create art (**media art**).

Information objects are incredibly diverse, existing in both physical and digital forms.

They serve the purpose of conveying, communicating, or storing information. From the tangible like posters, billboards, and signs, to the digital realm of computers and video cameras, these objects populate our information environment, each with its unique role and function.



- 2 An interactive “Media Walkshop” activity is explained to students:
 - Students are introduced to the aim and objectives of the lesson.
 - In pairs or small groups, students choose a route (which can be a space in the school (inside), in the schoolyard, or in the classroom). In this environment, they search for and document various “signs”, i.e., objects, messages, and things visible and invisible to the human eye, such as cameras, telephones, posters, pictures, stickers, books, and other information objects in the school.
 - Once they have worked out the task, the pupils divide themselves into roles (route planner, writer, photographer, designer, journalist, etc.). The roles can be combined, i.e., one person can have several tasks.

2. Surrounded by media: the role of information objects in everyday life

GROUP WORK (~ 20 MIN.)

- Once the route has been planned (start, scheduled stops, end), all groups move in their intended directions. The “Unlocking the Meaning of Signs” handout can be given to the pupils as support material.
- After discovering a “sign” (media or information object), they take time to “read” it: discuss, record (photograph), interpret, research, or interview.



“Unlocking the Meaning of Signs” handout: questions to be discussed by the groups:

How would you describe the environment? Is it quiet, noisy, friendly, aggressive, dominant? What are the signs (media and information objects) that indicate this? For example, on a bulletin board, you may see many different messages; some messages may be friendly and attractive (e.g., an invitation to join a debating club), and others may be more aggressive (e.g., instructions not to litter in school grounds).

What is visible and what is not visible in the media and information object? For example, if the chosen information object is a “photocopier,” – what data does it collect, who archives and stores it, what is its purpose, what is it used for, etc.?



ASSESSMENT AND REFLECTION

DISCUSSION (~ 10 MIN.)

- What narrative can you create from this experience? How does media affect our environment and choices?
- What media product format do you choose to tell this story (your experience)? Why?

REFLECTION (~ 10 MIN.)

Students can be asked to summarize their experience of the activity by briefly answering the following questions (they can also be asked to write their feedback on different sheets of paper):

- How did I feel doing the activity?
- What knowledge/skills would have helped me to do this task better?
- What difficulties did I encounter?
- What did I like about doing this task?



2. Surrounded by media: the role of information objects in everyday life

FOLLOW-UP (HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT)

Students prepare a presentation. The project (media product) created by the group can be a photo narrative (photos with explanations/quotes, diary, drawing). All creative methods are suitable if the assignment is to prepare for the next lesson; it can be a podcast, video, poster, etc.

PLACE FOR YOUR THOUGHTS AND IDEAS





3. Bias thinking: why is it dangerous?

We tend to have a **dichotomous mindset** – that is, we see things as black or white, good, or bad. We see ourselves on the “white” side, and from this “white” perspective, we see and judge others. This is usually an unconscious tendency of thinking that makes everyday life easier (no need to think deeply and waste energy). It is also a defensive reaction. This is why dichotomous thinking is particularly prevalent in conditions of high uncertainty. The brain calms down when it knows the answer to whether it is a threat, whether it is safe, whether it is a friend or an enemy.

However, this mode of thinking can also be risky. Dichotomous thinking, at its core, is the catalyst for society’s **polarization**. It subtly nudges us towards conflict and hate speech, often resulting in divisive communication and actions that propagate hate and abuse.

Reality is not black or white. It is grey – lighter or darker, but grey. A quick answer equals a polarized answer, and critical thinking starts in the grey area.

This greyness is the hallmark of critical thinking, which is challenging, requires more mental effort, and increases uncertainty. However, training oneself to tame uncertainty and the grey area (between black and white) is possible.

Critical thinking is about adopting another perspective without losing one’s identity. Being conscious about thinking is one of the golden rules of critical thinking. Therefore, we should be bold and question sources or individuals who are nice to us, popular, and trusted so far. Let us ask ourselves whether I have factual evidence for this? Perhaps we will realize that, on the face of it, white is actually light grey.

LESSON TOPIC

The categorization (polarization) of opinions and the fragmentation of society due to the impact of disinformation.

GRADE (YEAR)

9–12

SUBJECTS FOR WHICH THIS LESSON PLAN CAN BE INTEGRATED

Native language lessons (Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian), English or other foreign languages, history, geography civics, information technology (IT), or as a non-formal education activity.

AIM OF THE LESSON

The lesson aims to introduce students to the categorization (polarization – grouping into two opposite poles) of opinions, covering different issues or current problems. To help students understand how categorization divides society, whereby when a topical issue arises, it splits into two “camps”, and people’s opinions become polarized. Explain that this can be a consequence of the effects of disinformation – one of the most significant effects is the polarization of views, attitudes, or even values.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1 Introduce the basic concepts of information, disinformation, and their impact on society.

- 2 Gain a deep understanding of the “Categorizing Opinions” method, a crucial tool for comprehending the intricacies of issues and steering clear of simplistic judgments.
- 3 Understand what has led to one or another assessment of the issue or subject under discussion in the context of the tasks.
- 4 Grasp the risks of making judgments solely in terms of “black” or “white”, “good” or “bad”, and the potential for such judgments to lead to disinformation and misunderstanding.
- 5 Understand and be able to comment on the dangers of disinformation and what constitutes a reliable source of information.
- 6 Summarize and reflect on the experience, identifying what they understood from the lesson, what they liked, what was most valuable, and what was challenging.

APPLIED ACTIVITY

Interactive activity **“Categorizing opinions”** (“black” or “white” test).

DURATION

1–2 hours (depending on the number of students and how much detail is given to each question).



3. Bias thinking: why is it dangerous?

MATERIALS NEEDED

- For the teacher: presentation, handout with prepared questions.
- For students: pen and paper (the number of sheets of paper depends on the number of students) or a smartphone with internet connection.

POSSIBLE WAYS TO ADAPT THE TASK

If all students have smartphones with an internet connection, the task can be done anonymously using live polling apps such as “Slido”, “Mentimeter”, etc. However, the teacher needs to make sure of this and prepare in advance. It is also possible to warn students in advance that the activity will require mobile phones with internet connection.

PREPARATION

Write down questions on a paper (e.g., 10 questions), all starting with “What do you think about ...?”. For example:

- What do you think about global warming?
- What do you think about the education system in your country?

- What do you think about the TikTok app?
- ...

etc. (it is advisable to include questions that are relevant on the day of the session and avoid questions that are sensitive to students).

STRUCTURE/ACTIVITY

INTRODUCTION (~ 10-15 MIN.)

- 1 Briefly discuss the basic concepts of information, disinformation, and their impact on society.



Information's impact on society or individual consciousness has been studied for decades from different disciplinary perspectives, such as psychology, sociology, or anthropology.

3. Bias thinking: why is it dangerous?



Determining the effects of disinformation on society is one of the most significant challenges for researchers studying this form of communication. Although social surveys, experiments, data from social networks, or observing people in their natural environment have advantages and disadvantages, one of the notable downsides is that the researcher has a stake in the final results. It is worth noting that the impact of disinformation on people is different, i.e., various effects on perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, or opinions and the behaviour that is triggered by these effects. This depends on **people's resilience** to manipulative communication, influenced by education, social, economic, demographic, or psychological vulnerability.

- 2 Students are introduced to the interactive activity “Categorizing opinions” (“black” or “white” test) and the aim of this lesson.

GROUP WORK (~ 30-40 MIN.)

- The audience is shown a slide with only the beginning of the question: ‘What do you think about ...?’ A slide showing a spectrum of colours and shades from black to white is recommended for visualization. For example:



- All the prepared questions are then read aloud, and the students write their answers on their sheets.
- After the students have answered all the questions, the first question is read, and each student reads their answer aloud. The teacher aims to identify the answers associated with positivity (good) and negativity (bad).

It is recommended to ask the audience to indicate where they would “place” their opinion on the issue under discussion on the slide. Suppose the audience tends to point close to the centre (which is extremely rare in practice), but the answer is clearly “white” or “black” in its meaning or connotation. In that case, asking them to provide a word to further polarise the opinion is recommended.

3. Bias thinking: why is it dangerous?

N.B. In this exercise, the audience's opinions may diverge, leading to confrontation. Therefore, the teacher(s) must moderate the audience. In the event of divergence of views, it is necessary to emphasize the natural existence of divergent opinions in society and, if required, to show a slide in which two characters looking from different sides disagree on which number they see: 6 or 9.

- Once the answers are known, the audience is asked, "Who formed your opinion?" and "Who is the source of the information?" Write down one reason (a maximum of three).

ASSESSMENT AND REFLECTION

DISCUSSION (~ 15 MIN.)

- What did you learn from this experience?
- How does the information we receive influence our opinions and judgments?
- Why do different members of society have different opinions?
- How dangerous is an opinion formed by disinformation?
- Why is it dangerous to judge things only as "black" or "white", "good" or "bad"? What encourages such judgments?

- Why is it essential to have a reliable source of information? What is a reliable source of information?

REFLECTION (~ 10 MIN.)

- What did you like?
- What was challenging?
- What was difficult to understand?
- What was the most memorable?

PLACE FOR YOUR THOUGHTS AND IDEAS



4. Information search: how do we survive under uncertainty?

Manipulation and information disruption, such as disinformation, fake news, or propaganda, are prevalent and work best in times of crisis and uncertainty when people are most vulnerable. Humans have a subconscious desire to control the future, and **uncertainty** is associated with the unknown, which makes predicting the future complex. Under such conditions, we begin to feel fear and anxiety. We start looking for answers in the media and on social networks. We become receptive to any information that helps us “feel the future” – to regain control. Unfortunately, this is often disinformation – quickly produced and devoid of facts. The consequences of falling for such disinformation can be severe, leading to misguided decisions and further perpetuating the cycle of uncertainty.

When we make important decisions (e.g., health, finance, security, or politics), we rely on existing information and personal and collective preferences. Therefore, it is essential to pay attention to disinformation that emerges when a new or sensitive issue arises in society.

Moreover, we tend to react primarily with our emotions and make many cognitive mistakes when looking for answers.

As a result, we only sometimes reduce uncertainty (often, we only increase it).

For example, we look for information that confirms our beliefs and opinions; we pay attention to what is obvious first; we rely on information that is easily accessible, but not necessarily reliable, on the internet or social networks; we are used to forming our opinions based on the information that reaches us first and then find it difficult to change them, etc. Understanding the role of emotions in our decision-making process is crucial to be more critical of the information we consume.

Therefore, when reading a source, ask yourself the following questions: 1) Why should this information be important to me? 2) What emotion does it evoke in me? 3) Why am I reacting the way I am reacting? 4) Who is the author of the message? 5) Does the message contain arguments, or is it just opinion?

LESSON TOPIC

Emotions, behaviour and information seeking under uncertainty.

GRADE (YEAR)

9–12



4. Information search: how do we survive under uncertainty?

SUBJECTS FOR WHICH THIS LESSON PLAN CAN BE INTEGRATED

Native language lessons (Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian), English or other foreign languages, history, geography civics, information technology (IT), or as a non-formal education activity.

AIM OF THE LESSON

To familiarize students with the uncertainties that follow significant events/situational changes or crises.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 1 To familiarize with the method “Understanding Uncertainty” and its purpose.
- 2 To understand and be able to identify how one feels in each situation of uncertainty, how one behaves, where one looks for information, and why.
- 3 Summarize and reflect on the experience by identifying what they understood from the lesson, what they liked, what they remembered most, and what was challenging.

APPLIED ACTIVITY

Interactive activity “**Understanding Uncertainty**”.

DURATION

1 hour.

MATERIALS NEEDED

Large sheets of paper, coloured markers (a projector may also be available).

PREPARATION

In a few sentences, describe a hypothetical situation reflecting a critical event. This could be a national event (e.g., false emails about hidden explosives sent to schools en masse) or a regional event (depending on where the activity is taking place) (e.g., a case of violence or harassment or the discovery of drugs in school).

POSSIBLE WAYS TO ADAPT THE TASK

The hypothetical event can be visualized using infographic symbols and presentation effects to increase engagement.



4. Information search: how do we survive under uncertainty?

Alternatively, the answers to the questions can be presented using live polling applications such as “Slido” or “Mentimeter”. This will increase anonymity and, hopefully, openness and audience engagement. However, it is necessary to ensure internet connectivity and that students have smartphones with internet connection.

STRUCTURE/ACTIVITY

INTRODUCTION

(~ 5-10 MIN.)

Students are introduced to the interactive activity “Understanding Uncertainty” and the aim of the lesson.

GROUP WORK

(~ 30-40 MIN.)

- The students are introduced to the situation. It can be read aloud or presented on a slide.
- Questions are then asked, and the student’s answers are recorded on a large sheet dedicated to each question:

1 How do you feel in this situation? Why?

The first question should capture emotions and, when looking for the reasons for these emotions, refer to the lack of information that leads to uncertainty.

It is advisable to discuss the feeling/state of uncertainty (when was the last time the audience had this feeling/state, etc.).

2 What do you do in this situation? Why?

With the second question, the teacher tries to convince the audience of the importance of quick, clear, and understandable information for people to act.

3 Where will you look for information? Why?

The third question encourages critical thinking, asking students to assess the expertise of information sources. The audience is presented with a hypothetical situation where official information is unavailable, and pseudo-experts are sharing advice on social media. This question should focus on the expertise of the source of information and the assessment of this expertise (position of the expert(s), education, experience, etc.), empowering students to make informed decisions.

4. Information search: how do we survive under uncertainty?

ASSESSMENT AND REFLECTION

DISCUSSION (~ 10 MIN.)

- What did you learn from this experience?
- How do people react under uncertainty and why?
- Why does disinformation appear before factual information under uncertainty?
- What defines the expertise of an information source?



The natural human response to uncertainty seeks quick, clear, and understandable information. This reaction to uncertainty is driven by the desire to know the extent of the threat, how it will affect each individual, and how to protect oneself. Reducing uncertainty is about regaining control. Because disinformation does not take time to assess the facts or investigate the situation, it tends to come first, falsely decreasing uncertainty in crises or significant events.

REFLECTION (~ 10 MIN.)

- What did you like?
- What was challenging?
- What was difficult to understand?
- What was the most memorable?

PLACE FOR YOUR THOUGHTS AND IDEAS



CONCLUSION: WHAT'S NEXT?

The information circulating in today's media is far from a quiet and calm river. It is a mix of highly credible, expert-generated information and manipulative content that can threaten society. The good news is that with a little effort, we can all develop critical thinking, resilience to digital disruption, and the ability to distinguish between quality content. We, therefore, invite you to continue to deepen your knowledge of media and information literacy and to put it into practice with our selection of valuable resources and tools.

USEFUL LINKS AND RESOURCES

- DIGIRES. (2020). Building Digital and Resilient Citizenship: Policy Guidelines. Available from: https://digires.lt/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/D1.5_Policy-suggestions.pdf
- DIGIRES. (2020). Informed Deliberation and the Digital Age: A Question of Quality of Media Texts. Available from: https://digires.lt/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/D1.5_Policy-suggestions_DQI.pdf
- DIGIRES. (2020). Report on research activities of the Baltic research foundation. Available from: https://digires.lt/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/D1.3_Report-on-research-activities.pdf
- IREX. (n.d.). Online course of media literacy VERY VERIFIED. Available from: <https://veryverified.eu/>

ABOUT BECID

The Baltic Engagement Centre for Combating Information Disorders (BECID) is a network of experts in fact-checking, media literacy, media practice, and academic research combating information disorders and promoting media literacy in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. BECID focuses on regular fact-checking, research on the perception of disinformation, and media literacy campaigns that aim to increase information resilience and media literacy. BECID is part of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) network.

For more information on BECID activities and produced content, please visit www.becid.eu.

ABOUT DIGIRES

The Association Baltic Digital Resilience Research Centre DIGIRES is the first example of collaboration in the field of digital resilience not only in Lithuania but also in all three Baltic States. DIGIRES aims to bring together experts and organizations working on similar themes of media literacy, digital resilience, and sustainable democracy development and to show ways to develop resilience in a coherent and targeted way by finding new forms of resilience through agreements and cooperation between national organizations, institutions, and public authorities representing different sectors.

For more information on DIGIRES activities and produced content, please visit <https://digires.lt/en/>.

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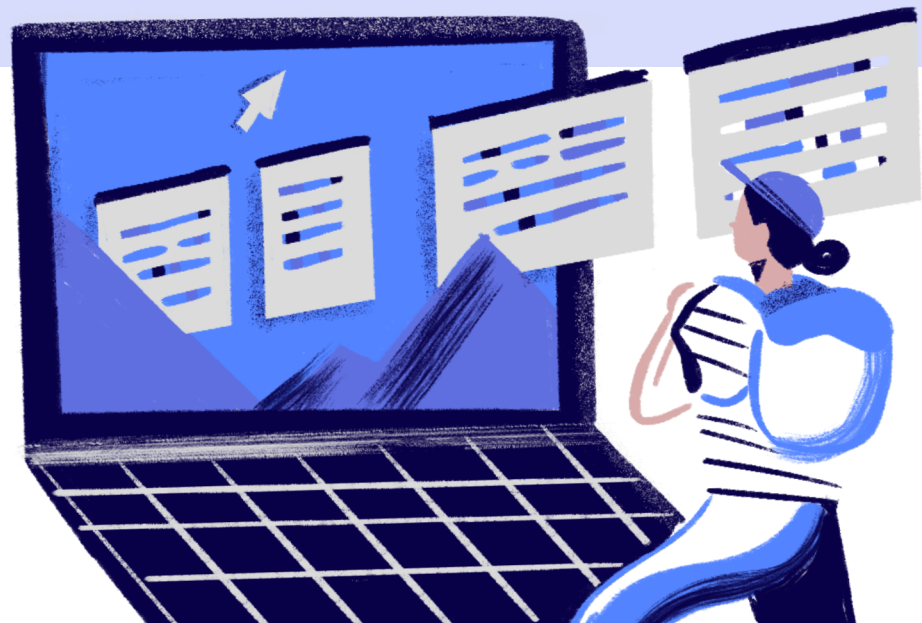
ANNEX

“Unlocking the Meaning of Signs” handout: questions to be discussed by the groups



How would you describe the environment? Is it quiet, noisy, friendly, aggressive, dominant? What are the signs (media and information objects) that indicate this? For example, on a bulletin board, you may see many different messages; some messages may be friendly and attractive (e.g., an invitation to join a debating club), and others may be more aggressive (e.g., instructions not to litter in school grounds).

What is visible and what is not visible in the media and information object? For example, if the chosen information object is a “photocopier,” – what data does it collect, who archives and stores it, what is its purpose, what is it used for, etc.?



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Building Civic Resilience with Digital Verification Skills: Media Literacy Lessons from Lithuania

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Abstract

The rapidly evolving digital media ecosystem requires people to be aware of how their digital information choices are shaped by both individual capabilities and digital platform logics. The paper seeks to expand current understanding of democratic capacity and civic resilience in the face of the negative impacts of manipulative content. The presented experience is based on the multi-level pilot study conducted within DIGIRES/BECID initiative. Initially, 89 journalism students were instructed in learning source verification techniques, with the assignment to develop media literacy lessons for 575 high schoolers. The reflections on the gained experience were interpreted in the broader context of digital media use and perspectives on dysfunctional content among various population groups (339 adults). As revealed, specially tailored learning conditions can significantly impact the development of an individual's overarching sense of self, a crucial element in both an individual's sense of personal and professional identity.

Keywords: media and information literacy, democratic capacity, civic resilience, information verification, fact-checking, information disruptions.

Introduction

While digital platforms, known as Tech Giants or GAFAM¹, have revolutionized the way people access information, communicate and form opinions, the abundance of manipulative content and increased engagement with it has affected people's understanding of news media in general and the role of journalism. Digital media offer many opportunities for democratic participation and self-expression, but they can also lead to dysfunctional patterns of communication, such as disinformation and hate speech, and thus become a driver of social and political polarization. The latter implication, namely the uncertainty surrounding the credibility of content, is one of the most recent developments in Platform Society (van Dijck, 2018), challenging established ways of organizing social and democratic life.

Broadly defined as ‘information disruptions’ (Wardle & Derakshan, 2017), information manipulations refer to the growing circulation of disinformation, artificial facts, radicalization,

¹ Big Tech refers to the five largest American companies such as Google (Alphabet), Amazon, Facebook (Meta), Apple, Microsoft. These companies are referred as the Big Five or GAFAM.

and other forms dysfunctional content. Various types of information distortion are not only confussing. They can be especially harmful as they are based on strategic aims to deceive and manipulate, which leads to the feelings of insecurity and helplessness. The unsettling feelings of suspicion, disbelief and distrust are of exceptional damage to democracy and sustainability of everyday life.

Research shows that initially, it was the pandemic, followed by the Russian aggression and war in Ukraine and related geo-political challenges, that had a significant impact on media and information consumption practices. These events led to an increase in social media use and consumption of ‘unmoderated content’ (circulating in such platforms as “Telegram”) accross all demographic groups. Due to increased uncertainty regarding source credibility, the accessibility of reliable and accurate information, along with one’s self-assurance in responsible information use, has become critically important.

In such a context, the role of conventional news media and journalism, along the public’s self-conscious awareness of various forms of dysfunctional content (such as disinformation, radicalism, hate speech), must be considered as **indispensable tools for self-protection and building resilience** against a multitude of information disruptions (Boulliane et al., 2022; Tenove, 2020).

How do different groups of people perceive journalism and news media and its role in combatting disinformation? What do people think of their own responsibility in becoming informed and civically equipped users of digital information? What role should journalism training anticipate in educating digital literacy professionals?

These questions will be explored by examining the self-efficacy aspects of human agency (Bandura, 2006) and how they get transformed in the context of platforms-driven communication and online information disruptions. This discussion will offer insights into experiences from Lithuania, specifically examining public responses towards changed communications environment. Following that, a practical study centred on digital source verification training for journalism students and its implications for **professional resiliency** development will be discussed.

Resilient sense-making in unsettling conditions: Conceptual framework

To gain a more comprehensive understanding of resilience against information disruptions, conceptual refinements and empirical testings are required. Although there is a growing body of research on MIL in times of digital transformation, there is less evidence on **civic resilience**. Development of **civic – or citizen – resilience** is influenced by socio-cultural factors, such as values and traditions, and media-awareness skills of people (McDougall, 2019). It thrives under certain contextual conditions determined by infrastructural factors, such as information accessibility and media viability, and also institutional trust (Humphrecht et al., 2020, 2021).

In general terms, resilience discussions often focus on the **democratic capacity** to respond to potential threats and harms, which require both structural and individual (agentive) capabilities (Tenove, 2020). Gaining access to and acquiring information in digital environments necessitate user actions, emphasizing the role of human agency. More precisely, the algorithmic logic of the platforms relies on audience input; digital information circulates in social media based on ‘digital footprints’, i.e., data that is implicitly provided by users. Likewise, user’s attention is emotionally triggerred, leading platforms to algorithmically prioritize content that boosts user engagement. Therefore, it is important to consider that in digital information ecosystems, there are technological (infrastructural) constraints that might influence the human

capabilities to adequately respond to potential threats and harms, such as an influx of disinformation.

To address all these specificities, a conceptual framework based on three interrelated characteristics required in **informed decision making and self-conscious awareness development** must be constructed. These characteristics that contribute to the development of civic resilience (see Figure 1) include: (a) communication rights, i.e., access to global infrastructures and availability of diverse content, (b) media literacy, i.e., the ability to use digital media, and (c) the perception of civic value in digital content, i.e. public views towards journalism and its status, including trust in media.

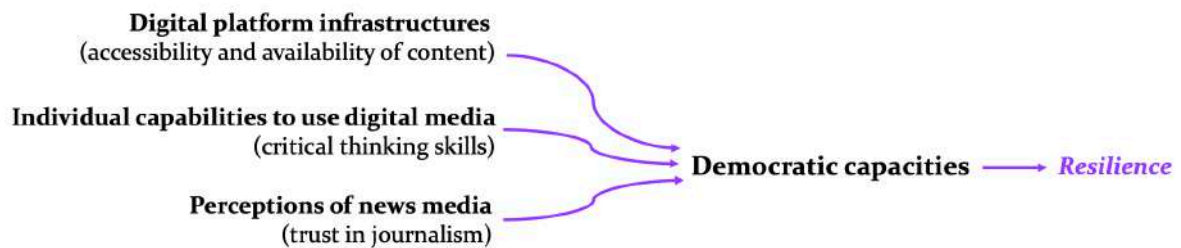


Fig. 1. Communication rights (accessibility and availability of information), media literacy and trust in media as determinants of democratic capacities and resilience.

Though not explicitly defined, there is one aspect, particularly that of human agency, which permeates all these three dimensions. Broadly speaking, human agency (Bandura, 2006) refers to **individual self-efficacy and intentionality to make informed decisions** based on the available information. It is also regarded as an individual's willingness and readiness to trust in the accuracy and reliability of information. In situations involving responsible information use, we can refer to examples of 'epistemic agency', which is cultivated through diverse individual capabilities. For example, accessing and critically evaluating information is a cognitive as well as motivational and emotional process, that involves verifying, judging, and making decisions based on received information. Moreover, the use of information is a social process that necessitates individuals to engage and interact with other users and sources to obtain reliable information. Engaging in the process of utilizing socially relevant information contributes to building trust and feelings of security, which are essential components of democratic capacities for civic resilience development.

Media and the development of democratic capacities: Lessons from a small country

Country-specific political, economic, and media settings have a significant impact on the capabilities of citizens to deal with and resist information disruptions. Increasing polarization of society and rising populism, as well as low confidence in news media, a weak public service broadcaster, and more fragmented audiences, are among the key factors limiting citizens' resilience to disinformation (Humphrecht et al., 2020, 2021).

In the following sections, a brief overview of the media-related situation in Lithuania is provided.

Lithuania is a small country, located in the northeastern coast of the Baltic Sea, with a population of 2.8 million. While the media in Lithuania remains free and economically viable,

the industry and the profession face diverse risks associated with digital changes (Jastramskis et al., 2017; Balčytienė & Juraitė, 2022). Lithuania's media policy demonstrates a high level of awareness of the risks associated with disruptive communication: various regulatory and governance solutions have been developed to counteract detrimental effects. State institutions actively promote interinstitutional cooperation, news media invest in fact checking operations, media literacy is incorporated into formal education, and media education is practiced in informal settings. Moreover, online media 'fractionalization' is minimal, indicating that radicalist narratives have hard time gaining traction in the public sphere (Balčytienė & Aslama-Horowitz, 2023).

In recent years, the need for media education and fact-checking training has become more than apparent. To address this need, many high schools in Lithuania have started to offer such types of lessons or sessions of informal trainings in MIL. Despite good intentions and support from the Government programs, the utmost challenge that schools face – is the lack of adequate knowledge of teachers and lack of suitable teaching materials (Balčytienė & Wadbring, 2017; Juraitė & Balčytienė, 2023). And this is understandable – the field of digital media education (technologies, tools, and instructional applications) is evolving very rapidly, as well as the problems (information manipulations, disinformation, hate speech, digital ethics issues, etc.) faced by all stakeholders who can be teachers, students, librarians or policymakers (Frau-Meigs, 2022; Jolls, 2022; Bennett et al., 2020; Stix & Jolls, 2020; Carlsson, 2019).

Despite the growing concern of online disinformation and manipulations in the country, the perceptions of the general population regarding their ability to spot and verify online sources yield some worrisome results. One of the recent Eurostat surveys shows (Figure 2) that only 1 out of 10 Lithuanians opted to check suspicious online information².

Furthermore, Eurobarometer surveys suggest that people in the Baltics are more often confronted with disinformation than in other European countries and close to 60% of respondents boldly acknowledge that they are confident in their ability to recognize disinformation (see Figure 3)³. Conversely, many of them have had experience of sharing misleading online content – what is more, as the DIGIRES⁴ pilot survey reveals, it is often done not only out of ignorance, but also for fun (see Figure 4).

² Eurostat (2021). How many people verified online information in 2021? <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20211216-3>.

³ Flash Eurobarometer (2022). News & Media Survey 2022. European Parliament. <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2832>.

⁴ DIGIRES (<http://digires.lt>) is an Association with founders in academic, media and education fields. The activities performed center around media literacy trainings, raising public awareness of and alertness towards the growth of digital harms.



Fig. 2. How many people verified online information in 2021? (Eurostat, 2021).

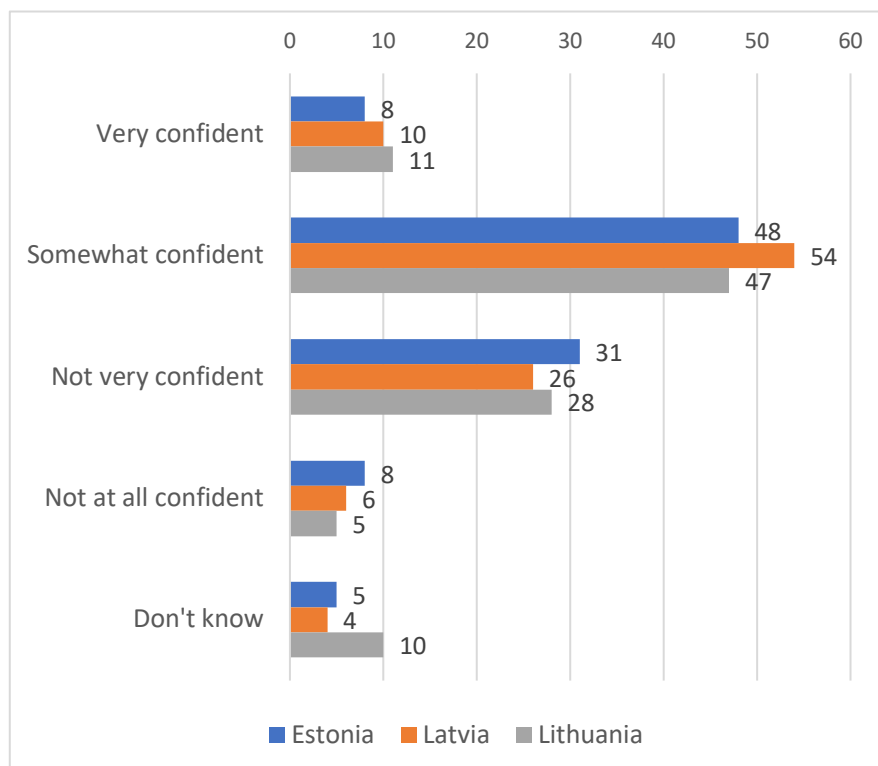


Fig. 3. Confidence to recognize disinformation, % (Eurobarometer, 2022).

In the framework of the DIGIRES project, a pilot survey was conducted in April-May 2022 (DIGIRES, 2022). Using quota sampling technique and face-to-face interviews, a sample of 339 respondents was collected and analyzed. The vast majority of the survey participants are Lithuanians (98%), majority of them are women (55%), people with higher education (57%), employed and living in cities (respectively, 69% and 69%). Even though the quota sampling does not provide with the representative results, the profile of survey respondents enables us to gain insight into the risks associated with relevant capacities.

The survey included questions on media use, perceptions of journalism and awareness of risks and challenges related to disinformation. Even though respondents demonstrated their concern about disinformation being an important national problem (78%), as well as high confidence in their ability to distinguish between the truth and lie (66%) (see Figure 4), 40% of them admitted that they had shared fake news online because of different reasons.

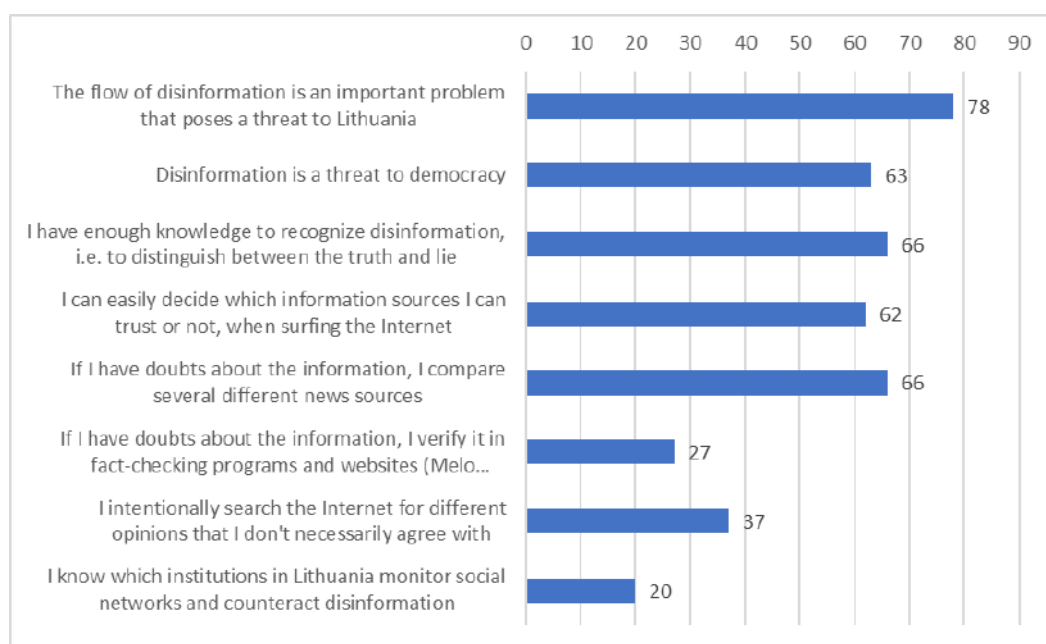


Fig. 4. Perceptions of disinformation (%). Results from DIGIRES pilot survey (DIGIRES MIL report, 2022).

On the other hand, we can observe a **growing demand for high-quality information** during periods of profound uncertainties and crises. Majority of the respondents (around 80%) appreciate quality journalism because of its key role in sustaining democracy and as a source of reliable news, extremely important in the times of crises (see Figure 5).

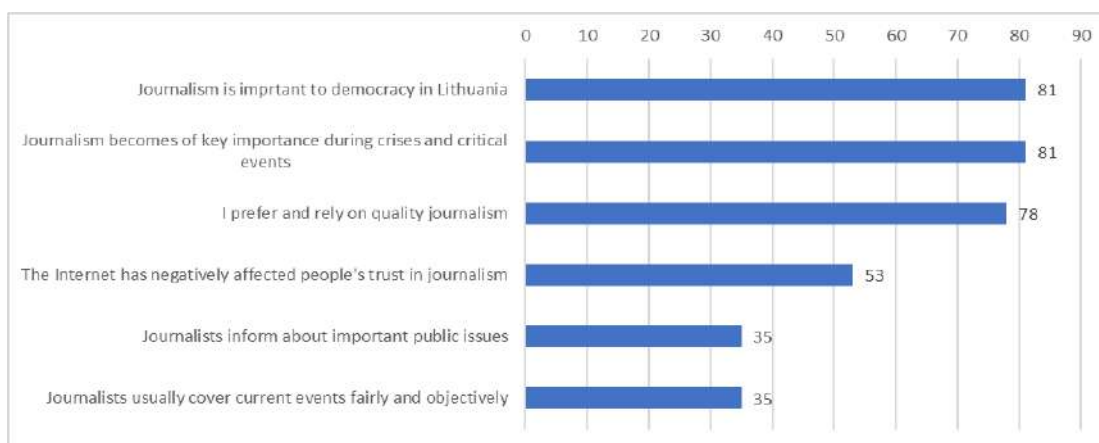


Fig. 5. Perceptions of journalism (%). Results from DIGIRES pilot survey (DIGIRES MIL report, 2022).

Looking at different categories across the national population, the most significant differences are seen in relationship to age, education, and social status. Younger and more educated audiences tend to be more active users of online news channels with more diversity in their general media repertoires, that include TV and radio, social networks, news portals, official information sites, international news sources and audiovisual media platforms. As digital natives, they are also more critical about the power of information manipulations and the scope of disinformation in the online media environment. However, even if these groups of people demonstrate higher confidence in their abilities to discern truth and identify lies, their resilience to information disruptions is limited and their capabilities (e.g. debunking skills, source verification techniques) are inadequate to prevent spread of malicious content.

To sum up, the urgency of media and information literacy (MIL) becoming a strategic guideline for all communication agents, not just for media and education sectors, remains a matter of high concern in Lithuania.

Fact-checking trainings for source verification: the DIGIRES/BECID approach to digital media literacy and civic resilience

In digitally mediated environments, everyone has a responsibility to be aware of the growing risks associated with information abundance, competing interests and manipulative content. Therefore, the **active role of individuals** and their informed response to the rising challenges of information disruptions is an important dimension of civic resilience (Stix & Jolls, 2020; McDougall, 2019).

As noted earlier, building civic resilience requires taking into account both structural conditions, such as economic viability and status of news media and epistemic communities, and individual capabilities, including support to democratic values, expressions of trust, and democratic experience. Following this line of thinking, the development of civic resilience is a communicative, i.e. 'discursive', process and should be understood as a specific **'social mindset' for countering disinformation**. This mindset encompasses the skills and resources available to individuals to identify risks, possess knowledge, and have the intention to respond responsibly to disinformation and malicious content.

To be properly informed and to participate in meaningful information exchanges, citizens must be trained not only in the critical assessments of content (Jolls, 2022; Moreno-Gil, V. et al., 2021; McDougall, 2019). They need to know the **techniques and open-access web tools** of

fact-checking; so they need to be digitally advanced and **self-efficacious users**. All these requirements imply that media literacy must be viewed as a strategic guideline towards becoming a digitally competent and resilient digital citizen.

In this section, media literacy training focussed on information verification approach in digital media literacy education as well as MIL competences, is presented.

In Autumn 2022, the DIGIRES/BECID team, consisting of journalism professors and disinformation specialists collaborated on the design of MIL training materials. The focus was specifically on teaching young people about journalism, responsible media use and developing capabilities of information checking that foster development of individual self-efficacy and social trust.

In October-November 2022, eighty-nine VMU students in Public Communication and 575 high schoolers of 9-10 grades from Kaunas city high schools (including S. Darius and S. Girėnas Gymnasium, VMU Ugnė Karvelis Gymnasium) participated in the series of trainings that focused on learning about different tools, techniques and strategies of verification. The main evaluation tool applied – an online questionnaire with closed and open questions – was specially designed for these trainings. When preparing the questionnaire, the objectives of the training, the content, the target group of trainees and the resources available for evaluation were taken into account. The questionnaire assessed media literacy and critical thinking competencies of the training participants.

No.	Groups of people and participating organizations	Facts
1.	University (Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas)	1 (VMU is a founding member of the DIGIRES association)
2.	High-schools in Kaunas: VMU partner High-schools – S. Dariaus ir S. Girėno gimnazija (https://dgg.lt), Ugnė Karvelis gimnazija (https://ukg.vdu.lt)	2
3.	VMU students studying Public Communication (3 rd year of BA studies with tracks in journalism, communication, and media designs)	89 students have formed 23 groups (of 4-5 students per group)
4.	Teachers: the DIGIRES (http://digires.lt) Training team working collaboratively and sharing professional expertise to develop joint knowledge	9 experts and specialists with expertise in audience reception studies, disinformation, media literacy, information operations, fact-checking, groupwork and classroom organization
5.	Supervisors and teachers from partner High-schools	3 supervisors and assistants

6.	Lesson “Media literacy for civic resilience: Learning source verification with fact-checking” (two parts, each 45 min)	2
7.	High schoolers (grades 9-10) from two schools in Kaunas attending classes on “Media literacy for civic resilience: Learning source verification with fact-checking” taught by VMU student groups	575

Table 1. Target groups and participating organizations in fact-checking trainings.

The core idea behind the training sessions of the Module, which included lectures, questionnaires, consultations, ‘lateral reading’ strategies, scenarios of fact-checking and source verification, and many more of the activities, was to propose a comprehensive yet focused approach to media literacy education. At the center of all activities was the aim to engage in learning and testing source verification strategies. Such an **approach is multilayered** as it covers complexities of the digital environment defined by platform-logic, types of disinformation narratives and information manipulations, the effects of disinformation on people (such as why disinformation is so persuasive), fact-checking tools, and design and presentation strategies for delivering checked and verified content to other users.

Students attended lectures focused on reporting skills, propaganda and disinformation, media development, and digital media literacy education. Students also received intensive training on fact-checking instruments, as well as the ‘lateral reading’ method and its practical applications.

At the end of the training, the students worked in groups and prepared lesson plans to be conducted during their two visits to Kaunas’ High-schools.

Finally, students produced media products with the tips on how to check digital information. These products and reflections on trainings were presented at the improvised conference, which took place at VMU in December 2022.

Perceptions of journalism: A starting ground for practicing media literacy

Evaluation results of VMU students and highschoolers, compared with the responses of the cohort of 18-29 year olds in the earlier presented DIGIRES pilot survey, are presented in Figures 6-7. As seen, all three groups of young people are similar by their use of social media as the main source of information. Also, perceptions of disinformation threats to Lithuania and democracy are very similar in these three groups.

The evaluation of journalism stood out the most among schoolchildren, of whom barely every second appreciates quality journalism and considers it as important for democracy. The greatest support for journalism was expressed by VMU students in Public Communication (see Figure 6).

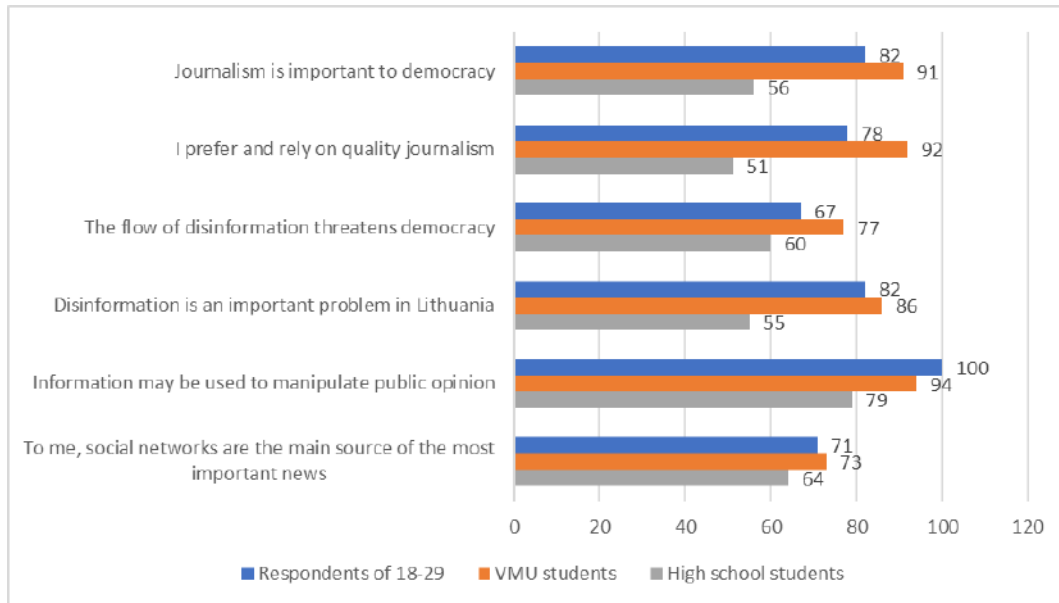


Fig. 6. Assessment of information sources and threats (%). Comparing responses between different groups of young users (DIGIRES MIL report, 2022).

Despite growing concern about informational threats, high self-confidence and self-conscious awareness is demonstrated among the young people who believe that they have sufficient knowledge and are able to recognize disinformation, select reliable sources of information and compare them to distinguish between false and truth. In this case, high school students rely a little less on their knowledge. However, despite certain differences in relation to information verification methods, and fact-checking programs, only one in three young people use them (see Figure 7). An even smaller number of youth could point to specific examples of fact-checking systems, programs, and information verification carried out by various organizations.

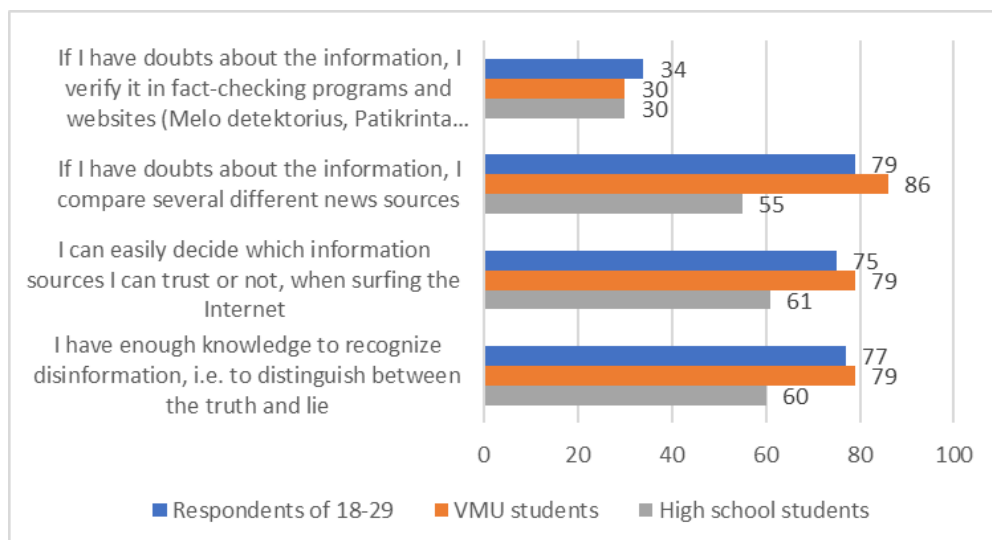


Fig. 7. Capacity to recognize disinformation (%). Comparing responses between different groups of young users (DIGIRES MIL report, 2022).

As noted above, developing civic resilience requires **self-directed learning**. In addition to standardized testing instruments, self-reflection was used in the training program. These provided feedback on students' learning experiences, their self-assessment on knowledge gained, and provided a better understanding of self-efficacy assessments for the digital challenges faced by the young generation. The open-ended reflections made it possible to supplement structured tests with in-depth questions and, accordingly, to expand the assessment results with authentic insights and comments. The answers shared by the trainees also revealed their digital media literacy and critical thinking skills, knowledge and perceptions of the information ecosystem. Here are some student comments about the importance of quality journalism and fact-checking skills:

*"The **lateral reading method** has become my main fact-checking tool that I have to use in practice when I encounter potential cases of misinformation on the Internet or in the media. In the past, even before I studied this subject, I even intuitively had to do something similar - when reading a news story that seemed to present inaccurate information, I would look for alternative sources, try to track down the authors and cited sources. In this case, we managed to **define this concept**, this mode as a real, existing anti-disinformation tool." (Andrius)*

*"At school, I showed the children a fake story I had created and even 70% of the students believed it. I realized that it is very easy to create and spread lies, but it is more difficult to **convince a person with arguments and facts** when he has already believed misleading information. <...> The spread and quantity of disinformation and false information is not decreasing, it is important to learn to distinguish lies from the truth. In order for us to be as little confused and lost as possible and for no one else to deceive us, **we must be constantly alert**." (Bernadeta)*

As a result of the media literacy training campaign, educational resource "Media literacy without Myths: How to Recognize the Truth and Resist Lies?"⁵ was developed by the DIGIRES team. Combining different knowledge and expertise, it is a universal Toolkit, easily adaptable for different potential MIL education multipliers, including youth workers and librarians, university and high school teachers, youth leaders and other active members of the educational and creative industries community.

Discussion

In digital environments, having a critical perspective on how one's information choices and learning are influenced by digital platform logics, as well as being aware of how individual actions can impact others (such as by sharing untrustworthy content), becomes of paramount significance.

However, upholding digital rights and acting responsibly requires more than just self-confidence and familiarity with verification tools and fact-checking techniques. It involves acquiring self-efficacy, engaging in responsible information use, and practicing ethical communication.

These competencies are in the realm of democratic capacities and MIL. Democratic capacities encompass principles of trust, security and equality. **Examples of good journalism can be utilized to study such democratic capacities.** Whereas MIL provides individuals with the

⁵ https://digires.lt/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Metodologinis_leidinys.pdf.

skills and capabilities to combat various information disruptions, such as disinformation and manipulation, which are pervasive in today's society.

Our study revealed that specially tailored learning conditions can significantly impact the development of an individual's overarching sense of self, a crucial element in both an individual's sense of personal and professional identity. Therefore, we may suggest that there is a need for better functioning conditions and collaboratively working infrastructures (such as partnerships between news media and other knowledge communities), as well as media literacy capabilities of individuals and resources to sustain civic resilience against disinformation and other types of information manipulations over extended periods.

In conclusion, the collaboratively designed and implemented MIL approach advocated by the DIGIRES team proves to be valuable in addressing the new calls of the Digital Age, which are characterized by challenges to facticity, ethics, and accountability. The good practices of DIGIRES/BECID will be further used to develop customized media literacy campaigns for different vulnerable groups, as well as in the training activities of other EDMO⁶ Hubs.

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