Recommendation of the AEGEE-Europe to the European Parliament based on results after the 10th edition of the project "Europe on Track"

Empowering Digital Citizens: A Proposal for Media Literacy in the Digital Age

Executive summary: Enhancing digital literacy among the population and youth is crucial for empowering individuals as both consumers and active contributors in the digital age, given the prevalence of misinformation and the rapidly evolving digital landscape. This is especially important as misinformation can distort public perception, influence political processes, and erode trust in institutions. To effectively address these challenges, comprehensive strategies that promote critical thinking, responsible online behaviour, and collaboration with technology platforms are essential, but should be complemented by integrating digital literacy education into both formal and non-formal settings that reaches all age groups, and particularly young people, by collaborating with youth organisations.

Background: In today's digital age, the widespread use of social media has fundamentally transformed how individuals access and interact with information. While this has created unprecedented opportunities for information sharing, it has also given rise to significant challenges, particularly the spread of vast amounts of misinformation, such as fake news, propaganda, hoaxes and clickbait which undermines public trust and democratic processes[1]. The large amount of disinformation during the covid pandemic has for example already been shown to make people less likely to follow public health guidance[2].

The European Union has recognized the critical need to address low media literacy among its

citizens to combat these challenges. Several initiatives, such as the European Media Literacy Week and the Media Literacy Awards, have been launched to promote critical thinking and media literacy skills across Europe. Additionally, the EU's "Shaping Europe's Digital Future" and "Digital Decade" strategies aim to harness the potential of digital technologies for the benefit of its citizens and businesses, with a strong emphasis on digital literacy , inclusion and skills.

Despite these efforts, significant gaps remain. Traditional educational approaches often fail to keep pace with the rapid evolution of digital content, as curricula are often only slow to change. In primary and secondary education levels, media literacy and digital skills is often not educated as a separate subject, and educators on those levels are recommended to be retrained on digital education in only half of the European education systems, even though it is necessary in all of them. And digital skills training by NGOs often focus only on underprivileged groups, meaning the upskilling of the general population by NGOs is lacking. This can all be found in The EIT Digital report, "The Future of Education for Digital Skills" (2024)[3]. There is a pressing need to involve young people and youth NGOs more directly in media literacy education. Youth are not only the most active users of digital platforms but also the most vulnerable to the impacts of misinformation[4], but that also makes them more adaptable to new technological changes. Youth NGOs, consisting of youth and being smaller than formal education systems, will by extension be able to better understand the educational needs on media literacy of young people. By understanding how fake news operates and developing robust media literacy skills, young people can become critical consumers and responsible producers of information.

Involving youth in combating misinformation requires a multifaceted approach that extends beyond formal education. Strategic partnerships with youth organisations are essential for the successful implementation of impactful non-formal educational initiatives. These initiatives will support young people in recognizing misinformation and foster a culture of critical thinking and responsible online behaviour. By leveraging the enthusiasm and creativity of youth, we can build a future where informed and empowered citizens actively contribute to a truthful and democratic digital environment.

Policy proposals:

The EU should improve educational opportunities on the topic of Media literacy. To this extent, The EU must:

1. **EU Youth Media Literacy Fund:** Establish a dedicated funding mechanism to support youth-led media literacy initiatives across the European Union.
2. **Standardised Curriculum:** Develop a framework for a standardised media literacy curriculum that can be adapted by individual Member States, ensuring essential knowledge and skills are imparted to all students.

3. **Teacher Training Requirements:** Establish minimum requirements for digital literacy training for educators across the EU, especially on primary and secondary education levels, fostering consistency and ensuring teachers are equipped to deliver effective media literacy instruction.
4. **EU-wide Media Literacy Campaign:** Launch a coordinated public awareness campaign across all Member States to raise public awareness of media literacy and its importance in combating misinformation.

Furthermore, to combat misinformation, especially related to democratic processes, and improve the public's trust, the EU must:

1. **Enhancing Transparency in Political Advertising:** Mandate clear disclosure of political ads' funding sources and target audiences.
2. **Combating Fake Accounts and Manipulative Content:** Establish clear guidelines for removing false content and partner with fact-checkers for verification.
3. **Educating Users on Disinformation Tools:** Provide users with tools to identify and flag misinformation, integrating fact-checking summaries directly into flagged content.
4. **Supporting Fact-Checkers:** Offer financial support and collaboration opportunities to independent fact-checking organisations.
5. **Integrating Critical Thinking Courses:** Integrate critical thinking courses into curricula to equip young people with skills to evaluate online information.
6. **Launching Social Media Literacy Campaigns and Workshops:** Conduct engaging campaigns and workshops to educate young people about manipulation tactics used online and foster self-awareness in online interactions.
7. **Establishing Data Access Partnerships:** Partner with academic institutions to provide researchers better access to data for studying disinformation.

These proposals aim to address the multifaceted challenges posed by misinformation and empower individuals to navigate the digital landscape responsibly. By fostering critical thinking skills and promoting collaboration with key stakeholders, we can build a society resilient to the influence of misinformation and ensure a future where truth prevails.

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