



REPORT ON ROUNDTABLE: CHALLENGES OF TACKLING DISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS

Erasmus+ Jean Monnet Module: Media Literacy and Active Citizenship - MELI Module

Thursday, 17. 3. 2022, 16.00

Location: **Hybrid event** – participation was possible via Zoom as well as physically at Faculty of Media (FAM), Leskoškova 9e, 1000 Ljubljana

Agenda:

- Introductory presentation of the MELI Module and its activities (prof. dr. Mateja Rek)
- Going digital – presenting MELI Online resources (prof. dr. Mateja Rek)
- Photo moment
- Presentations of prominent projects in Slovenia, addressing the topic: Challenges in dealing with misinformation and fake news & media literacy:
 - Dr. Sonja Merljak Zdovc - presentation of the Časoris project - <https://casoris.si/>
 - Dr. Blaž Rodič - Modeling the impact of the characteristics of individuals and the network on the dissemination of fake news in the social network - <https://www.fis.unm.si/modeliranje-vpliva-lastnosti-posameznikov-in-omrezja-na-diseminacijo-laznih-novic-v-social-network/>
 - Anja Bašin - Infrastructure program of the Faculty of Media - collection, management and archiving of data on media literacy - <http://pismenost.si/>
 - Dr. Alenka Pandiloska Jurak - presentation of the MELIA Observatory project - <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/melia-observatory>
- Discussion on:
 - conceptualization of misinformation, fake news, propaganda;
 - the impact of misinformation, false news and propaganda on the functioning of modern societies;
 - activities and tools to counter misinformation and false news;
 - measures at national and EU level to identify the credibility of information.



Introductory comments

The exposure of citizens to large scale disinformation, including misleading or outright false information, is a major challenge for a meaningful civic engagement and democratic deliberation of citizens in the EU. The aim of this roundtable was to address possible set of actions to tackle the spread and impact of online disinformation in Europe and ensure the protection of European values and democratic systems.

The roundtable created an opportunity for knowledge transfer, debate and networking, bringing together MELI Module's target groups on a national and local level – students, academic staff, practitioners working in the field of media literacy and civic engagement from civil society, educational institutions, public or governmental offices. Students of Faculty of Media, enrolled in all levels of education – BA, MA and PhD – were participating at the conference and also took an active role in its organisation, debate and post-festum activities.

We especially thank dr. Sonja Merljak Zdovc, Dr. Blaž Rodič, Anja Bašin and Dr. Alenka Pandiloska Jurak for their interesting and very informative presentations of media literacy projects on which they are working. We also thank discussants in the roundtable – Marko Puschner (Safe.si), Tomi Dolenc (Arnes), Petra Zupančič (Agency for Communication Networks and Services of the Republic of Slovenia, AKOS), dr. Mitja Reichenberg (FAM) in Andrej Drapal (Consensus), who greatly contributed to information sharing and to the quality of the debate.

To provide synergies with the existing and new Jean Monnet actions, other Slovenian Jean Monnet Chairs, Module, Project and Network coordinators participated as well (among them dr. Erika D. Uršič, dr. Urška Fric, dr. Victor Cepoi). A total of 69 people attended the round table.

Topic: Challenges of tackling disinformation and fake news

Fake news are fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent. Fake-news outlets, in turn, lack the news media's editorial norms and processes for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of information. Fake news overlaps with other information disorders, such as misinformation (false or misleading information) and disinformation (false information that is purposely spread to deceive people) (Lazar, 2018).

Coping with disinformation has become difficult to handle, regardless of whether fake news is planned, manipulative or even unplanned - when originating from ignorance, or from a firm, even fundamentalist beliefs. Learning how to use media and how to participate in dynamic processes of communication and creation processes of media messages have become a necessity and an integral part of social life (Golob, Makarovič and Rek, 2021). Media literacy seems to be crucial in that regard,



while it refers not just to skills enabling us to use new emerging media or create online messages, but also to understanding how media works in this changing environment, and to the ability to analyse and evaluate the media content (Livingstone, 2004). Furthermore, it also highlights the necessity to comprehend the intents and consequences of media messages.

In the past decade there was a significant increase in research, projects, workshops, trainings, events, mobility opportunities designed by various stakeholders of civil society as well as media producers, aiming to raise the awareness and provide media literacy competences of Slovenes. They vary on the scope of competences they provide, ranging from very specific competences, like developing skills in photography, story-telling, journalism, film production etc., to raising awareness about safety and privacy issues on internet or skills, that help build resilience to negative phenomena, produced by media landscape, like disinformation, hate speech or fake news, empowering youth to make informed decisions and take an active role in a society, either in political processes as active citizen or economical processes as conscious consumers. Many of these projects are delivered by trained professionals in media related topics, address current topics and issues and are well adapted to the fast changes in media landscape. They address relevant social issues dynamically arising with the fast technological advancements. Some of these projects were presented at the roundtable, in order for students to get a better idea of topical media literacy activities, projects and initiatives that are being currently undertaken in Slovenia.

Dr. Sonja Merljak Zdovc presented an award-winning free online newspaper for children – Časoris: *Our mission is to guide and inspire children in making informed decisions and becoming informed, active, compassionate and responsible citizens of the world. Children want to know what is going on around them. We offer them news they can trust – timely, relevant articles on current affairs for children, by children and in the name of children. Information is put in context and presented in kids-friendly language. We support them to understand the news and current affairs, to critically think about what they're reading, and to apply this knowledge to the real world. Every article is accompanied by questions for additional reflection and a glossary. We believe they have stories to tell, and we also offer them a platform for their voices – a place to discuss issues that are important to them. We believe in unbiased, accurate and ethical journalism. Without quality journalism, there is no democracy nor freedom* (source: <https://casoris.si/about-us/>, 8. 4. 22).

Dr. Blaž Rodič presented research project funded by Slovene Research Agency, which is being conducted at the Faculty of Information Studies in Novo Mesto - Modelling the influence of individuals' and network characteristics on dissemination of fake news in a social network:
The viral spread of digital misinformation has become so severe that the World Economic Forum (2018) considers it among the main threats to human society. There is worldwide concern over false news and the possibility that it can influence political, economic, and social well-being (Törnberg, 2018). The scale and rapidity of sharing fake news and misinformation is having an impact on democratic processes. False news can drive the misallocation of resources during terror attacks and natural disasters, the



misalignment of business investments, and can misinform elections (Vosoughi et al., 2018). In order to curtail the negative influence of the fake news as an evolving phenomenon, we should continuously strive to understand it better, and study the mechanisms underlying the rapid diffusion of fake news in social networks. Most of existing research on fake news and related phenomena focuses on the analysis of past events by examining the spread of topics in social networks. While the analysis of large datasets (e.g. 500 million tweets in Yang and Leskovec, 2010) is able to provide significant insight and enable the development of statistical models, and we have an understanding of the cognitive biases influencing individuals spreading fake news, we lack models that would allow us develop and test new theories to explain and predict this complex social phenomenon using rules that are at work at the level of individuals. We thus intend to fill the gap by developing a new, original ABM model to develop and test theories on robust rules that influence the dissemination of fake news in a social network at the level of individuals. The objective of the proposed research is to develop and test new theories on rules that influence the dissemination of fake news in a social network at the level of individuals, using a new, original ABM model. New theories will provide a better understanding of the fake news phenomenon, while the novel ABM model will facilitate understanding of the individual and social dynamics present in the social networks where fake news proliferate and allow us and other researchers develop and test new theories. We intend to develop a set of experiments to research the relationship between relative success (domination in news cycle) of fake news and a set of factors, i.e. individual and network characteristics, e.g. cognitive biases, political bias, connectedness, fact-checking time, presence of hubs or 'influencer' nodes and echo chambers. We intend to use existing research on the fake news phenomenon and agent based modelling to develop and test the theories, and validate them by comparing model results and large datasets from main social network and news websites. (source: <https://cris.cobiss.net/ecris/si/sl/project/18758>, 8. 4. 22).

Anja Bašin presented an Infrastructure program on media literacy which is being conducted at the Faculty of Media, funded by Slovene Research Agency - *The Infrastructural program of Faculty for media – collecting, managing and archiving data on media literacy collects data, analyses trends and indicators about media literacy in Slovenia throughout a longer period of time. It offers support for successful research at the Faculty of Media as well as in other national and international research. As part of the infrastructure programme, secondary data on the state of play and developments in media literacy in Slovenia is collected (e.g. databases on existing projects, programmes, activities, professional and scientific literature in the field, etc.). This allows knowledge transfers and provides IT support for networking, both domestically and abroad. This way, we offer professional and instrumental support to the programme's various stakeholders in an economically and technologically modern way. Also, primary data on the state of media literacy with focus on vulnerable groups of populations (like children, blind, visually impaired, deaf and hearing impaired and elderly persons) are being collected and disseminated. In the period 2022-2027, continuation of the collection of data and update existing databases (source: pismenosti.si, 8.4.22).*



Dr. Alenka Pandiloska Jurak presented a transnational EU funded MELIA Observatory project - *The main objective of the project is to improve democratic transnational governance by developing transnational media literacy observatory, based on cooperation between different relevant stakeholders. In many countries of the Danube region, the development of competencies of media literacy and active citizenship are far behind more developed parts of Europe. This observatory will serve as a mechanism for increasing media literacy and thus strengthening citizens' competencies what will contribute to the development of sustainable democracy. The main target groups are the youth and the people who work with them. For the purpose of strengthening it, the observatory will provide tools, available for both young people as well as their educators. The project will establish an observatory for media literacy that will provide instruments for scrutinizing media contents, training tools and policy recommendations for upgrading media literacy in relation to other civic skills (source: <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/melia-observatory>, 8. 4. 22).*

Project presentations were followed by discussion on: a.) conceptualization of misinformation, fake news, propaganda; b.) the impact of misinformation, false news and propaganda on the functioning of modern societies; c.) activities and tools to counter misinformation and false news; d.) measures at national and EU level to identify the credibility of information.

It was argued that a growing need for developing resilience to negative phenomena, produced by the media landscape, such as disinformation, hate speech, and fake news, has led to growing support of efforts aimed at improving critical thinking and digital media literacy, including training actions and the provision of tools to help users identify disinformation. The goal of such activities is to empower people to make informed decisions and take an active role in society. Improving critical thinking and digital media literacy has thus become of strategic importance for active citizenship. Credibility of information obtained and shared in digital media play an important role in these processes.

The importance of delivering quality media education was emphasized . Both formal educational systems as well as informal training should strongly support individuals to be critical, conscious and active users of digital services, seeking for credible information.

There is a high demand for tools and networks in the field of media literacy. Digitalisation, mass media, ICT are expanding, with many future opportunities to apply variety of tools supporting the quest for credible information sharing online.

Code of Practice on Disinformation lays out a set of worldwide self-regulatory standards for industry. Guidelines for obligations and accountability of online platforms in the fight against disinformation should be further developed as well as a variety of fact-checking services.

It is important to further support research on the impact of digitalisation on various aspects of societal and individual lives. Implementation of existing media literacy policies, tools and activities should be monitored and evaluated to inform further efforts in tackling disinformation and fake news.



Concluding remarks

Impact of Roundtable on Faculty of Media hosting the MELI Module was as follows:

- promotion of innovative teaching methods, techniques and technologies
- connecting academia to professionals, policy makers and civil society in the field of media literacy
- increased ability and interest in studying EU issues
- academic staff improved their experience in terms of working with different stakeholders, providing practical recommendations and gaining new ideas for applied research
- academic staff deepened their understanding of the relation of their EU related study courses with the crucial practical issues.

Impact on the students and learners benefiting from the MELI Module was as follows:

- through their presentation of the research and discussion within the roundtable, students were engaged in the learning-by-doing process, gaining their research experience, becoming more familiar with EU related content, concerning digital single market, and becoming more aware of how their academic skills can affect the other stakeholders and the community
- students gain additional skills relevant for their further professional and career development.

Impact on other organisations and individuals involved at local, regional, and national levels:

- networking, relationship building among relevant stakeholders in the field of media literacy
- knowledge transfers, good practices' exchange
- innovative teaching practices were exchanged between participants from FAM and other Slovenian HEIs, to identify cases of good practice, which affects the pedagogic practices of the other Slovenian and non-Slovenian academic institutions, particularly in the field of media studies
- local, regional and national representatives of the civil society were engaged in co-creative dialogue
- they become more familiar with the recent advances in the academic sphere related to the digital single market in the EU and new practical solutions for mitigating negative consequences of disinformation and fake news for democracy, active citizenship and good governance in the EU.

The participants were satisfied with the round table, which is also evident from the survey data intended for the evaluation of the event.



Reference:

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Lazer, D. M., Baum, M. A., Benkler, Y., Berinsky, A. J., Greenhill, K. M., Menczer, F., ... & Zittrain, J. L. (2018). The science of fake news. *Science*, 359(6380), 1094-1096.

Livingstone, S. (2014). Developing social media literacy: How children learn to interpret risky opportunities on social network sites. *Communications*, 39(3), 283-303.

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MELI MODULE

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JEAN MONNET MEDIA LITERACY

OKROGLA MIZA

četrtek, 17. 3. 2022 ob 16.00 uri

»Izzivi pri spopadanju z
dezinformacijami in
lažnimi novicami«

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