

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR JOINT ACTION FOR BUILDING SOCIETAL RESILIENCE TOWARDS MALIGN INFLUENCES OF DISINFORMATION

As a result of the research process and the data analysis within the activities in the fight against disinformation, supplemented through the process of open consultations between the Metamorphosis Foundation for Internet and Society, the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia (SEMM), the Association of Journalists of Macedonia, the Independent Trade Union of Journalists and Media Workers (SSNM), the Institute for Media and Analytics (IMA), the NGO Infocenter, the Media Development Center (MDC), the Citizens' Association MOST, the Institute of Social Sciences and Humanities – Skopje, CIVIL - Center for Freedom and a number of experts and representatives of the stakeholders from the civil, public and private sectors, the initial group of organizations proposes the following recommendations as a basis for joint social action in order to solve this social problem.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- A systemic approach is necessary in order to build a culture of critical opinion and social dialogue at all levels, starting from the education system, the relationship between institutions and stakeholders in all sectors, as well as at the family and individual level.
- The basic principle of this approach is inclusiveness in making joint decisions and building consensus in accordance with a process of extensive consultations with all stakeholders, based on the democratic principles of transparency, provision of information and consistent understanding of the scope of application, as well as voluntariness, equality and non-discrimination.
- Inclusivity is necessary, because building resilience to disinformation is an issue with multiple dimensions - from national security to promotion of freedom of the media, fight against corruption and strengthening the role of the civil society as a driver of democratization, and requires a multidisciplinary approach and proactive activity of the state institutions within their competences.
- Taking into consideration the high polarization and fragmentation in the society on many levels, when preparing interventions against disinformation, it is important to make data-based decisions about whether in a specific situation it is effective to apply a confrontational approach (through which one can strengthen polarization) or to strive to give all parties a chance to reconsider some of their values, perceptions and thoughts, by means of an extensive and inclusive social dialogue.
- The susceptibility of the population to disinformation campaigns, conspiracy theories and other alternative narratives is a consequence of structural factors, which should be addressed with specific programs, rather than with pathologization or practices of politicization, rejection or ignoring.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE STATE INSTITUTIONS

- The surge of disinformation is not only a problem of the media and the professional journalism, but it is also a wider security problem and for this particular reason the Government and the other competent institutions should lead the process of confronting it, whereby the shaping of solutions must be based on the democratic principles and human rights, which are proactively articulated by civil society organizations and media organizations.
- Institutions, in partnership with the media and the civil society organizations, should create public policies, strategies and mechanisms to increase the resistance to disinformation and to develop media literacy, bearing in mind that this security issue goes beyond the media sphere and must include joint action with all competent state institutions.
- Taking into consideration the multidisciplinary nature of the problem of disinformation, this process should be considered compatible and complementary to the process of implementing urgent reform priorities in the field of media, which are a necessary part of the process of accession to the European Union, as well as the need for urgent alignment of the legal framework with all relevant EU directives and regulations, especially those that address the issue of spreading disinformation, content that promotes hate speech, terrorism and other forms of crime.
- State institutions should initiate a process for creating and/or upgrading public policies, priority lists and/or strategies at the state level for the fight against disinformation, which will consider the experiences from the application of the “Proposed Plan for Resolute Action against Spreading Disinformation”, as well as the needs for its upgrade in conditions of a pandemic, and changed geopolitical and other circumstances. Regardless of the form of the documents, the accompanying action plans must contain specific objectives, responsible institutions, allocated resources and deadlines.
- State institutions should upgrade the codes of ethics and internal procedures that refer to employees in the institutions in order to incorporate the fight against disinformation as a core value and further development of appropriate work procedures and security protocols.
- It is necessary to further strengthen the resistance to disinformation among state and public officials by upgrading the capacity building systems, by integrating content from this field into the curricula for professional upgrading, in order to raise the awareness and acquire specific skills in the field of media and digital literacy.
- All state institutions should increase the level of proactive transparency and openness, which will enable direct and more efficient support for the efforts of the media, services and organizations, which work directly to detect disinformation.
- State institutions, from the legislative and executive power, should have a proactive role in strengthening the financial capacities of the media and media organizations and in creating a favourable environment for financial investments in the media industry. It is particularly important to invest in strengthening self-regulation mechanisms and raising awareness of the role of the media as drivers of democracy in the society. The improvement of the situation of the media should be treated as a strategic goal.

- State institutions from the legislative and executive power should take a proactive role in creating a favourable/supportive legal and social environment for strengthening the financial capacities of the media and media organizations, as well as in creating a favourable environment for financial investments in the media industry. It is particularly important to improve the legal conditions for investments aimed at strengthening self-regulation mechanisms, as well as raising awareness of the role of the media as drivers of democracy in the society, and the improvement of the situation of journalism should be treated as a strategic goal.
- The Government of the Republic of North Macedonia should complete the implementation of the second part of the 2019 Action Plan, titled “Proactive Measures”, specifically:
 - To establish a structure - a working group for consultations and decision-making, whose members will include representatives of all stakeholders from the civil sector and the relevant institutions;
 - To find a model for conducting educational campaigns of high public interest aimed at increasing resistance to disinformation, according to a transparent and accountable model, which will prevent corruption of the media through the overflow of state money.
 - To continue the discussion with the media and the civil society organizations on the manner of support for the production of media content of public interest, especially educational contents on the topic of fight against disinformation based on the principles of transparency and accountability.
 - To continue and strengthen the cooperation with all professional media and organizations that work to verify facts and/or unmask disinformation, as a key aspect of mechanisms for transparency and public relations.
- The state institutions should initiate a process to create a strategic framework document that will provide specific steps for the fight against disinformation, which will also consider the experiences from the application of the Action Plan.
- The executive and legislative power should provide increased budgetary support for scientific research on the presence and the effects of disinformation on the society.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE POLITICIANS

- Political parties should not use disinformation as an element of political struggle and they should form (or upgrade) the internal party structures and mechanisms, codes of ethics and procedures aimed at building resistance to disinformation among their membership and the general public.
- Individual politicians, as part of their legitimate political struggle, should not spread disinformation through all forms of public communication that are available to them, such as the parliamentary rostrum, social networks, media appearances, party newsletters and in daily contacts with the citizens.
- Political parties should refrain from using organized structures on social networks (troll farms) for orchestrated malicious dissemination of disinformation, hate speech and incitement to violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PRIVATE COMPANIES, MARKETING AGENCIES AND OTHER ADVERTISERS THAT ENABLE MEDIA HOUSES TO OPERATE

- Advertisers should upgrade their codes of ethics and policies for corporate social responsibility with criteria that will enable regular check (monitoring) whether their funds are being used for sponsoring media that spread disinformation.
- Following past experiences and good practices, the business community, that is, advertisers, should consider the existing self-regulatory solutions, including the register of professional media “ProMedia”, whose members are obliged to meet the minimum of professional standards.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE INDIVIDUAL MEDIA, MEDIA WORKERS, THAT IS, JOURNALISTS

- Media workers, as well as the media as a whole, should advocate for increased compliance with the professional and ethical standards in journalism, as well as increased application of self-regulation tools.
- The media should actively participate in the fight against all types of disinformation and in the promotion of media literacy by increasing the quality and variety of media programs of informative and educational nature.
- Media owners and management should invest in capacity building for fact-checking before publication, which will make the media themselves more competitive and recognized as quality media by their audiences.
- The media that do not have their own content intended for the fight against disinformation, should commit to transmit content produced by fact-checking services or media that regularly expose and unmask disinformation within their operation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PROFESSIONAL MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS AND RELATED BODIES

- It is necessary to increase the cooperation between professional media organizations, as well as other institutions relevant to the media sector.
- It is exceptionally important to strengthen the promotion of self-regulation mechanisms as a means through which citizens have the opportunity to alert to abuses by unethical media.
- Fact-checking, apart from being a journalistic value, should also be affirmed as a form of self-regulation within the media community, as well as a means of encouraging public debate about the quality of media content and a type of informal education wherewith professional standards reach a wider audience in a practical way.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

- Civil society organizations should continue to create and accumulate knowledge related to the problem of disinformation, while building public archives of content that will collect knowledge and explanations about exposed manipulations and disinformation, which will be published under licenses that allow use by other bodies.
- As many organizations as possible should endeavour to start their own projects wherewith they will work on public awareness of disinformation or to join projects in the part of the non-governmental sector that is already working on debunking disinformation. Simultaneously, they should work on diversifying the target groups in their communities, which they have determined as the most susceptible to the negative impact of disinformation. Different approaches should be contemplated in order to explain the harmfulness of disinformation among different age groups, with a particular emphasis on young people.
- Civil society organizations should create content and promotional campaigns that present fact-based positive narratives to the public, in which measures to prevent the spread of the epidemic and the benefits of vaccination will be presented, in order to reduce the vaccine hesitancy, but also the opposition to the use of vaccines that protect against Covid-19, smallpox and other vaccine-preventable diseases. This is particularly urgent considering that diseases that were eradicated through vaccination are reoccurring in some neighbouring countries.
- An increasing number of local and grassroots civil society organizations should be involved in the efforts to increase media literacy and critical thinking in their communities, at all levels: through curricula that they will create independently or in collaboration with the academic community, specially developed for the fight against disinformation related to medicine (such as vaccines) and the health system, referring to the current practice of fact-checkers in the country. Specifically, this means cooperation between journalists and experts specialized in the fields that are the subject to disinformation, whose professional knowledge should be the basis of debunking.
- Civil society organizations that operate in the field of media literacy and fact-checking will increase their influence and opportunities for cooperation by joining the national Media Literacy Network and the regional or international networks engaged in the fight against disinformation.
- Civil society organizations should start or intensify their activities for lobbying and representation before the government in order to increase the support of public and state institutions in the fight against disinformation and the strengthening of media literacy and critical opinion, as well as to strive for the appropriate state bodies (prosecutor's office, judiciary) to enforce relevant laws against impunity for crimes that threaten the freedom of expression and the citizens' right to proper and accurate provision of information.