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TRANSFORMING MEDIA EDUCATION TO COUNTER DISINFORMATION: FACT-CHECKING, STRATCOM, AI

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Introduction. Disinformation is a major threat to democracy, exacerbated by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Artificial Intelligence (AI) amplifies the spread of propaganda. Media education, by fostering critical thinking, is key to countering hybrid threats and requires an innovative approach in the digital age.

Research Objective. The study aims to identify key strategies and approaches for countering disinformation within university media education.

Methodology. The study employs analysis, synthesis, and content analysis methods, enabling the identification of key transformations in media education and the examination of European university curricula integrating media, digital, and AI literacy, as well as strategic communications.

Results. The role of media literacy as a multidimensional competency was explored, encompassing access, analysis, evaluation, and content creation, as well as the development of critical thinking in digital environments. Practices integrating fact-checking, strategic communications, and digital literacy into educational processes were analyzed. Key trends include combining media education with practice, interdisciplinarity, digitalization of learning, and the introduction of AI literacy to address contemporary challenges.

Conclusions. The study underscores the critical role of integrating media literacy into education as a factor in building resilience against informational threats. The rise of AI necessitates supplementing traditional media education with digital and AI literacy. Major trends include the integration of media education with practice, interdisciplinarity, and digitalization. Beyond fact-checking, strategic communications and counter-narratives are increasingly vital in combating disinformation. Particular emphasis is placed on AI literacy, which includes understanding AI principles, ethics, and societal impacts to prepare for digital challenges.

Keywords: *media education, media literacy, disinformation, AI, fact-checking, narrative, strategic communications*

Introduction. In recent years, disinformation has emerged as a primary threat to democratic societies, particularly amid the pandemic, political processes, and Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine [4].

AI technologies have further enhanced the ability to spread propaganda and disinformation [15]. In 2018, the European Commission introduced the EU Code of Practice

on Disinformation, the first self-regulatory tool to encourage companies to collaborate in addressing this issue. The updated Code includes 44 commitments and 128 specific measures, emphasizing the pivotal role of citizen education [12]. Media education, as a tool for fostering critical thinking and information literacy, plays a crucial role in countering hybrid threats and manipulative informational influences.

Strategies to combat disinformation encompass a range of active measures, including media literacy, fact-checking, and debunking [1], [9], inoculation [22], and preemptive actions aimed at exposing and refuting misleading content [1].

However, the education system faces challenges due to technological transformations, highlighting the need to equip individuals with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to navigate the new digital reality [27]. Effective countering of disinformation requires an innovative approach in media education, combining modern teaching practices: mastering and understanding digital technologies and AI, developing fact-checking skills, critical thinking, and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Given the growing focus on this issue, a key question arises: what trends and tendencies are observed in modern media education, and what strategies and approaches are applied in international educational practices to counter disinformation? Analyzing these approaches not only identifies effective teaching models but also enables their adaptation to national contexts.

Recent studies highlight the increasing importance of an interdisciplinary approach to media literacy in European universities. Contemporary teaching of educational components related to disinformation extends beyond traditional media and communication studies, encompassing a range of disciplines where cognitive and critical approaches coexist: behaviorism, cognitivism, constructivism, socio cultural nuances, discourse analysis, practice theory, media studies, library and information sciences, pedagogy, and psychology [9].

Scholars like Łukasz Tomczyk [36], Sonia Livingstone [23], and Ana Pérez-Escoda [30] emphasize the importance of digital literacy and cybersecurity as integral components of modern media education. Fact-checking in higher education, highlighting the significance of practical information verification skills, is analyzed by Tekoniemi, S. [34], and Marta Pérez-Escolar [31]. The development of critical thinking as a component of media literacy and innovative teaching methods, including interactive tools, gamification, and simulations, are explored by William Shi [33]. Several studies focus on methods for measuring the effectiveness of media literacy and educational interventions. Notably, Mihailidis and Thevenin investigated what students learn in media literacy courses and whether media education fosters active citizenship and resilience to informational threats [26].

Research Objective. The article aims to determine key strategies and approaches to countering disinformation within university media education. Key tasks include identifying the main directions and thematic focuses of media education in the context of countering informational threats and outlining existing approaches that promote critical thinking and information literacy skills.

This research is highly *relevant* due to the pressing need to update educational approaches in light of the fast-paced advancement of AI and digital technologies, coupled with the escalating challenges of disinformation. Integrating the most effective teaching methods is crucial to effectively tackle these issues. This study sheds light on how educational institutions can modify curricula and teaching strategies to develop media literacy, boost resilience against disinformation, and promote the responsible use of emerging technologies – ultimately fostering informed citizenship and contributing to a healthier information landscape.

The scientific novelty lies in identifying new effective forms and directions of media education in the context of rapidly evolving digital transformation trends, which contribute to strengthening resilience against disinformation. The study also actualizes the problem of flexibility in adapting educational strategies to emerging technological challenges and the evolving landscape of information threats.

Object of the study – educational practices in media education aimed at countering disinformation. *Subject* of the study – strategies for transforming media education, particularly the integration of fact-checking, strategic communications, and digital literacy considering the impact of artificial intelligence.

Research Methods. The study employs methods of description, literature analysis, synthesis, and content analysis to identify key trends and transformations in media education and to assess the extent to which educational approaches in this field have been studied. To achieve the research objective, data on curricula and courses were collected from open sources and university websites. The analysis included a systematic examination of thematic content to reveal patterns and emerging topics. We identified overall characteristics and trends. Summarizing the obtained information enabled drawing specific conclusions on the research topic, particularly concerning the integration of media, digital, and AI literacy, as well as strategic communications, into European university education.

Discussion results. Numerous studies and international reports identify media literacy as an effective tool for protecting against informational threats and disinformation. According to the European Commission, media literacy is «the ability to access media, understand and critically evaluate various aspects of media and media contexts, and create communication messages in different contexts» [13, 12].

Sonia Livingstone defines media literacy as «the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create messages in various contexts» [23]. This approach positions media literacy as a multidimensional competency encompassing practical, cognitive, and critical aspects of interacting with media content in the digital ecosystem. *Access, analysis, evaluation,* and *creation form the basis* for identifying societal educational needs and shaping media education objectives, as they enable teaching not only technical media skills but also the critical thinking necessary for analyzing sources, recognizing manipulations, and verifying information accuracy. Many researchers view media literacy as a tool for empowerment and the development of critical citizenship. They argue that media literacy should enable individuals to critically navigate the media landscape, distinguish reliable information from disinformation, and foster an informed and active society capable of participating in democratic processes [16]. In this context, fact-checking and information verification skills often become key components of media literacy.

Integrating media literacy into educational programs is critical for developing essential skills in the digital age, as media education forms the foundation of a new literacy required for life, work, and civic participation in the 21st century [7]. However, building resilience to disinformation requires moving beyond traditional media literacy by incorporating interdisciplinary components, including strategic communications, digital literacy, AI literacy, and other relevant areas.

Educational Practices and Fact-Checking. Studies of professional fact-checkers’ practices show that the information verification process typically includes identifying claims for verification, contacting the author, searching for and debunking questionable information (including detecting digital forgeries in photo and video content), consulting experts, and publicly presenting verification results, alongside contextual analysis. This directly influences educational needs and program content [6, 524], [5].

Researchers emphasize the importance of teaching students to understand the concepts of disinformation and misinformation, which fosters a better understanding of different approaches to handling harmful content. Emphasis is placed on studying audience behavioral patterns in cases of misinformation dissemination and assessing targeted threats and technologies in cases of disinformation [19], [38].

Fact-checking education is grounded in a practice-oriented approach, aimed at developing students’ core knowledge and skills. Siling Tekoniemi identifies these as operational in the article Fact-checking as Digital Media Literacy in Higher Education.

- Mastery of the digital environment and verification tools: Involves training in verification platforms, search operators, databases, and digital trace analysis tools to identify informational threats.
- Critical evaluation of media materials using fact-checking methods: Includes analyzing news, social media posts, videos, and advertisements, considering source reliability and identifying logical fallacies.
- Preparation of analytical materials based on fact-checking results: Involves creating structured, evidence-based reports with categorization such as «true/false».
- Awareness of personal media attitudes and critical media literacy: Entails reflection on personal media consumption habits and biases, assessing disinformation risks, and developing information hygiene skills.
- Application of acquired knowledge to personal and professional tasks: Enables integrating fact-checking skills into professional activities, civic engagement, and daily practices, enhancing decision-making based on reliable information [34].

Methods for developing critical content analysis in the context of verification include checklist analysis and lateral reading.

- Checklist analysis involves using a list of questions to evaluate a single text or media material (e.g., photo, video), such as questions about the author, publication date, source references, and presentation style.
- Lateral reading (verifying content while reading) involves evaluating a text in a broader context, considering its connections to other materials, data sources, audiences, publication platforms, and potential biases [18]. This skill encourages students to seek additional sources to compare information and assess reliability, rather than focusing solely on a single text. For example, instead of thoroughly reading a suspicious article, a student searches for what other credible media or experts say, forming a broader informational context.

A foundational element in fact-checking courses is the use of OSINT (Open Source Intelligence) tools – methods for collecting, analyzing, and verifying information from open sources. Tools like InVID, Wayback Machine, ExifTool, TinEye, and OSINT Combine enable comprehensive investigations, including verification of photo and video materials.

Pre-2020 studies highlighted challenges affecting fact-checking development in media education, including a shortage of qualified media education specialists in EU countries [32], insufficient programs addressing diverse educational needs [19], [28] and an overall underestimation of media education's role [32]. Since 2022, fact-checking education in European universities has become more systematic. For instance, the University of Bologna (Italy) offers a master's course on investigative journalism and fact-checking, teaching verification tools and journalistic content creation. Rey Juan Carlos University (Spain) runs a program combining journalism, data, fact-checking, transparency, and AI. Eötvös Loránd University (Hungary) launched a summer school on countering disinformation, covering professional and legal aspects of digital truth. The CIVIS European University Alliance offers an online course on recognizing and debunking fake news. Babeș-Bolyai University (Romania) teaches media education with a fact-checking focus in its master's program. Leiden University (Netherlands) implements an Erasmus+ project for a postgraduate program on disinformation and fact-checking.

In November 2023, the first European Congress on Disinformation and Fact-Checking, organized by UC3M MediaLab and Ukraine's StopFake, strengthened collaboration among academics, journalists, and policymakers in combating disinformation.

A persistent trend is the close collaboration between universities and practitioners. Due to the rapid evolution of technologies and disinformation tools, educators must be actively engaged in verification processes. Consequently, most universities involve practitioners in teaching fact-checking and partner with fact-checking organizations.

Ukraine's experience in integrating fact-checking into academia is unique. Since 2014, the Mohyla School of Journalism at NaUKMA has hosted StopFake, a fact-checking proj-

ect that is a member of the IFCN and META third-party fact-checking partner. In 2017, a «Fact-Checking» course was developed and introduced, one of the first academic courses of its kind in Ukraine. The course combines theoretical foundations with practical information verification skills, engaging students in real-world case studies.

Strategic Communications and Narratives for Countering Disinformation: Media Education Approaches. Effective communication is a key component of countering disinformation. Informing audiences, as a tool for stable interaction among state institutions, media, civil society, and other stakeholders, and building trust, is particularly significant during war and crises [14]. This involves studying communication and crisis management theories, the role of strategic narratives in shaping public opinion to counter informational attacks, and analyzing governmental and intergovernmental anti-disinformation campaigns. Narrative analysis and framing methods are used to identify and construct counter-narratives. Three key parameters for identifying informational influence are [29]:

- Narrative strategies: allows identifying key messages, frames, and narrative structures in disinformation campaigns and developing counter-narratives.
- Target audiences: works with groups targeted by influence, analyzing their vulnerabilities and needs.
- Influence techniques: application of analyzing social, psychological, and digital tactics, including social engineering methods.

Content areas also include threat forecasting and prevention, such as filling information gaps, proactive communication, preempting false and manipulative narratives, and disseminating open government data through accessible, clear, and timely sources [28].

In European universities, strategic communications and narratives for countering disinformation are integrated into curricula through master’s programs, specialized modules, certification courses, and summer schools.

For example, King’s College London’s MA in Strategic Communications explores propaganda and psychological operations globally, studying crisis communications and their role in countering disinformation. Lund University (Sweden) has students analyze digital strategies and disinformation flows, developing communication plans with risk analysis.

Special attention is given to «frame analysis» and «narrative analysis» methods, enabling the identification of key disinformation campaign messages and crafting strategic responses to enhance societal information resilience. Training through crisis simulations, developing «prebunking» and «debunking» strategies, and practicing communication under informational security threats are integral to these programs.

Digital Literacy in the AI Era. Digital literacy is the ability to find, evaluate, use, create, and share content using information technologies and the internet [25]. Unlike basic digital skills, digital competence involves a deeper understanding of digital tools and environments and the ability to integrate digital technologies effectively into various activities [25]. A new trend is the emergence of «AI literacy,» which researchers view as a critical element in transforming educational conditions and practices and a key aspect of countering digital threats [25].

Michal Cerný, in «AI Literacy in Higher Education: Theory and Design», notes that AI literacy spans all levels of Bloom’s taxonomy [8]. Students not only use AI but also solve tasks with it in the future. Key components of AI literacy include knowledge, application, creation, and evaluation of AI tools, as well as ethics.

Researchers view AI literacy as a competency for daily life, the labor market, or a blend of technical skills with a socio-ethical dimension, depending on the educational context [35]. In the context of generative AI, Long and Magerko proposed a conceptual framework for AI literacy, including five key themes: what AI is; what AI can do; how AI works; how it should be used; and how people perceive AI [24]. For each theme, they identified necessary competencies, emphasizing data literacy as a foundation for understanding AI principles.

Key Educational Needs in Media Education for Countering Disinformation:

- Understanding generative AI characteristics: Educational programs should define key properties of generative AI – high accessibility, technological features, content specifics, and persuasive capabilities—to enhance understanding of information dissemination and digital threat nature.
- Knowledge of AI-driven social media processes (social bots and their impact):
- Key questions include understanding social bots – automated algorithms creating content and interacting on social media, often spreading unreliable information – and their role in amplifying viral fake news.
- Ability to identify and analyze AI-generated content (e.g., deepfakes): Educational components involve mastering skills to recognize generative AI techniques, such as deepfakes, and understanding platforms where they are commonly disseminated, enabling critical evaluation of potentially artificial or manipulated content.
- Ethics, transparency, and responsibility: Fostering responsible behavior as content creators and consumers, developing critical attitudes toward automated content, particularly regarding manipulation, privacy, copyright, and disinformation [10].

When designing teaching and learning on AI and disinformation, building curricula with tools integrating media education with technological practices is crucial. Researchers also emphasize that universities are shifting from teacher-centered learning to active learning with digital technologies, creating a new educational model where digital devices are integral. This holistic approach better prepares students to navigate the digital environment effectively [2], [20].

Conclusions. Integrating media literacy into educational programs is a critical condition for building resilience against informational threats. However, modern challenges, particularly those related to AI development, require supplementing traditional media literacy with new interdisciplinary components. Key trends in the educational environment include enhanced integration of media education with practice, interdisciplinarity, and digitalization of the learning process. Beyond general media literacy and fact-checking education, there is a growing emphasis on developing effective communication skills. Strategic communications and counter-narrative development are becoming essential directions in media education for building robust defenses against disinformation.

European university programs increasingly incorporate crisis communication theories, narrative analysis methods, and anti-propaganda strategies, contributing to societal information resilience.

In the context of digital transformation, digital literacy – and its emerging component, AI literacy – is gaining relevance. AI literacy involves understanding AI's logic and principles, ethical considerations, and societal impacts. A critical aspect of AI literacy is the ability to recognize and analyze content created by generative AI, such as deepfakes, which is essential for countering modern informational threats.

The study's findings can serve as a foundation for universities updating or developing media and digital literacy programs in the context of countering informational threats, fostering teaching practices focused on building students' resilience to disinformation and critical thinking.

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ТРАНСФОРМАЦІЯ МЕДІАОСВІТИ ДЛЯ ПРОТИДІЇ ДЕЗІНФОРМАЦІЇ: ФАКТЧЕКІНГ, СТРАТЕГІЧНІ КОМУНІКАЦІЇ, ШІ

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Вступ. Дезінформація – одна з головних загроз демократії, загострена пандемією та війною в Україні. ШІ посилює поширення пропаганди. Медіаосвіта, формуючи критичне

мислення, є ключем до протидії гібридним загрозам і потребує інноваційного підходу у цифрову епоху.

Мета дослідження полягає у визначенні ключових стратегій та підходів до протидії дезінформації в університетській медіаосвіті.

Методологія. У дослідженні використано методи аналізу, синтезу та контент-аналізу, що дозволило виявити ключові трансформації медіаосвіти та проаналізувати навчальні програми європейських університетів із інтеграцією медіа-, цифрової та ШІ-грамотності, а також стратегічних комунікацій.

Результати. Досліджено роль медіаграмотності як багатовимірної компетентності, що включає доступ, аналіз, оцінювання та створення контенту, а також розвиток критичного мислення у цифровому середовищі. Проаналізовано практики інтеграції фактчекінгу, стратегічних комунікацій та цифрової грамотності в освітній процес. Визначено основні тренди, зокрема поєднання медіаосвіти з практикою, міждисциплінарність, цифровізацію навчання та впровадження ШІ-грамотності як відповіді на сучасні виклики.

Висновки. Дослідження підкреслює роль інтеграції медіаграмотності в освіту як ключового фактора стійкості до інформаційних загроз. Розвиток ШІ потребує доповнення традиційної медіаосвіти цифровою та ШІ-грамотністю. Основні тренди – поєднання медіаосвіти з практикою, міждисциплінарність і цифровізація. Окрім фактчекінгу, зростає значення стратегічних комунікацій і контрнаративів у боротьбі з дезінформацією. Особливу увагу приділено ШІ-грамотності, що включає розуміння принципів роботи ШІ, етики та впливу на суспільство для підготовки до цифрових викликів.

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