

Enabling civil society to combat MIS- AND DISINFORMATION

Policy brief #2

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At a glance



Why build civil society capacity to tackle misinformation?

- › **The fight against mis and disinformation is complex and highlights problems posed by technical infrastructures and business models that underpin platforms, online media and search engines, as well as the low levels of trust in government and media more generally.** Efforts to combat misinformation rely on trust and credibility with a wide range of audiences, and on tools and technologies that can be used by those audiences to enable change.
- › **Civil society organisations can play an important role in the effort to combat misinformation, but often lack funding and/or expertise to address problems that may be technological rather than social.** Nonetheless, many civil society organisations already deliver important activities to combat misinformation, including fact checking, media literacy education, and research and observatory initiatives.
- › **Civil society organisations can add depth and breadth to efforts to combat misinformation.** They are often embedded in communities and social trends. They can be more credible than authorities and traditional media, and they can reach underserved audiences and communities.
- › **Participatory civil society organisations can empower cohesive communities.** Inclusive social capital that empowers people and bridges divides is a key foundation for any sustainable and broad-based effort.
- › **However, civil society organisations need the support of public and private partners** to deliver these benefits, including tools and resources to equip them to meet the challenge of misinformation.



How can strengthening civil society capacity to tackle misinformation be achieved?

- › **Work with civil society organisations as part of broad-based efforts to combat misinformation.** Public authorities, media companies, and platforms should work with civil society organisations as partners to design and implement multi-pronged strategies, campaigns and interventions. Activities may include structured policy dialogue with civil society, joint awareness raising campaigns, fact checking collaborations, and education and training initiatives.
- › **Empower civil society organisations to challenge misinformation and develop media literacy.** Civil society organisations need support to build the capacity and capabilities needed to combat misinformation. Support includes funding for a range of organisations and activities, tools and techniques to challenge misinformation, and civil society partnerships and coalitions, and supporting partnerships with education institutions.
- › **Establish partnerships based on shared principles of collaboration, transparency, and inclusive civic and democratic values.** Partnerships between civil society authorities and society and media or other organisations must be credible and sustainable. This includes transparent and shared aims of fostering open and democratic societies.

Background

In September 2023, Google commissioned Ecorys and LSE's Department of Media and Communications to carry out a *Media Literacy Policy Study*. This document is one of a number of positioning papers informed by the research findings. The recommendations build on data collection and analysis carried out between September 2023 and April 2024.

Further information about the study, including the methodology and full set of reporting outputs, is available on the dedicated web page:

www.ecorys.com/MediaLiteracyEducation

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position of Google or its partner organisations.

What is the role of civil society in combating mis and disinformation?

The fight against mis- and disinformation is complex and highlights problems posed by technical infrastructures and business models that underpin platforms, online media and search engines, as well as the low levels of trust in government and media more generally

Mis- and disinformation¹ are key challenges facing Europe.² Disinformation campaigns and the proliferation of misleading information online present a challenge to the cohesiveness and integrity of European democracy and societies. The need to take decisive action has been recognised through a range of European policy and regulatory initiatives including the Audio-Visual Media Services Directive, the Digital Services Act, the European Democracy Action Plan, and the 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation.

Increasingly the fight against misinformation is being developed through a broad range of measures and partnerships. Public authorities, education organisations, media organisations, and online platforms, are all supporting a range of preventative and reactive measures.³ However, these efforts face a variety of complex challenges, including:

- › The need to support access to trusted sources whilst empowering people to confidently appraise and identify accurate information.
- › Raising awareness of the risks of misleading and fake information without further undermining general trust and credibility of news and information sources.
- › Delivering actions and interventions that empower active and legitimate civic and political discourse in the context of contested and potentially sensitive topics.

Civil society organisations can play an important role in the effort to combat misinformation

The importance of civil society organisations to these efforts has been increasingly recognised by policy makers and media organisations.⁴ Civil society organisations can include a wide range of organisations from large transnational nongovernmental organisations through to community based and grass roots participatory organisations and initiatives and address a range of themes and topics that are relevant to the fight against mis- and disinformation. Whilst traditionally CSOs were associated with organisation in person, civil society organisations organise and operate through a variety of formal and informal online communities and settings.

1 In this policy brief, misinformation is taken to mean inaccurate or misleading information that may be created or shared inadvertently, whilst disinformation is information that is deliberately intended to mislead, including as part of organised campaigns. Whilst there are important distinctions, in practice there is a close relationship between the two dimensions, particularly where modern disinformation campaigns rely on cultivating and or amplifying misinformation across social media. Both terms are used throughout this report. For more, please see: Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). Information Disorder: Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policymaking. Council of Europe DGI(2017)09. Available at: <https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html>

2 For more about the contours of the information crisis, evidence of the harm caused and associated responses, see Tackling the Information Crisis: A Policy Framework for Media System Resilience a report by the LSE Commission on Trust and Technology: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/assets/documents/research/T3-Report-Tackling-the-Information-Crisis-v6.pdf>

3 <https://www.lse.ac.uk/media-and-communications/truth-trust-and-technology-commission>

4 European Economic and Social Committee (12/06/2023) Strong civil society and independent media are the firewall against disinformation (European Parliament). Accessed from: [Strong civil society and independent media are the firewall against disinformation on 9 May 2024](#)

Across this highly diverse landscape, civil society organisations **deliver a range of activities** that support the fight against misinformation,⁵ including:

- › **Fact checking, credibility and verification initiatives**, including not for profit and community-based initiatives that enable users and communities and professionals to identify misleading information and access accurate and trusted sources and information.
- › **Media literacy⁶** and associated initiatives that have develop and deliver curricula, education and training across the range of media literacy topics and practices, such as for young people or other social groups, or working with professional groups such as journalists or librarians.
- › **Research, monitoring and awareness raising** including initiatives that monitor the prevalence of and trends of dis and mis information and forms of online hate, and raising awareness amongst audiences, stakeholders, and decision makers.

The research conducted as part of this project has highlighted that civil society organisations, including their characteristics, missions, and activities, can make a particular contribution to these efforts. For example, civil society organisations of different types can:

- › be **responsive to emerging social trends** and the ways that misinformation proliferates in different social networks and settings, including both online and offline. This includes experience of misinformation themes or issues including the history of how narratives have evolved and adapted through different settings.

- › act as **credible and trusted** sources, advocates and partners that can help to shape, deliver, or amplify accurate information and campaign messages. Civil society organisations are distinct from public authorities or private commercial organisations which can give them more acceptance by audiences when conveying messages or challenging perceptions or ideas.
- › have **direct links to audiences and communities** across different settings and channels, including underrepresented or underserved communities that may be the targets of or vulnerable to different types of misinformation and who may access information and media through different or niche channels.

Furthermore, civil society organisations can also act as the foundation in the fight against mis- and disinformation by **empowering communities**.⁷ Participatory civil society organisations of all types, including NGOs online communities, and grassroots sports, cultural and community organisations can establish **shared norms**, including in relation to media literacy, and can empower communities through **social and civic capital**. Civil society organisations can therefore foster open societies and promote resilience against dis and misinformation through:

- › Creating opportunities to develop personal and civic competencies and values through engagement in social, voluntary, and civic forums and settings.
- › Creating connections and bonds between individuals and groups that can create bonds and bridges within and between communities and promote community cohesion.
- › Creating platforms that enable individuals and groups to engage with public authorities and agencies and democratic processes and decision-making.

5 See for example Bradshaw, S. & Neudert, L-M. (2021) The road ahead: mapping civil society responses to disinformation (National Endowment for Democracy). Accessed from: [The-Road-Ahead-Mapping-Civil-Society-Responses-to-Disinformation-Bradshaw-Neudert-Jan-2021-2.pdf](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/Disinformation-Bradshaw-Neudert-Jan-2021-2.pdf) (ned.org) 9 May 2024.

6 We define media literacy as an umbrella expression that: 'includes all the technical, cognitive, social, civic, ethical and creative capacities that allow a citizen to access and use information and media effectively, and to safely and responsibly create and share media content through different platforms'. This definition aims to capture media literacy's dynamic and multifaceted nature and aligns with the broad operational definition outlined in the EU 2020 Council conclusions. For more, please see: Council Conclusions on media literacy in an ever-changing world 2020/C 193/06: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020XG0609%2804%29>

7 See for example Hammonds, W. (2023) Culture and democracy, the evidence (European Commission). Accessed from: [Culture and democracy, the evidence - Publications Office of the EU](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legislation-summaries/culture-and-democracy-the-evidence) (europa.eu) on 9 May 2024.

Civil society organisations need the support of public and private partners to deliver these benefits

Civil society organisations are essential to the fight against mis- and disinformation and already play a range of vital roles. Civil society organisations are also facing increasingly sophisticated and evolving mis- and disinformation challenges that require increasingly sophisticated multi-pronged responses that:

- › Support the resilience of society against mis- and disinformation including empowering communities through education and awareness raising.
- › Protect and promote the transparency and integrity of media and ensure access to accurate information.
- › Build coalitions to challenge misleading and divisive efforts to undermine cohesive, democratic, open societies.

In this context, there is an increasing need to both work with and support the role and capacity of civil society organisations in the effort to combat mis- and disinformation. However, feedback through our study highlighted a series of challenges that can limit the role that civil society organisations play in strategic efforts to combat misinformation. Key challenges that have limited the role of civil society organisations in the fight against mis- and disinformation highlighted through the research have included:

- › Piecemeal engagement with civil society by authorities, major platforms and news organisations that fails to recognise or maximise the role and value of civil society organisations as proper partners in the conception, design, implementation, and evaluation of actions.

- › Limited capacity of civil society organisations, including where services or activities are being offered as a public good but with limited funding or support to help sustain activities including time and associated skills and competencies.
- › A need to equip civil society organisations with the tools, techniques, and data that they need to help identify, address and challenge mis- and disinformation, establish resilient community cultures and norms.
- › A failure to ensure that partnerships and organisations are inclusive of the diversity of civil society groups, including diverse or underrepresented communities and social perspectives that are key for efforts to combat and support victims of misinformation across society.
- › A need to ensure trust and transparency in the development and maintenance of partnerships between authorities and platforms with credible civil society organisations and groups that can make legitimate and credible contributions to actions and strategies.

What can be done to support civil society to combat misinformation?

Work with civil society organisations as part of broad-based efforts

Public authorities, media companies, and platforms should work with civil society organisations as partners in the design and implementation of multi-pronged strategies, campaigns and interventions. Civil society organisations should be embedded into efforts as joint partners in the development, design and implementation of **policies, strategies, interventions, and campaigns**. Specific opportunities to explore as part of these activities include:

- › **Joint awareness raising campaigns:** civil society organisations can be partners in awareness raising campaigns to provide insight into narratives and misinformation trends in local contexts and languages, testing of campaign materials and resources with audiences, and as trusted and credible channels for communicating messages. For example, in Ireland the [Be media smart](#) campaign that has run since 2019 worked with a range of local partners including local radio and community media organisations to communicate and disseminate trusted messages. Similarly, Google's [Prebunking](#) campaigns to raise awareness of manipulative techniques on social media in Germany, Poland and Slovakia and Czech Republic were developed and implemented with the input of civil society partners, including co-branded campaign outputs and platforms.
- › **Fact checking and research collaborations:** fact checking can be supported by collaborative initiatives that bring together NGOs and media organisations that bring together complementary methodologies to identify debunk misleading information, as well as proactively engaging with online communities.

For example, in Belgium [deCheckers](#) has supported community-based fact checking including offering a source for collating, checking or corroborating information online alongside proactive community outreach to introduce fact checks into online and social media discourse. In Poland the most significant fact checking organisation is the NGO [Demagog](#) which was founded in 2014 and has debunked over 2000 fake news in ten years alongside other fact checking NGOs such as the foundation "Przeciwdziałamy Dezinformacji" that runs [fakenews.pl](#), the [Pravda Association](#), and [Foundation of Reporters](#).

- › **Media literacy education and training:** civil society organisations have a well-established track record delivering media literacy education and training that can bring new perspectives into classrooms and professional settings. For example, in Romania the [Funky Citizens Association](#) delivers a range of media literacy activities, such as educational resources and training that address a wide range of audiences, including youth, migrants, and individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. In France [Savoir Devenir](#) has delivered a large volume of training workshops for trainees and professional groups, such as journalists, librarians, and policy makers and administrators. Similarly, [Lie Detectors](#) is a European education and training NGO that works with journalists to deliver a programme of education and training to educate young people and policy makers about the risks of misinformation and equip them with the skills needed to effectively navigate contemporary media.

Empower civil society organisations to challenge misinformation and develop media literacy in their communities

Civil society organisations need support to build the capacity and capabilities needed to combat misinformation. Support includes funding for organisations and activities, support with necessary tools and techniques to challenge misinformation, and opportunities to build partnerships and coalitions with other civil society organisations. For example:

- › **Work with a broad range of organisations and settings:** Examples of investment programmes include European level funds such as the Creative Europe and the [European Media and Information Fund](#), that have supported many of the activities outlined above such as fact checking organisations, active citizenship and education organisations, and research and observatory organisations. In addition national funds such as “[Social cohesion through participation](#)” ([Zusammenhalt durch Teilhabe](#)) and [Demokratie leben!](#) in Germany have supported grass roots civil society groups to challenge extremism and misinformation including regional clubs, associations and educators and initiatives that are delivered in “places of prevention”, e.g. in families, educational institutions, among peers, during recreational activities, on the internet or in the penal system.
- › **Equip civil society organisations to challenge misinformation:** This includes supporting civil society organisations through training and awareness raising on the types of misinformation they may encounter, as well with practical tools and techniques on how to challenge or deal with misinformation in different settings or groups.⁸ For example, Google through the Jigsaw initiative offers a [range of tools and support to NGOs](#) to moderate and challenge online content alongside and has worked with [Full Fact](#) in the UK to develop AI powered tool to identify misinformation alongside schemes such as the trusted flaggers programme to help identify problematic content. Google.org has also work with a coalition of NGOs across Central and Eastern Europe, led by [Tech Soup of Poland](#) to help equip CSOs with tools to fight misinformation online.

The European Commission’s [Creative Europe](#) programme is also supporting a range of projects that will equip educators, professionals, and intermediaries, with the tools and resources to challenge misleading information and narratives. For example, the [GenderEd coalition](#) is building a network of media literacy practitioners, educators and librarians, experts, activists, human rights defenders, social media influencers and artists to challenge gendered misinformation.

- › **Support collaborative forums:** Civil society organisations can benefit from opportunities for networking and exchange of practice. The GenderEd and Tech Soup coalitions aim to mobilise and equip networks of civil society organisations to combat misinformation. Similarly, [Media Literacy Ireland](#) is an independent, informal alliance of organisations and individuals working together voluntarily to promote media literacy in Ireland. It brings together a range of organisations and stakeholders from across the country. The overarching mission is to empower Irish people with the skills and knowledge to make informed choices about the media content and services that they consume, create and disseminate – across all media platforms. Other types of collaborations include the [European Digital Media Observatory](#) that is an Europe wide interdisciplinary network of media, private, civil society, and academic organisations, with national and thematic hubs. Through this network EDMO observes trends in disinformation, supports fact checking and media literacy good practice and informs policy making.

⁸ See for example Donovan., J. (2021) How civil society can combat misinformation and hate speech without making it worse (Media Manipulation Casebook). Accessed from: [TSC002_HateSpeech_TS_fnl.pdf \(mediamanipulation.org\)](#) on 9 May 2024.

Establish sustainable and consistent partnerships that are based on shared principles and objectives

A key challenge in the context of mis- and disinformation is ensuring that partnerships with civil society organisations are credible and sustainable. Important principles that can help to guide the development and maintenance of effective partnerships in the fight against dis and misinformation include:

- › **Collaboration not transaction:** partnerships should be based on collaborative approaches that integrate partnership working throughout the policy, project or intervention lifecycle, from problem identification and definition, design and implementation, and evaluation, and associated relevant actions such as sharing of data.
- › **Accommodating different capacities:** partnerships should be based on the complementary strengths that organisations can bring to the initiative or objective, including recognising and working with the different organisational capacities and characteristics of civil society organisations including voluntary or not for profit missions and structures.
- › **Quality of methodologies and practice:** partnerships should be founded on relevant expertise, capacity, and credibility to deliver activities and interventions that combat misinformation. This includes identifying credible and effective civil society organisations but also, where necessary, supporting relevant organisations to develop necessary capacities.
- › **Shared values:** partnerships should be founded on shared values and commitment to promoting the aims and objectives of open, democratic, and inclusive societies and a commitment to the aims of fostering media literacy through capacity building and education.
- › **Equality and diversity:** partnerships should ensure the diversity of organisations and communities can be included in broad based coalitions and efforts. This includes where organisations are engaged with underrepresented communities and the role they can play in supporting media literacy objectives.
- › **Transparency:** the scope and nature of partnerships, the organisations involved and associated funding relationships, and any guiding principles should be clear and transparent for all in the partnership and for external stakeholders and communities.

Box of resources

Good practice examples



Example 1: deCheckers

deCheckers is a community-based fact checking organisation that operates in Flemish and Dutch. It aims to offer users a Flemish platform on which all fact checks that meet international quality conditions can be accessed in one place. It presents fact-checks that try to determine whether a factual claim in the public debate is correct or not with clear reasoning and openness about their sources. It is open to requests for advice and fact checks from community users whilst also signposting fact checks in social media and online communities. It works on principles of openness, impartiality, helpfulness and respect. For more information about deCheckers see [deCheckers](#)



Example 2: Lie Detectors

Lie Detectors is an independent media literacy organisation that works with journalists to empower young people and teachers to tell fact from fake online and understand how professional journalism works. Interactive training sessions for school and teacher-training communities are run by selected and trained journalists and enable young and old to fact-check online content, understand news media, make informed choices and resist peer pressure as they assemble their worldview. Lie Detectors also contributes its insights from its work into advisory processes in the fields of education and digital rights to facilitate long-term societal resilience to polarisation and disinformation online. [Home - Lie Detectors](#)
[Lie Detectors \(lie-detectors.org\)](#)



Example 3: Media Literacy Ireland

Media Literacy Ireland (MLI) is an informal alliance of individuals and organisations who work together on a mainly voluntary basis to promote media literacy in Ireland. Facilitated by Coimisiún na Meán, the national media regulator in Ireland, MLI has over 250 members from a broad range of sectors public and community sectors. It supports a range of activities including training and development in a variety of areas such as fact checking, digital literacy for teens, and training for professionals such as teacher, librarians and community leaders, as well as running awareness raising campaigns and awards. It also supports research and analysis into key misinformation trends and challenges and sharing of information across the alliance. For more information see [Media Literacy Ireland - Empowering people to critically evaluate media](#)



Example 4: European Digital Media Observatory

EDMO is Europe's largest interdisciplinary network to counter disinformation. It brings together civil society organisations, fact checking organisations, media and technology firms and academic institutions around a range of national and thematic hubs. It supports collaboration on fact- in the EU and support the development of expertise, ideas and collaboration for media literacy practitioners. It also provides a forum for sharing research and information on combatting disinformation and collates expertise and advice to inform policy making actions against disinformation in the EU. For more information see [EDMO – United against disinformation](#)



Example 5: Tech Soup Digital Activism for Resilient Communities Program

Tech Soup is working with a network of NGOs to equip a network of CSOs and frontline workers with technology, tools, and knowledge to identify and tackle disinformation threats. The initiative is aimed at CEE including Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia. Activities will include research on disinformation threats in the region, assessment of CSO challenges and needs, and supporting selected CSOs with direct support, including training advice, small grants, and access to tools and technology solutions to support disinformation responses. This work is supported by Google.org through Tech Soup's Digital activities for resilient communities programme that aims connects grant makers and businesses with civil society and support nonprofits and activists to use the best technology for social change. Further information: [Digital Activism for Resilient Communities - TechSoup Europe](#) and [Empowering Civil Society to Combat Disinformation: Digital Activism Program Takes Action Across the Central and Eastern Europe, Blog, Hive Mind \(hive-mind.community\)](#)



Example 6: Gender-Ed Coalition

Gender-Ed Coalition works to prevent the spread of gender-related disinformation across Bulgaria, France, Italy and Greece, and does this through generating ideas for change through an online civic hackathon, and conducting research on initiatives that focus on gendered disinformation and have a high component of media literacy. Research focuses on three areas where change might be fostered: public policies, capacity building tools, and the role of communities of practice and networks. The coalition produced four country reports in 2024, highlighting best practices across each of the participating countries. For more information, see <https://www.genderedcoalition.net/>



Example 7: Savoir-Devenir

Savoir-Devenir is a non-profit organisation that aims to support citizens in taking ownership of their media and digital life by supporting media and information literacy, digital citizenship, and internet governance. It works with a very wide range of partners, including technology companies, fact-checking organisations, journalists and other civil society organisations, and engages across Europe in advocacy, training delivery, and pedagogical resources, among other things. Its resources are open access and include games, manuals, guides, teaching kits, videos and podcasts. Further information and access to its resources at: <https://savoirdevenir.net/>

Further resources

Be Media Smart is a media literacy and awareness raising campaign in Ireland. Further details at: www.bemediasmart.ie

Creative Europe has funded Media Literacy Actions through the CREA-CROSS calls. Further information on past calls and funded projects can be found here: www.ec.europa.eu/info/funding-tenders/opportunities/portal/screen/opportunities/topic-details/crea-cross-2024-medialiteracy

Demagog is a Polish Fact Checking organisation. Further details of their work here: www.demagog.org.pl

Funky Citizens is a Romanian NGO that promotes good governance and active citizenship through smart use of technology, communication and advocacy, and civic education. Further details can be found here: www.funky.org

Media Literacy Ireland is an informal alliance of individual and organisations who work together voluntarily to empower Irish people with skills and confidence to access and evaluate media content and services. It is supported by the national media regulator Coimisiún na Meán. Further information can be found here: www.medialiteracyireland.ie

The European Media and Information Fund pursues objectives of public interest and provides grants, on a competitive basis, to researchers, fact-checkers, not-for-profits and other public interest-oriented organisations. Further information here: www.gulbenkian.pt/emifund/emif-at-a-glance/

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