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FROM THE INFORMATION AGE TO THE DISINFORMATION AGE. UKRAINA`S FIGHT AGAINST DISINFORMATION BY STRENGTHENING MEDIA LITERACY

Abstract:	*The development and evolution of the information society, framed in the ample process of globalization, brings with it a series of vulnerabilities, risks, and threats, which have repercussions on public perception. Managing the information flow, especially in crisis or conflict situations, has become a real challenge.* *The mechanisms by which the negative effects can be diminished, at the informational level, are directly related to the educational aspect, by creating an information culture. Information literacy and media literacy are tools that can act as shields against the infodemic. Our research aims to analyze the process of building and developing in Ukraine the conceptual and practical framework for implementing media literacy.*
Keywords:	**Media literacy; Information literacy; Ukraine; Learn to Discern; crise; fake news; manipulation; education; information literacy**
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Introduction

During crises, the need for communication and the number of rumors can be ascertained. People cannot be prevented from communicating, believing, and reacting, the communication act being indispensable, even vital in states of insecurity, abnormality, danger, or fear. The communicational phenomenon in such situations has a strong increase[218] in producing effects and influences on public opinion, aggravated by the technological evolution that facilitates the creation and development of a new communication environment available to all, social networks. Compared to traditional media, which has a legal deployment framework, and the possibility of control – at least on the formal level, containing coercive elements, the new media have brought a series of challenges and attempts to build a control system, which, so far, has not been effective. The evolution of crises on the international relations stage, characterized by the increase in scale and complexity, requires security to become a multidimensional concept, both operatively and reactively. More so in the information society, information is a weapon, a target, and a strategic raw material that underlies all decisions making[219]. In this context, we are witnessing the tendency to globalize information that facilitates the simultaneous relationship of millions of people who are aware that living in a society means communicating. At the same time, the means that favor the new agora and facilitate this type of dialogue, can become a new weapon, perhaps the most powerful, of conditioning and mystification of the human being[220].

From this perspective, every actor on the international relations stage was confronted with the identification of tools that would effectively contribute to the management of the communication phenomenon, in terms of effects. Both at the state level and of international organizations, building

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[218] Ioan Drăgan, *Paradigme ale comunicării de masă,* Șansa, București, 1996, p. 9

[219] Ștefan Cantargiu, *E-Defence și societatea informațională,* in ”Observatorul Militar”, No. 39, 2002, p. 18

[220] Ioan Drăgan, *Opinia publică, comunicarea de masă și propaganda,* Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, 1980, p. 8

strategies to combat disinformation has become a priority, especially since the strategic narratives represent a tool for political actors to shape perceptions and actions of domestic and international audiences, also to articulate a certain position on a certain issue[221]. In this matter, one of the solutions should be focused on improving people`s information and media literacy[222].

Media Literacy

Communication is seen as a means of influence and social power; is a resource of power and even a necessary condition for the exercise of power[223]. In this context, the aggression of information has caused a breach in the defense and security strategy, received from three perspectives: information as a means for the benefit of forces, the infosphere as a medium for carrying out military actions, and the infosphere as a stake of conflict situations[224]. These elements are directly related to media literacy which refers to the knowledge and motivation needed to identify and engage with journalism[225]. The studies conducted in this area were developed in 2004 by James Potter who considers that media literacy is a concern that demands we do something and created a cognitive model of media literacy, based on five basic knowledge structures: media content, media effects, media industry, the real world, and the self-interact with a person`s combination of drives, needs, and intellectual abilities. "With knowledge in these five areas, people are much more aware during the information-processing tasks and are, therefore, more able to make better decisions about seeking out information, working with that information, and constructing meaning from it that will be useful to serve their own goals"[226]. Other researchers are concerned about the idea that media literacy education is not all the time successful but has positive effects on perceived realism, media knowledge, criticism, behavioral beliefs, self-efficacy, and attitudes[227]. The main idea within the media literacy approach is that media representations of reality are, in many cases incomplete or accurate[228]. The technology evolution brings certain challenges in this area so the need to assess the effectiveness of media literacy education becomes a big concern[229]. Mass communication seen as "technical means for receiving, editing, and disseminating messages: print, radio television, press agencies, studious, newsrooms, and broadcasting networks" is considered a part of cultural services within a society[230]. In this regard, the connection between the educational field as a sine qua non-condition for the implementation of media literacy is related to the cultural services, as primordial infrastructure in every modern society.

Premises for creating media literacy in Ukraine

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Ukrainian government instituted major reforms in libraries by opening many literary collections and reorganizing the libraries. This is the first step within the information literacy framework-building system, which preceded the next step, creating the media literacy infrastructure.

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[221] Miskimmon Alister, Ben O`Loughlin, Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives. Communication Power and the New World Order,* Routledge, New York, 2013, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315871264

[222] Kristin M. Lord, Katya Voght, *Strengthen Media Literacy to Win the Fight Against Misinformation,* in "Stanford Social Innovation Review", May 2021, DOI: 10.48558/py1b-3g51

[223] Denis McQuail, *Comunicarea,* Institutul European, Iași, 1999, p. 207

[224] Mircea Șuteu, *Războiul informațional în conflictele armate moderne,* in "Gândirea militară românească", No. 3, 2022, pp. 101-107

[225] Adam Maksl, Seth Ashley, Stephanie Craft, *Measuring New Media Literacy,* in "Journal of Media Literacy", Vol. 6, No. 3, 2015, p. 29

[226] James Potter, *Theory of Media Literacy: a Cognitive Approach*, Sage Publication, 2004, p. 69

[227] Jeong See-Hoo, Hyunyi Cho, Yoori Hwang, *Media Literacy Interventions: a Meta-Analytic Review*, in "Journal of Communication", Vol. 62, No. 3, 2012, pp. 454-468

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[229] Hans Martens, *Evaluating media literacy education: Concepts, theories and future directions*, in "Journal of Media Literacy", Vol. 2, No. 1. 2010, pp. 5-21

[230] Felix Constantin Goldbach, Andreea Nicoleta Dragomir, Ioana Maria Bărbat, *Culture – a Value of Public Management*, in "Procedia Economics and Finance", No. 16, 2019, p. 196

One of the most significant activities within the process of building a media literacy frame in Ukraine was in 2002: the Ukraine Media Partnership Program[231] focused on improving the quality of journalism and building stronger business management practices, a program sponsored by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the US Department of State through the Public Affairs Sections of the US Embassy in Ukraine. The result of this program consists in initiating partnerships between Ukrainian and American media outlets; more than thirty media organizations across the USA were hosting hundreds of Ukrainian journalists and media managers for training; more than 150 American Journalists and media managers have traveled to Ukraine, providing mentoring, and sharing best practice[232].

Another step was the project entitled Bibliomist Program started in 2008 and had the purpose to ensure all Ukraine`s citizens access to information. The partners were the Minister of Culture of Ukraine, the Ukrainian Library Association, the US Agency for International Development (US AID), and Microsoft Bill&Melinda Gates Foundation which was developed through IREX (International Research and Exchanges Board)[233], an international development non-governmental organization[234]. Bibliomist was built as a joint effort between the government, librarians, and civil society to modernize Ukraine's public libraries, so all citizens have access to information. The previous studies highlighted that only 17% of the population, at that time, had internet access[235]. According to the latest data, the program empowered 4,000 librarians with actual skills, provided training on e-governance to almost 450 government officials, more than 2,000 citizens and 1,800 librarians, modernized 1,930 libraries with modern technology and free internet access, hosted half a million unique patrons annually and sixty million total visits, more than 8,000 librarians' received training to provide services[236].

Another contribution and interest in media literacy, particularly in media education in Ukraine, belongs to the Institute of Social and Political Psychology of the National Academy of Pedagogical Science in Ukraine. In 2011 a five-year pilot program was developed in 120 schools, by offering an elective media literacy course[237]. In 2010, in Ukraine was adopted the concept of introducing media education taught to 120-grade students in schools from different regions of Ukraine[238].

The Implementation of media literacy in Ukraine

Ukraine`s Learn to Discern Program (L2D), originally named Citizen Media Literacy started in February 2015 (till March 2016), after the events concerning the Russian Federation`s annexation of Crimea, as an IREX Project. Was launched with the financial support of the Canadian Embassy[239], Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, Through the Global Peace and Security Fund, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs[240], in collaboration with the Association of Ukrainian Press and Stop Fake. Before launching the L2D program, a study conducted by IREX, in 14 regions of Ukraine among the population aged 18-70 revealed that 50% of the respondents were not able to identify the fake news, proved to blindly trust the media messages, and they did not check the information, especially if the sources are their acquaintances[241].

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[231] IREX, Ukraine Media Partnership (UMPP), Ukraine Media Partnership Program (UMPP) IREX, (26.05.2023)

[232] *Idem*

[233] IREX, Bibliomit-Global Libraries Ukraine, Bibliomist - Global Libraries Ukraine | IREX

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[237] Maria Haigh, Thomas Haigh, Tetiana Matychak, *Information Literacy vs. Fake News: the Case of Ukraine,* in "Open Information Science, June 2019, p. 157, https://doi.org/10.1515/opis-2019-0011

[238] Maryna Dorosh, *Media Literacy in Ukraine: Blurred Motion Vectors, i* Media literacy in Ukraine: blurred motion vectors - MediaSapiens. (detector.media)

[239] USAID, IREX, *Vibrant Information Barometer 2022, p. 15*, VIBE_2022_Ukraine.pdf (irex.org), (23.05.2023)

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[241] Tara Susman-Pena, Katya Vogt, *Ukrainians` Self-defense Against Disinformation: What We Learned from Learn to Discern,* June 12, 2017, Ukrainians' self-defense against disinformation: What we learned from Learn to Discern | IREX, (21.05.2023)

L2D reached more than 15,000 people of all ages and professional backgrounds, and more than 90,000 people were indirectly involved, by the shared information[242]; 20.7 million Ukrainians saw an accompanying public-service announcement in 2016[243]. At that time, was anticipated that till 2021, through applying the methodology within Ukrainian high school curricula, the program will reach more than 40,000 students and will provide the know-how tools to integrate L2D into the academic process[244]. The first step was to assemble a committee of 15 experts of experts in media literacy, fake news, and counter-propaganda work, managed by Renee Hobbs and her colleagues from the USA finalized in October 2015 with a 196 pages document of annotated examples of fake news, propaganda, and biased reporting from Russian and Ukrainian media, split into three chapters: first chapter provides a theoretical and basic understanding of propaganda and information, in terms of media ownership, media objectives, media activity; the second chapter covers the danger relating the fake news, manipulation, and propaganda, with practical exercises and media content analyses; the third chapter presents the effects and consequences of the speech in media dehumanization and stereotypes[245].

One year later, in 2016, the Academy of Ukrainian Press in collaboration with the Free Press Centre, financially supported by the MATRA Program of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, elaborated a 202 handbook "Media Literacy in social sciences lessons"[246]; contains eleven sections about media, media education, media literacy, basic methods of critical thinking, aspects regarding the history of Ukraine, world history, Ukraine`s struggle for independence in 1917-1920, Ukrainization, Holomodor, world wars, Nazism, subculture, propaganda[247]. This handbook was the second publication of this type, within the framework of the Academy of Ukrainian Press; on December 2015 another 36 pages handbook was published, "ABC of Media"[248] by Norbert Boltz, a professor at the Technical University of Berlin[249]; the content is targeting the media technologies as a systematic and integrated perspective of the modern media. In 2016, more than 15,000 Ukrainians took part in Learn to Discern workshops, and 20.7 million Ukrainians saw an accompanying public-service announcement[250].

In 2018, the program continued. Learn to Discern goal was to support the Ukrainian's future generation to deal with the information environments, avoid being manipulated, detect false information, and make informed decisions. Within the L2D 50 schools were tested, including in the eastern city of Mariupol; trainers started initially teaching adults across the country how to detect disinformation and propaganda before turning to younger generations[251].

IREX's Learn to Discern – Schools project was funded by the British Embassy in Ukraine and the US Embassy in Ukraine. Was implemented in partnership with Stop Fake Organization, the Academy of Ukrainian Press, and the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine. Started as a pilot experiment in

[242] *Idem*

[243] IREX, *IREX and Partners Conduct Countrywide Media Literacy Lesson in Ukraine*, July 15, 2019, IREX and partners conduct countrywide media literacy lesson in Ukraine | IREX, (21.05.2023)

[244] Tara Susman-Pena, Katya Vogt, *Ukrainians` Self-defense Against Disinformation: What We Learned from Learn to Discern,* Ukrainians' self-defense against disinformation: What we learned from Learn to Discern | IREX, (21.05.2023)

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[249] MediaSapiens, *The Manual of "ABC Media" by professor of the Technical University of Berlin Norbert Boltz was published in Ukraine,* AUP has published a manual "ABC of Media" by German professor Norbert Boltz - MediaSapiens. (detector.media), (12.05.2023)

[250] IREX, *IREX and partners conduct countrywide media literacy lesson in Ukraine*, July 15, 2019, IREX and partners conduct countrywide media literacy lesson in Ukraine | IREX, (12.05.2023)

[251] Sasha Ingber, *Students in Ukraine Learn How to Spot Fake Stories, Propaganda and Hate Speech,* March 22, 2019*,* In The Wake Of Ukraine's Civil War, Students Learn How To Identify Fake News : NPR, (12.05.2023)

50 schools in Ukraine, for 5,425 students in 8th and 9th grade[252]. During this program, 3,612 eighth and ninth-grade teachers were trained and equipped with L2D resources and instructional guidance[253]. Trained personnel on teaching media and information literacy proposed a curriculum focused on certain subjects, each of it having proposals for channels for integration[254]:

- History of Ukraine. World History - in terms of a manipulated narrative of historical events used to influence the modern civic issue; channels for integration: working with historical sources and interpretations, such as scientific papers, blogs, articles, web pages, films, political image-making, webpages;
- Ukrainian Language. Ukrainian Literature - in terms of working with different types of texts; analysis of messages; channels for integration: analysis of narratives, especially media messages, work with facts, the influence of texts idea language manipulations,;
- Art – in terms of the importance of the visual context`s role within modern consumption, eyewitnesses, manipulation through emotions, music, and video testimonies.

The assessed evaluated pilot program was expanding to 650 schools across Ukraine. Learn to Discern initiated different activities or projects to address disinformation in some other countries around the world: Jordan, Serbia, Tunisia, and the United States[255].

Effects of Implementation of the L2D in Ukraine

During the evaluation stage of the L2D 2018 pilot program, from September to December 2018, seventeen schools participating in the Learn to Discern Program and ten control schools that were not exposed to these lessons were studied (named control school within the study). The results showed that the students from the first category had better results on all assessment tasks: identifying hate speech, false stories, facts, and opinions; they also proved better knowledge of the media messages, and proved healthier habits and media consumption behavior, with an analytical approach[256]. Regarding the topic of media analysis measures, the ability to identify facts vs. opinions, intended audience, points of view, missing information, the goal of the story, and the way media messages are built, the evaluation revealed that the students who participated in L2D enhanced curricula performed control group students by 11%[257]. The answers to the subjects such as editorial influences, censorship, ownership of important media networks, differences between valid information and propaganda, and the way to deal with the situations regarding the exposure to potentially fake posts on different social media showed that the difference was by 14% in favor of L2D students[258]. The ability determines if a statement is a fact with a source or a fact without a source or opinion, revealed a 16% difference, and regarding the ability to identify a fake post the difference was 18%, in favor of the same group. The biggest difference, 114%, was in the ability to identify hate speech. Other aspects considered in this study refer to a locus of control, a sense of control over media consumption, and self-reported information consumption.

A few months after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, from April 4 to April 13, 2022, L2D achieved an online survey for teachers and school administrators, 354 persons, who have been participating in the training since 2018. The results revealed: "9% of teachers report that L2D helped them navigate the information space during the war; 93% of teachers discussed the topic of media and information literacy at least once since the invasion with students, partners, and others; 90% of teachers helped other people analyze information. Most of them were helping their family, friends, and

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[252] *Idem*

[253] Katie Strine, *IREX Information Literacy L2D methodology is Proving Vital During the War in Ukraine,* May 24, 2022, IREX information literacy L2D methodology is proving vital during the war in Ukraine | IREX, (12.05.2023)

[254] *Boosting Immunity to Disinformation, Ukrainian Students Better Detect False Information after Teachers Integrate Media Literacy into Standard* Subjects, p. 2, L2D-S Pilot Results for Students_External Report 3.22.19 (irex.org), (12.05.2023)

[255] *Ibidem,* p. 21

[256] *Boosting Immunity to Disinformation, Ukrainian Students Better Detect False Information after Teachers Integrate Media Literacy into Standard* Subjects, p. 22, L2D-S Pilot Results for Students_External Report 3.22.19 (irex.org), (23.05.2023)

[257] *Idem*

[258] *Idem*

colleagues"[259]. The results of the study were considered an inspiration for the L2D team to continue their activity, in terms of providing resources, support, tools, and a safe convenient way for the educational environment.

According to the latest IREX Annual Impact Report[260] from 2022, the cooperation includes the National Union of Journalists, the Academy of Ukrainian Press, and Freedom House Ukraine, to assist more than 100 journalists. The report shows that 98% of the teachers trained through IREX`s Learn to Discern curriculum admitted that the program helped them to counteract the information manipulation[261]. IREX`s online Learn to Discern courses and tools to build resilience to manipulative information are available in various languages as Albanian, Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, English, Russian, Arabic, and Ukrainian, across eleven countries, with a target public of over 100,000 people[262]. Regarding the Ukrainian version, named "Very Verified Ukraine"[263], it has received more than 80,00 views and issued over 13,000 certificates of completion, which represents an average completion rate of over 35%[264]. The impact on learner`s skills refer to the ability to identify hate speech more than doubled, with a 32% improvement in those who took the course in media analysis skills[265].

In April 2023 the non-governmental organization Media Detector released a quantitative study to determine the index of media literacy of Ukrainians, comparing two studies conducted before in 2022/2021 and 2021/2022[266], comparing the first study from 2021 with the latest one. The first study from March 2021[267] (2020 as the year of the research) demonstrated that almost two-thirds of Ukrainians, 63% believe that the primary purpose of media is to inform about socially significant developments, and 67% are convinced that media serve the interests of their owners, not those of state (8%) or society (8%)[268]. Regarding disinformation, 57% of the Ukrainian audience considers that is relevant, and 6% never heard about fake news. Only 24% check media content. The same percentage, 57%, admit that there is a manipulation problem within the media[269]. Another interesting issue concerns the paid-for materials; 55% consider that to be a real problem. The level of media literacy within this study was evaluated on a scale from 0 to 10 (1 is the lowest level, 10 is the highest level, and 5 is the average); the results highlighted that 15% of Ukrainians have a low level of media literacy and 33% is below average[270].

The researchers have found that this aspect is directly connected with educational status, gender, age, type of population area, urban or rural, northern, and southern Ukraine; the lower the level of media literacy is related to the lower the educational level. Residents of northern Ukraine have the highest level of media literacy, and those living in the southern area have the lowest one. But the biggest difference

[259] Katie Strine, *IREX Information Literacy L2D Methodology is Proving Vital During the War in Ukraine,* May 24, 2022, IREX information literacy L2D methodology is proving vital during the war in Ukraine | IREX, (23.05.2023)

[260] IREX, *IREX 2022 Annual Impact Report, p. 15,* IREX_Annual_Impact_Report_2022.pdf, p. 15, (28.05.2022)

[261] *Idem*

[262] IREX, *Learn to Discern (L2D) Online Tools for Building Resilience to Information Manipulation,* Learn to Discern (L2D) Online Tools for Building Resilience to Information Manipulation | IREX, (27.05.2023)

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[265] *Idem*

[266] Detector Media Tea, *Media Literacy Index of Ukrainians: 2020-2022,* Media literacy index of Ukrainians: 2020-2022 (short presentation) :: Detector Media, IREX, *Learn to Discern (L2D) Online Tools for Building Resilience to Information Manipulation,* Learn to Discern (L2D) Online Tools for Building Resilience to Information Manipulation | IREX, (15.05.2023)

[267] The study is an analytic report based on the findings of complex research, on the data of the quantitative research conducted by the research agency Info Sapiens, compiled at the request of Media Detector by Maria Naumova, associate professor, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Science of Ukraine, EN_REPORT_MEDIALITERACY_INDEX-DM (detector.media), (15.05.2023)

[268] Detector *Media, Media Literacy Index of Ukrainians,* p. 31 EN_REPORT_MEDIALITERACY_INDEX-DM (detector.media), (15.05.2023)

[269] *Ibidem*, p. 8

[270] *Ibidem*, p. 10

within this study is between people with different financial statuses: 72% of those whose income is only enough for food have low and below average levels of media literacy[271].

The latest research from April 2023 indicates an important increase in general media literacy between 2020 and 2022, from 55% to 81%[272]; the average value of the indicators rose from 4.8 (in 2020) to 5.9 points (in 2022). "Within the general level of media literacy, the percentage of individuals with high competency doubled in three sub-indices: understanding the role of media in society (from 45% to 72%), digital competence (from 49% to 64%), and sensitivity to distorted content (from 56% to 66%)"[273]. The researchers observed, compared with 2020, that media literacy was higher among 18-25 years old, because of access to digital literacy. Regarding the differences between lower and higher educational status, 33% of those with general secondary education received low or below-average scores compared with 10% of those with full or partial higher education. As in the first research, financial status was an important criterion; respondents with higher levels of well-being had higher indices, 72%, and those with low levels of living 12%.

Conclusions

Information literacy is the conceptual and practical framework that is necessary to precede the existence of creating and consolidating media literacy. We consider that in the first category, Bibliomist Program had the main role to open the path, by building a library infrastructure, both technical and in terms of data approaches, including databases. With this foundation, media literacy, through L2D was easier to implement, the programs being permanently connected to each other, and having a strong mutual element –education.

The existence of these two infrastructures doesn't guarantee the existence of objectivity, and impartiality within the implementation of specific activities, both in terms of informational literacy, as well as media literacy. There are a few elements that we should consider reading between the lines and adopt a reserved attitude, at the same time as a critical and analytical approach; from our point of view, the first element is the financing source of any project or program; the second one is the national, regional, and international context chosen for their initiation and implementation. For example, the L2D Program is considered a necessary program considering the events in Crimea in 2014. At the same time, at the European Union Level was an important moment that led to the initiation and consolidation of new actions to fight against disinformation from the Russian space, which benefited from important support, both conceptually logistically, and financially[274]. A short comparative view between our research in this working paper and our previous study published at Cambridge Scholars Publishing demonstrates many similarities in terms of actors involved (the state, civil society, researchers, fact-checkers), a mutual enemy to fight against, conceptual frameworks, tools, etc.

Also, for avoiding subjectivity and for a deeper analysis is significant to mention that the first study of Media Detector for the year 2020 (released in March 2021) had a sample size of 2000 respondents, the adult population of Ukraine, over 18 years old, and the compared study from 2020 to 2022 (from April 2023) has 1200 respondents, also the adult population over 18 years old. Another difference between these two is that for the first study, the sample type was a breakdown by age, gender, population area scope, and region (Kyiv, Northern Ukraine, Western Ukraine, Central Ukraine, Southern Ukraine, Eastern Ukraine), and the second one was conducted in terms of age, sex, the typical size of the settlement and region in the temporarily occupied territories of Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson regions and the Autonomous Republic of Crimea.

In this infosphere and post-truth age that characterizes contemporaneity, there is a fine line between the elements of the information age and the disinformation age, and we must be aware that every actor on the international stage, under the pavement of good intentions, is impossible not to propagate subliminal manipulative and/or propagandistic messages. We reiterate the importance of education for the

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[271] *Idem*

[272] *Idem*

[273] *Idem*

[274] Nicoleta Annemarie Munteanu, *Combating Misinformation at European Level,* in "The European Union in the Age of (In)Security. From Theory to Practice", 2nd Edition, Cambridge Scholard Publishing, 2022, pp. 103-133

creation and consolidation of both informational literacy and media literacy, with the caveat that is necessary to analyze beyond official and formal statements, beyond the stated goals of the projects.

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