

Next Generation **What We Know:**

Mis/disinformation in the Western Balkans

 **BRITISH
COUNCIL**



**Executive
Summary**

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The report reflects the evidence available at the time of data collection and analysis. As online information environments develop rapidly, findings should be viewed as indicative of lived experiences and patterns observed during the study period, rather than as a complete inventory of all narratives or content.

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British Council

Izzah Meyer, Next Generation Portfolio Manage, Global
James Perkins, Head of Research Excellence, UK
Jeremy Lang, Lead Non-Formal Education, Wider Europe
Bojana Čolović, Senior Programme Manager Western Balkans

BIRN

Aida Ajanović, Lead Researcher
Kristina Voko, National Researcher, Albania
Mirza Haličević, National Researcher, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Albulena Sadiku, National Researcher, Kosovo
Vuk Maraš, National Researcher, Montenegro
Tamara Chausidis, National Researcher, North Macedonia
Tijana Uzelac, National Researcher, Serbia
BIRN HUB Team

Youth Advisory Group

Greta Topjana, Albania
Valbona Halitaj, Albania
Geri Emiri, Albania
Ena Čaušević, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Atdhe Lila, Kosovo
Bujar Hoxha, Kosovo
Emili Radonjić, Montenegro
Martina Todorovska, North Macedonia
Muhamed Smakić, Serbia
Tamara Arsić, Serbia
Branimir Đurović, Serbia
Marina Zec, Serbia

At a glance

What young people say	What we saw in practice	What to do about it
Credibility is often decided through people and ‘official-looking’ signals, not through full verification.	Selective checking is situational: young people ‘check when it matters’, rely on trusted others for quick sense-making, or move on when overloaded.	Reduce friction. Build ‘credibility-cue literacy’ ¹ , simple routines, and platform-native trustworthy explainers, while addressing upstream accountability gaps.

I've started to doubt everything because it's become really hard to recognise what is true. (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Focus Group Discussion, Female, 18-24)

Why this matters

Across the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia), young people navigate rapidly evolving, highly personalised information environments. Information reaches them through recommendations, creators, repost chains, comments, and group chats, often in brief, shareable formats that lose context. In this setting, credibility decisions are made swiftly, under pressure and information overload.

This study indicates that responses focused solely on individual ‘fact checking’ are likely to perform poorly. Resilience is strongest when individual ability is supported by systems that make reliable information easier to recognise and access, and when accountability is reinforced ‘upstream’, across media, institutions, and platforms.

What we did

This study was commissioned by the British Council and carried out by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN). It forms part of the British Council’s Next Generation research programme, which examines the priorities, aspirations and needs of young people around the world. This aims to help ensure that young people’s interests are properly represented in policies that are impacting their lives and shaping their futures.

For this study, BIRN combined four sources of evidence to understand both lived experience and the wider context: thirteen focus group discussions (FGDs) and sixty-seven Social Media Diaries (SMD), both conducted with young people aged 18–30; forty-eight key informant interviews (KIIs); and Light Social Listening (LSL), where available. The diaries generated 549 episodes in total. Evidence was triangulated across methods: convergence increases confidence, while divergence is treated as analytically meaningful (e.g., public visibility versus semi-private circulation).

¹ ‘Credibility-cue literacy’ refers to the ability to recognise and critically interpret the signals people use to judge whether information is trustworthy — for example who shared it, whether it appears ‘official’, how widely it is repeated, and whether trusted others confirm it. In practice, this means helping young people distinguish between useful cues and misleading ones in fast-moving digital environments.

A full research report for this study is available at the following link:

What we found

Theme	What it means
1. Trust travels through people	Credibility is often judged through who shared it, familiarity, and perceived 'officialness'.
2. Checking is work, so it gets outsourced	Verification is selective and often delegated to trusted people or 'good enough' cues.
3. Platforms shape what becomes 'normal'	Ranking, recommendations, ads, creators, and comments influence repeated exposure and interpretation.
4. Sharing isn't always belief	Humour and belonging drive sharing even when belief is mixed, still amplifying content.
5. Too much information becomes emotional	Overload fuels confusion, anxiety, irritability, withdrawal, or 'hyper-vigilance'.
6. Fix it upstream	Young people locate responsibility in weak standards, enforcement, and platform or media accountability.
7. Media literacy as infrastructure	Media and information literacy is viewed as an intergenerational capability that needs sustained support for youth and adults.
Signals to watch	Why they matter
Minor theme: No pure facts — only narratives to select from	Some young people experience contested issues as competing framings, not simple true or false checks.
Minor theme: AI authenticity	Synthetic and manipulated content weakens everyday authenticity cues and increases reliance on source identity.
<i>'It's really important to me who is sharing it... it matters to me who shared it.'</i> (Regional, Focus Group Discussion, Female)	<i>'If I see that someone is too biased, then I tend not to believe it.'</i> (Montenegro, Focus Group Discussion)

What changes when we take this seriously

The findings highlight three practical impact pathways, each with distinct implications for policy and progress:

1) Youth decision-making	Build ‘credibility-cue literacy’ and repeatable, low-friction routines that match real scrolling behaviour (rather than idealised ‘check everything’ expectations).
2) Wellbeing and participation	Treat digital wellbeing as part of information resilience. Overload pushes young people into avoidance or constant alert; both reduce the capacity to verify and engage constructively.
3) Upstream accountability	Strengthen standards, transparency, and platform responsibility for amplification, advertising, and comment environments—paired with safeguards for independence and proportionality.

Priority actions

The study suggests ten prioritised actions, organised by timeframe:

Immediate (next 6–12 months)

- Incorporate ‘credibility-cue literacy’ into youth-focused support and education.
- Reduce verification friction with simple, repeatable routines that fit real feeds.
- Treat digital wellbeing as an aspect of information resilience.
- Support quality media and fact-checkers to reach youth through platform-native explainers.

Leading stakeholder groups: Education systems (ministries, schools, teacher training), Media and journalism (including fact-checkers), Civil society and youth organisations

Medium term (12–24 months)

- Establish an iterative Continuing professional development programme for teachers on media literacy and cyber hygiene.
- Move from standalone media literacy to cross-curricular infusion of critical thinking.
- Extend interventions to the early years and families, with parent-facing support that avoids blame.

Leading stakeholder groups: Education systems (ministries, schools, teacher training), Civil society and youth organisations

Structural (system reforms and sustained investment)

- Strengthen platform accountability for amplification, comments, and advertising transparency.
- Improve account integrity and provenance cues that ordinary users can understand.
- Create a practical ‘upstream package’ for standards, transparency, and enforcement—paired with safeguards.

Leading stakeholder groups: Platforms and the digital ecosystem, Media and journalism (including fact-checkers)

Notes on evidence and interpretation

This is a qualitative, purposive study designed to explain mechanisms rather than produce statistically representative estimates. Different methods capture various layers of the information environment. Social Media Diaries reflect personalised feeds and everyday behaviour; Light Social Listening captures publicly accessible traces and cannot reliably observe private or semi-private spaces (e.g., messaging apps and closed groups). Cross-country differences in theme visibility indicate emphasis within each dataset, not national ‘performance’.

Study outputs referenced: Final report and thematic briefing paper – accessible at the following link: <https://doi.org/10.57884/EESX-5952>



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