Next Generation What We Know

Mis/disinformation in the Western Balkans

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Research and insight

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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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Contents

Abbreviations and key terms

Abbreviations

AI – Artificial intelligence.
ALB – Albania.
AMI – Albanian Media Institute.
ARTICLE 19 – ARTICLE 19 (freedom of expression organisation).
ASCAP – Quality Assurance Agency for Pre-University Education (Albania).
ATLAS.ti – Qualitative data analysis software used for coding (ATLAS.ti codebook v2).
AVMU – Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (North Macedonia).
BFMI – Balkan Free Media Initiative.
BiH – Bosnia and Herzegovina.
BIRN – Balkan Investigative Reporting Network.
CAWI – Computer-assisted web interviewing (online survey method, referenced in sources).
CG – Montenegro (country shorthand used in desk research source naming).
CPD – Continuing professional development (teachers).
EMI – Media and Information Literacy baseline/policy work source referenced in country snapshot (Albania).
FES – Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.
FGD – Focus group discussion.
ICS – Institute of Communication Studies (North Macedonia).
IMA – Institute for Media and Analytics (referenced in North Macedonia sources list).
IREX – IREX (international development organisation;
'Vibrant Information Barometer' and 'YouThink' programme referenced).
KEC – Kosovo Education Centre.
KII – Key informant interview.
KOS – Kosovo.
LSL – Light social listening.
MESTI – Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (Kosovo).
MFRR – Media Freedom Rapid Response.
MIL – Media and information literacy.
MIM – Macedonian Media Institute.
MKD – North Macedonia (country code used in the report's comparative sections).
MNE – Montenegro (country code used in the report's comparative sections).
NM – North Macedonia (shorthand used in some quotations/labels).
OBCT – Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa.
OSCE – Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.
REG – Regional (used in quote labels such as 'REG_FGD_01').
RESIS – RESIS Institute (referenced in the North Macedonia sources list).
SEENPM – South-East European Network for Media Professionalisation.
SMD – Social media diaries.
SRB – Serbia.
UNDP – United Nations Development Programme.
UNESCO – United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.
UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund.
VIBE – Vibrant Information Barometer (IREX).
WB6 – Western Balkans Six (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia).
YAG – Youth Advisory Group.

Key terms

'Credibility cues' – Practical signals used to make quick credibility judgements (for example, source identity, 'officialness', presentation style, engagement, comments).

'Disinformation' – Verifiably false information shared with an intent to deceive and mislead.

'Exposure → judgement → trust → sharing' – Behavioural sequence used to structure analysis of how content is encountered and acted on.

'High-salience'/'high-intensity' moments – Periods (for example, elections, crises, polarising social issues) when exposure spikes and emotional pressure rises.

'Information environments' – The combined conditions shaping what young people encounter and how they interpret it (public media, platforms, semi-private spaces, relationships, institutional communication).

'Light social listening (LSL)' – A contextual method capturing public, searchable content; it does not reproduce personalised feeds or reliably observe private/semi-private spaces.

'Malinformation' – Information that deliberately misleads by twisting the meaning of truthful information.

'Misinformation' – Verifiably false information shared without an intent to mislead.

'Platform-native formats' – Content designed for platform logics (short clips, memes, carousels, repost chains) that travels quickly and often loses context.

'Proxy trust'/'social proof' – Trust shortcuts based on who shared something, familiarity, perceived 'officialness', and endorsement cues rather than direct verification.

'Triangulation' – Integrating evidence across FGDs, KIIs, SMD, and (where available) LSL; convergence strengthens confidence, divergence is treated as analytically meaningful.

'Trust' – The belief that a source, platform, or piece of content is reliable, credible, and shared in good faith (used as the report's central organising concept).

'Verification friction' – The time, effort, and uncertainty costs that make checking selective, outsourced, or avoided.

Foreword

I am proud to present this study into youth perspectives on media and mis/disinformation in the Western Balkans. It represents another step in the British Council's commitment to strengthening resilience to disinformation in the Western Balkans and builds on the British Council's unique Next Generation series, a global research initiative that offers valuable insights into the lives, perspectives, and aspirations of young people worldwide.

This study comes at a time when disinformation is an endemic phenomenon, particularly in the Western Balkans. Low levels of trust in media and public institutions have created a fertile environment for the spread of both dis- and misinformation. Young people are especially affected by this rapidly evolving information landscape. At the same time, their perspectives and experiences remain underexplored. This survey was therefore developed to help address that gap by amplifying the voices of youth to better understand how they navigate this landscape and filter the information they are exposed to.

The British Council has been supporting the media ecosystem in the Western Balkans for many years. Working in partnership with local and UK stakeholders, we have contributed to efforts to reduce the spread of disinformation by supporting independent media outlets and journalists producing fact-checked and gender-sensitive content. Our work focuses on strengthening the quality of independent media content while enabling organisations to expand and diversify their audiences and enhance their resilience and long-term sustainability. Particular attention has been given to audiences most vulnerable to disinformation, including older citizens, young people, diaspora communities, and other marginalised groups, as well as individuals with diverse political, religious, or social perspectives.

Our support to the media ecosystem has been complemented by the work we do with young people throughout the region, including through our 21st Century Skills programme – enhancing critical thinking and problem solving – and other programmes that support media skills, youth innovation and activation, community participation, and social cohesion.

At a time of heightened uncertainty and growing information fatigue, we believe it is essential to support young people in navigating complex information environments while also rebuilding trust in credible sources of information for all citizens of the region. This study sheds light on the complexity of the information environments that young people must navigate. It also describes the ways in which they have adapted to that environment, including through “credibility cues”, and emphasises the importance of interpersonal trust and community signals.

The study suggests that tackling disinformation and improving young people’s information environments in the Western Balkans requires interventions addressing both the individual skills of young people, and the wider systems and communities in which young people live, both on- and offline. We hope these findings will initiate and inform discussions and inspire collaborative actions that provide both young people and media ecosystems across the Western Balkans with relevant, needs-based support.

Clare Sears
Director Western Balkans, British Council

Executive summary

Purpose and approach

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.

This study investigates how young people across Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia (the 'Western Balkans 6' – WB6) access information, evaluate credibility, and respond to mis/disinformation within everyday, platform-shaped environments. It concentrates on 'information environments' as lived systems: the combination of platforms, formats, relationships, and institutional conditions that influence what becomes visible and credible.

The study employs a mixed-methods approach combining focus group discussions (FGDs) and Social Media Diaries (SMD) with young people aged 18–30, key informant interviews (KIIs), and Light Social Listening (LSL) where available. Evidence is triangulated across methods. Convergence enhances confidence; divergence is regarded as analytically meaningful and is discussed as an indication of differences between public visibility and lived experience, including content circulating through semi-private or private spaces.

Key findings

Across the WB6, young people describe information environments characterised by high volume, fragmented attention, and a reliance on practical 'credibility cues' rather than thorough verification. Trust is rarely unconditional and is often mediated through people and proxy signals.

- **Exposure is influenced by platform dynamics and social networks.** Young people often come across claims via recommendations, creators, comments, repost chains, and group chats rather than through intentional news seeking.

- **Credibility judgements depend on shortcuts under pressure.** Common signals include perceived 'officialness', familiar branding, presentation style, engagement metrics, and social endorsement ('who shared it'). These signals can be useful but are not always dependable.

- **Checking is experienced as work.** Verification demands time, skills, and motivation, and is often selective. When overwhelmed, young people may delegate checking to trusted individuals, disengage, or regard content as entertainment rather than truth-claims.

- **Trust is uneven and often contested.** Institutional trust varies across contexts, but scepticism towards politics and media incentives is common. In lower-trust settings, interpersonal trust and community cues become more influential.

- **Risk heightens during periods of high salience.** Elections, crises, and polarising social issues amplify exposure and emotional stress. In these moments, feeds can seem 'unavoidable', and reactions tend to become anxious, conflicted, avoidant, or hyper-vigilant.

Implications and leverage points

The findings highlight the need for interventions that target both individual abilities and systemic factors. Major leverage points include:

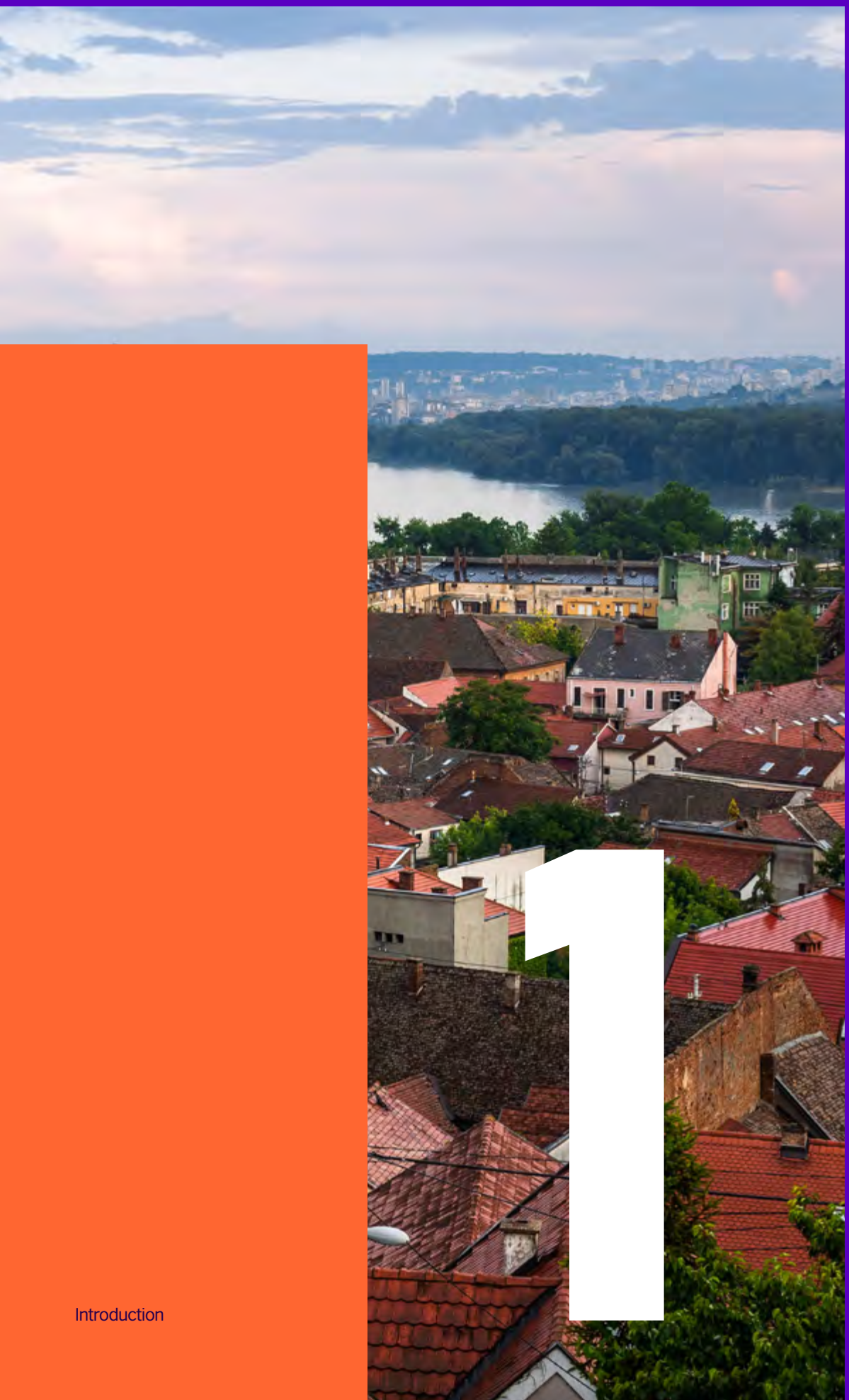
- Enhancing media and information literacy (MIL) as a practical, cross-curricular skill set, supported by ongoing professional development (CPD) for teachers.
- Creating youth-focused content and resources that are platform-specific, concise, and delivered through trusted intermediaries, including peer-to-peer and co-created formats.
- Supporting quality media and fact-checkers to enhance youth engagement through explainers and partnerships with trusted creators, while safeguarding editorial independence.
- Enhancing institutional communication by ensuring consistency, transparency, and responsiveness, especially during high-pressure moments.
- Advancing platform accountability measures (labelling, transparency, advertising controls, and mitigation of amplification incentives), in line with rights-based approaches.

Introduction

Young people in the Western Balkans 6 (WB6) navigate fast-changing, highly personalised information environments that are shaped as much by social relationships as by media institutions. Content reaches young people through a mix of public platforms and semi-private or private channels, including group chats and forwarded posts. In these spaces, claims are often encountered in short, shareable formats (videos, memes, screenshots), and credibility judgements are frequently made under time pressure with limited context.

These dynamics are important because they affect how young people form opinions, make decisions, and participate in civic life. They also influence exposure to mis/disinformation and harmful or manipulative content, especially during high-salience times such as elections, crises, or polarising social issues. At the same time, young people are not passive recipients. They actively interpret, ignore, challenge, or share content, drawing on a mix of personal experience, peer networks, and cues about trust.

This report shares insights from a mixed-methods study on youth information environments and mis/disinformation across the WB6. It examines everyday practices, perceptions, and pressures that shape how information is encountered and acted upon. In line with the overarching aims of the Next Generation research programme, the report highlights implications and recommendations for policy and programming.



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1.1 Background and rationale

Public debate on mis/disinformation often assumes that falsehoods are corrected through individual fact checking or that 'better information' will automatically attract attention. Findings from this study across the WB6 suggest a more complex reality. Young people describe an environment characterised by high volume, fragmented attention, and shifting trust. In practice, checking is experienced as work: it requires time, motivation, and access to reliable sources, and it is not always feasible in fast-moving feeds.

In parallel, platform design and monetisation structures influence what becomes visible. Recommendation systems can amplify emotionally charged content, while advertising and creator ecosystems can blur boundaries between information, persuasion, and entertainment. Comment sections and group dynamics can further shape interpretation, sometimes clarifying claims, but often intensifying conflict, polarisation, or cynicism.

The purpose of this study is to go beyond a narrow focus on 'false content' and to explore the wider information environments in which young people live: how exposure occurs, which cues influence credibility judgments, how trust is built or broken down, and which moments or topics heighten risk. This approach supports more realistic and effective responses that acknowledge both individual agency and structural limitations.

1.2 Study objectives and research questions

Study objectives

The study aims to:

- Describe young people's information environments in the WB6, including platforms, pathways, and social interactions.
- Understand how young people evaluate credibility, including the cues and shortcuts they use in real-world situations.
- Explore how mis/disinformation and harmful narratives spread, especially during heightened moments.
- Identify how exposure and overload impact wellbeing, participation, and everyday decision-making.
- Generate actionable implications and leverage points for policy, education, media, and programming.

Research questions

The study is guided by the following questions:

- How do young people in the WB6 access information, and which platforms and channels shape everyday exposure?
- What formats and pathways most commonly bring claims into young people's attention (for example, recommendations, creators, comments, forwards, and advertising)?
- Which cues are used to judge credibility, and how do time pressure, emotion, and trust in institutions influence these judgements?
- How do young people recognise, verify, and respond to misinformation and disinformation, and how do these experiences influence confidence in information sources?
- How do social relationships (peers, family, communities, creators) shape what is believed, shared, challenged, or ignored?
- Which topics and periods are experienced as 'high-risk' or high-intensity, and why?
- What implications follow for strengthening media and information literacy, institutional communication, platform accountability, and youth-facing interventions?

1.3 Country coverage and audiences

Country coverage

The study examines the WB6:

1. Albania
2. Bosnia and Herzegovina
3. Kosovo
4. Montenegro
5. North Macedonia
6. Serbia

Findings are presented on two levels:

- A WB6-wide synthesis highlighting shared dynamics and cross-cutting themes.
- Country snapshots that frame findings within national contexts and highlight distinctive patterns.

Intended audiences

The report is designed for:

- Policymakers and public institutions involved in education, youth, media, and digital policy.
- Educators, curriculum designers, and teacher training providers.
- Civil society organisations and youth organisations developing media and information literacy or digital resilience initiatives.
- Media, fact-checkers, and professional associations aiming to enhance youth engagement and trust.
- Platforms, regulators, and stakeholders focused on online safety, transparency, and accountability.
- Donors and international organisations supporting youth, civic participation, and information integrity in the region.

1.4 How to read the report

The report is organised to facilitate both quick navigation and in-depth analysis.

- **Chapters 2–4** set out context, concepts, and the study approach. This includes key definitions and the logic for interpreting information environments, credibility cues, and decision-making under real-world conditions.

- **Chapter 5** explores youth information environments in plain terms (platforms, formats, social dynamics, trust landscape, and risk moments).

- **Chapters 6–8** present the key thematic findings. Each theme is backed by evidence from various methods and emphasises mechanisms, tensions, and implications.

In addition to this report, a number of other annexes are available that provide additional transparency and supporting material (for example, theme-to-code mapping and triangulation displays, where applicable). Annexes are available on request from researchglobal@britishcouncil.org.

Evidence is triangulated across methods. Convergence across methods is regarded as stronger support, while divergence is considered analytically meaningful and discussed as an indicator of differences between public visibility and lived experience (for example, between what is observable in public content and what circulates in semi-private spaces).

For readers looking for practical takeaways, the implications and leverage points section can be read as a standalone summary of action areas, which can then be linked back to the supporting evidence in the thematic chapters.

Note on evidence and interpretation

Desk review evidence is used to provide context on youth, media, and digital conditions across the WB6. The thematic findings in Chapters 6–8 are based on qualitative evidence and triangulated across focus group discussions, key informant interviews, Social Media Diaries (SMD), and Light Social Listening. When evidence varies across methods, this is considered meaningful and discussed as a sign of differences between public visibility and lived experience (including content circulating in semi-private or private spaces).

Regional and country context

This chapter outlines the regional and national context necessary to understand the findings. It summarises the main features of youth information environments across the WB6 and highlights country-specific factors that influence exposure, trust, and daily decision-making. The aim is not to provide an extensive policy review but to focus on contextual elements directly relevant to the evidence in Chapters 6–8, including platform pathways, credibility cues, and the institutional and media dynamics that shape accountability. Country snapshots in Section 2.2 offer brief profiles for each WB6 context, with detailed background information available in Annex A.

Desk review evidence is used here to provide context; the thematic findings are derived from qualitative evidence and triangulated across FGDs, KIIs, Social Media Diaries, and Light Social Listening.

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2.1 Regional overview of youth information environments in the WB6

Across the Western Balkans Six (WB6), young people's information environments are shaped by three overlapping dynamics: platform-centric news habits, weak and contested media systems, and uneven provision of media and information literacy (MIL) services. The net effect is an environment in which young people often recognise the risks of misinformation but must navigate them through shortcuts such as peer endorsement, familiarity, perceived 'officialness', and ad hoc verification, rather than relying on stable institutional anchors.

Regional surveys and assessments reveal limited formal training for credibility assessment. In the initial scoping of the study, fewer than 40 per cent of young respondents across the region were reported to have received any formal instruction on evaluating information credibility, reinforcing a reliance on heuristics rather than systematic verification (BIRN, 2026).

Simultaneously, structural weaknesses in media ecosystems (such as political polarisation, market fragility, and inconsistent professional standards) influence both what reaches young people and how they interpret it. This is especially evident during high-salience moments (such as political crises, public safety incidents, and polarising identity issues), when emotionally charged content spreads rapidly across feeds and messaging channels, while trusted corrective signals tend to be slower or less visible.

Media and information literacy provision remains inconsistent and often project focused. Regional assessments cited in the inception work for this study suggest that many MIL efforts are driven by NGOs and international organisations rather than being systematically integrated into school curricula, with responsibilities scattered across ministries, regulators, and schools (BIRN, 2026). When curricula are present, they are frequently cross-curricular or optional, which can weaken delivery and leave teachers without ongoing, classroom-ready support.

The country snapshots below utilise desk research compiled by country researchers and supporting sources to outline the main features of each youth information environment relevant for interpreting the findings.

2.2 Country snapshots

These snapshots provide short profiles of each country's youth information environment, focusing on:
(i) how young people typically access information,
(ii) the main vulnerabilities (misinformation, harmful content, trust and integrity risks), and
(iii) the policy and practice context (MIL and relevant institutional responses).

Albania

In Albania, social media is becoming an increasingly central way for young people to access information, with blurred lines between 'news', entertainment, and influencer content. A regional media trends report states that social media is the primary source of information for youth, reflecting the growing influence of social networks on daily behaviour (SEENPM, 2025).

MIL has been the focus of numerous policy and programme initiatives. A national background review outlines efforts to develop an integrated MIL curriculum aligned with UNESCO competencies, planned to be piloted across selected primary and secondary schools (EMI, 2021). More recently, UNESCO reported an expansion of MIL integration by training teacher trainers to cascade MIL skills to peers (UNESCO, 2025).

The broader platform environment is also influenced by policy debates and public concern about harms associated with short-video platforms, including discussions of restrictions and safety measures (Reuters, 2025). While this report's findings mainly rely on qualitative accounts, these contextual factors are relevant for understanding how risk and responsibility are viewed by both youth and adults.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina's information environment features a strong traditional role for television, high social media use, and significant exposure to politicised and identity-related narratives. A comparative report on social media and information dynamics revealed that, although television remains the most common news source, approximately 50 per cent of respondents access news daily via social networks (BFMI, 2022).

Platform use is dominated by Facebook in the public social media sphere, with Facebook accounting for a very large share of social media users and about half of users aged 18–34 (BFMI, 2022). In practice, youth information pathways often shift smoothly among portals, social platforms, and interpersonal sharing, which can both accelerate credible reporting and enable the spread of misleading claims.

Based on this study's qualitative evidence, Bosnia and Herzegovina is notable for its strong focus on outlet transparency and institutional capacity constraints, including interest in ownership/impressum cues as credibility signals (BIRN, 2026).

Bosnia and Herzegovina is advancing through a pilot phase rather than a standard formal rollout of media and information literacy (MIL) in schools. UNESCO states that pilot testing was approved at the canton and entity levels, with librarian and teacher training linked to implementation in 30 schools across Sarajevo Canton, Herzegovina-Neretva Canton, and Republika Srpska, beginning in the 2021/2022 academic year (UNESCO, 2023; Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, n.d.). Simultaneously, Sarajevo Canton has introduced a dedicated strategy to develop MIL within the education system, signalling policy integration in at least part of the country's fragmented governance structure (Ministry for Education of Sarajevo Canton, 2022). This approach places implementation capacity at the centre: coverage and consistency rely on ongoing teacher support and coordination among multiple education authorities.

Kosovo

In Kosovo, television remains a key source of information for the general population, while social media is increasingly an important alternative channel, especially for younger audiences. A media trends profile states that television remains the main information source, with social media (particularly Facebook and Instagram) gaining popularity as alternative sources (SEENPM, 2025).

On MIL, a recent review of Kosovo highlights that media literacy is mandated as a cross-curricular theme in pre-university education, with the extent of classroom integration varying in practice (Hibrid.info, 2024).

Montenegro

Montenegro's youth information environment is predominantly digital and increasingly influenced by semi-private communication channels. National strategy documents highlight that young people primarily gather information through social networks and online portals, and that they are expected to continue doing so (Government of Montenegro, 2023). As information circulates through messaging apps and closed groups, it can also escape public debate and journalistic correction, creating parallel 'realities' that are difficult to counter through conventional media responses.

The youth strategy further emphasises the importance of strengthening skills and protective infrastructure, including through civic education and media literacy in schools, reflecting concerns about unreliable and manipulative content environments (Government of Montenegro, 2023). This context is significant when interpreting the study's findings on selective checking, low reporting, and the expectation that responsibility lies 'upstream'.

Montenegro introduced media literacy as an elective subject in primary education during the 2023/24 school year, supported by teacher guidelines developed under a UNESCO-linked initiative (UNESCO, 2023). This offers a clear entry point in formal schooling, but scale and continuity will depend on available resources and ongoing teacher support, including alignment with broader youth policy priorities on digital and media skills (Government of Montenegro, 2023).

Trust in the media is a particular vulnerability. The 2024 national youth study reports that trust in media is among the lowest, with only 15.8 per cent of respondents indicating they trust media fully or to a significant extent (Ostojić, 2024).

North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, the youth information environment is characterised by high digital engagement and increasing concern about misinformation and online risks. The country desk research source list compiled for this study highlights national evidence on adolescent online behaviour and safety (UNICEF, 2020–2023), youth policy priorities including digital competencies (Agency for Youth and Sport, 2023–2027), and survey work on youth news consumption and misinformation recognition (ICS, n.d.).

Media literacy has also been promoted through education-related programmes. A notable example is the 'YouThink' programme, which reports the integration of media literacy education into primary and secondary schools and its connection to teacher development, including pre-service training (IREX, 2022). Institutional focus is also demonstrated by the work of the national audio-visual regulator, which assesses media literacy among secondary school students, thereby supporting a more targeted understanding of their needs (AVMU, 2024).

The same source compilation indicates that national stakeholders have been assessing media trust, integrity challenges, and disinformation risks through dedicated studies and monitoring reports (e.g., IREX, 2024; Metamorphosis, 2024), and that media literacy has been measured among secondary school students by the audio-visual regulator AVMU (AVMU, 2024).

The same report also highlights that media literacy has been introduced as an optional school subject ('language, media and culture'), but stakeholders favour a stronger approach by integrating media literacy across other subjects and earlier years (IREX, 2024).

Serbia

In Serbia, a complex and polarised media ecosystem interacts with widespread platform use and ongoing concerns over manipulation, privacy breaches, and online harms. The 2024 Vibrant Information Barometer report for Serbia highlights instances of surveillance and harassment of activists and student protesters, as well as the circulation of manipulated or false information aimed at discrediting public figures (IREX, 2024). It also notes a high level of digital rights violations and online infringements in 2023, with fraud, threats, and manipulation accounting for a significant portion (IREX, 2024).

The same report highlights that media literacy has been introduced as an optional school subject ('language, media and culture'), but stakeholders favour a stronger approach by integrating media literacy across other subjects and earlier years (IREX, 2024).

Comparative evidence also highlights Facebook's dominance within Serbia's social media user base and the significance of social networks as a news source for a substantial proportion of internet users (BFMI, 2022). In the study's qualitative synthesis, Serbia is also noted for calls to clarify standards and the role of regulatory bodies (BIRN, 2026).

Conceptual framing

This chapter outlines the concepts and analytical approach used to understand how young people in the WB6 encounter, evaluate, and respond to contested information. Instead of viewing misinformation simply as a 'content problem', it is considered a prevalent aspect of young people's everyday information environments: influenced by platform design, social connections, trust in institutions, and the broader media and policy landscape.

3

3.1 Key concepts and definitions

The study uses the following definitions:

- **Misinformation:** Misinformation refers to verifiably false information that is shared without an intent to mislead.
- **Disinformation:** Disinformation refers to verifiably false information that is shared with an intent to deceive and mislead.
- **Malinformation:** In some instances, the study also considers malinformation – information that deliberately misleads by twisting the meaning of truthful information.

Trust is the central organising concept of this research: It is defined as 'the belief that a source, platform, or piece of content is reliable, credible, and shared in good faith.'

Trust can be expressed on three levels:

- **Institutional trust,** directed towards media outlets, governments, platforms, or organisations.
- **Interpersonal trust,** based on relationships with peers, influencers, or family members, and
- **Situational trust** differs depending on the topic, platform, or context.

Throughout the report, these concepts are treated as practical and contextual. Young people do not encounter information in neat categories; they navigate mixed signals, inconsistent accountability, and varied incentives across platforms, media outlets, and interpersonal networks. The definitions above offer a consistent point of reference for interpretation across different countries and methods.

3.2 How we think about 'information environments'

Information environments are understood as the collective conditions that shape what young people encounter, what becomes prominent, and how credibility judgements are formed in practice. This includes public media, platform infrastructures, semi-private spaces (messaging apps, closed groups), interpersonal relationships, and institutional communication.

To structure the analysis of these environments, the study adopts a behavioural model that conceptualises digital behaviour as a sequence of connected actions: exposure → judgement → trust → sharing.

The report defines each stage as follows:

- **Exposure:** How young people encounter information online, through news feeds, direct messages, group chats, influencers, or recommended content.
- **Engagement:** How young people engage with content – reading, watching, commenting, liking, or ignoring it.
- **Trust (as a stage in the model):** How credibility is evaluated after a user interacts with content.
- **Sharing (or ignoring):** The behavioural outcome: choosing whether to share, discuss, fact-check, or ignore a piece of information.

This model highlights a key point in the qualitative analysis: credibility judgements are seldom made in isolation. They are influenced by exposure conditions (what appears and how frequently), the tone and social dynamics of engagement (including comments and peer reactions), the trust cues available (people, outlets, platforms), and the perceived outcomes of sharing or challenging content.

3.3 Trust, credibility cues, and decision-making

Building on the inception framing, the report explores trust as both:
a) a clearly defined concept, and
b) a decision point within the exposure–judgement–trust–sharing sequence.

In real-world situations, young people often make credibility judgements quickly, under time pressure and overload. They therefore depend on 'credibility cues': signals that assist them in deciding whether something feels sufficiently reliable to accept, act on, ignore, or pass on.

Throughout the qualitative analysis, these cues cluster around three practical reference points:

- **Source-based cues:** who shared it, whether the source is seen as 'official', familiar, or aligned with a trusted community.

- **Content-based cues:** whether the content 'fits' prior understanding, looks plausible, or shows signs of manipulation.

- **Social and platform cues:** how others interact with it (shares, comments, influencer framing) and how platforms influence visibility (recommendations, trends, paid amplification).

These cue-based judgements are not merely 'good' or 'bad' literacy. They are adaptive responses to an environment where information is plentiful, verification is costly, and institutional trust can be fragile or disputed. When institutional trust is low, interpersonal trust may become the default. In situations of high polarisation, young people often interpret information mainly through perceived intent ('agenda') rather than evidence. In the noisy and emotionally charged platform environment, attention-grabbing cues can overshadow cues of reliability.

This lens also helps explain avoidance and disengagement. When checking involves time, emotional effort, or social conflict, 'ignoring' can be a rational coping strategy rather than a sign of apathy. This is especially noticeable during high-salience moments (elections, crises, polarising debates), when young people may find information overwhelming and tiring.

3.4 What this study adds (relative to existing evidence)

The study enhances understanding by linking established concepts (misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, and trust) to real-life youth decision-making across various methods and countries, using the inception report's behavioural sequence to ensure consistent interpretation.

First, it captures not only what young people say they 'should' do, but what they actually do across the exposure–engagement–trust–sharing sequence, including the trade-offs they make under overload.

Second, it treats trust as the organising concept and explores how trust shifts across institutional, interpersonal, and situational levels, rather than assuming a single, stable trust relationship.

Third, it enhances credibility through triangulation. As the inception report states, 'Triangulation will be performed on two levels.' It distinguishes:

- Convergence, which reinforces confidence when similar themes appear across multiple data sources, and

- Divergence, which is flagged for further interpretation (indicating contextual differences, subgroup variations, or methodological limits).

This is important for the final report because it considers mismatches across methods (for example, between perceived exposure in diaries and visibility in public social listening) as analytically significant rather than as errors to be smoothed out.

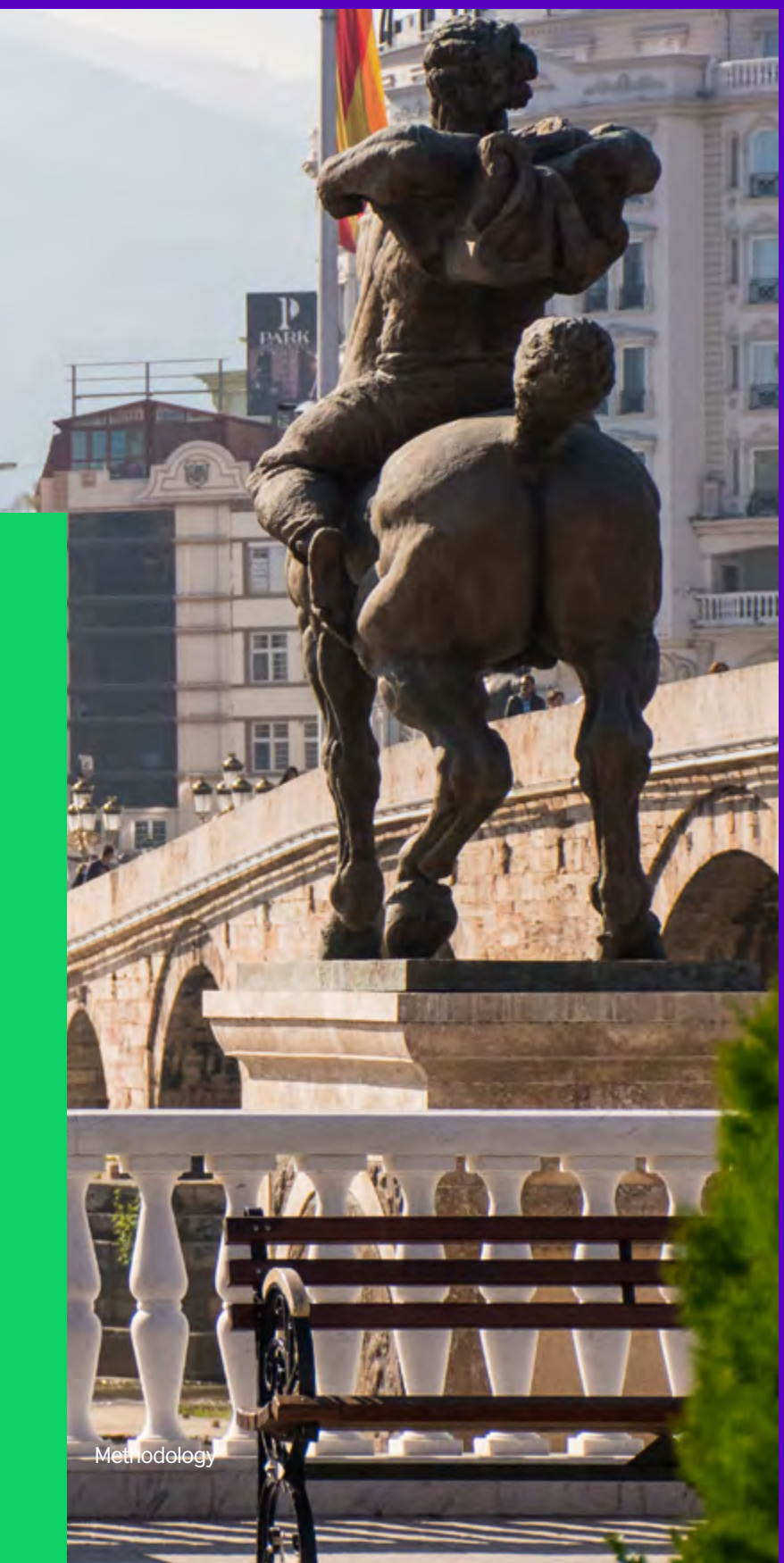
Finally, the study incorporates participatory validation into interpretation (as detailed elsewhere in the report), helping ensure that findings are not only about young people but also informed by youth perspectives and grounded experience.

Together, this conceptual framework supports the report's main message:

Strengthening youth resilience is not just about individual skills. It also requires attention to the environments that influence visibility, normalisation, and the real-world risks of checking, speaking out, or disengaging.

Methodology

4


PARK

4.1 Research design and approach

This study uses a multi-method qualitative approach to explore how young people aged 18-30 across the Western Balkans encounter, interpret, and respond to mis/disinformation in everyday digital environments. The methodology is intentionally layered. Focus groups with young people and interviews with key stakeholders explore how trust, credibility, and responsibility, while social media diaries record 'in-the-moment' exposure and behaviour as it happens. Light social listening offers contextual insights into the broader public-facing information landscape during the same period. A participatory validation layer was also integrated into the research process to enhance interpretation, ensure resonance with young people, and translate evidence into practical leverage points.

The methodological logic follows a straightforward sequence: **exposure → judgement → action → impact**, considering the mechanisms that influence each step (such as trust shortcuts, verification friction, platform amplification dynamics, and emotional overload). When different methods produce varying results, these discrepancies are regarded as analytically significant rather than errors.

4.2 Country coverage

The research examines six Western Balkans contexts: **Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia.** Country teams used harmonised tools and reporting frameworks to enable cross-country comparison while maintaining contextual detail. All country-level materials were anonymised and aggregated for regional analysis.

4.3 Data sources and collection methods

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

FGDs were used to explore shared language, norms, and social dynamics related to credibility, trust, platform use, and information routines. Group settings proved particularly helpful for understanding how young people collectively negotiate meaning, how peer influence shapes beliefs and sharing, and how normative claims (what young people say they 'should' do) are formed and circulated.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

KIIs were conducted with adult stakeholders and experts to gather system-level perspectives across areas such as education, media and journalism, institutions and regulators, civil society, fact-checking, and digital rights. KIIs help position youth experiences within broader institutional and ecosystem dynamics and enable triangulation between what young people report and what practitioners observe.

Social Media Diaries (SMDs)

Social media diaries were created to document exposure and reactions as closely as possible in real time. Each diary entry was transformed into an 'episode' detailing platform, content type or topic, attention and response, belief judgement, actions taken (for example, ignoring, checking, sharing, discussing, reporting), and the credibility cues the diarist relied on. Diaries enable the analysis to explore the gap between expressed norms and actual behaviour, including when and why checking becomes selective, and how humour and a sense of belonging influence sharing.

Dataset note (SMD participation): Across the compiled episode files, the number of diarists varies by country. The current episode datasets include sixty-seven diarists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, and Montenegro. Episode volume also varies by country, reflecting participation levels and diary density rather than differences in 'importance'.

Light Social Listening (LSL)

Light social listening was used as a way to triangulate context, aiming to identify key public narratives and platform trends during the research period. LSL does not mimic an individual's personalised feed; instead, it offers a structured view of what is publicly visible in searchable spaces and how specific narratives and formats circulate. In this study, LSL findings were incorporated as contextual indicators alongside FGDs, KIIs, and diary evidence.

Coverage note (LSL): LSL outputs were available for some countries during analysis, with partial coverage elsewhere due to operational constraints. When LSL is missing or limited, it is treated explicitly as a limitation and does not invalidate the youth-reported experiences captured through FGDs and diaries.

4.4 Sampling and recruitment

Sampling was designed to ensure comparability while capturing a wide range of youth experiences across gender, geography, and everyday digital practices. Young participants were recruited through country teams using purposive methods to guarantee a diverse mix of educational backgrounds and levels of digital engagement. Key informants were chosen for their relevance to the information environment, policy and practice levers, and their professional proximity to issues facing youth.

The analysis separates two participant groups from across WB6: **young people** between the ages of 18-30 (13 focus group discussions with 124 youth participants, plus social media diaries with 67 youth participants; 160 youth participants in total across youth methods, including 109 women/girls, 50 men/boys, and one participant with gender not recorded) and **adult stakeholders/experts** (48 key informant interviews with 48 stakeholders, comprising 28 women and 20 men). This structure facilitates a comparison between lived experiences and system-level insights.

4.5 Ethics, safeguarding, and data management

The research aimed to reduce risk and ensure participants' privacy. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent, and all materials were anonymised. Transcripts and diary entries were de-identified, stored securely, and used solely for research. Due to the sensitivity of certain topics (such as political polarisation, identity-related narratives, and online harassment), facilitators and interviewers employed youth-sensitive language and avoided unnecessary exposure to harmful content.

Data handling followed a structured workflow: **collection → transcription and anonymisation → coding and synthesis → triangulation → validation** and development of recommendations. Quotations used in the report are translated into English and edited only for clarity, where necessary, while preserving meaning; identifying details are removed.

4.6 Analysis approach and triangulation

Analysis combined structured coding with iterative thematic synthesis. Materials from FGDs and KIIs were coded using an ATLAS.ti codebook (v2), enabling consistent tagging of credibility cues, behaviours, barriers, emotions, and system-level dynamics. Diary entries were converted into episodes and analysed both as behavioural evidence and as narrative accounts of how credibility is judged 'in the moment'. LSL logs were regarded as contextual signals and integrated where they aid in interpreting or qualifying self-reported exposure.

Themes were developed iteratively, progressing from coded evidence to draft thematic claims, then testing boundaries and tensions across countries and methods. The final framework comprises seven main themes and two minor themes or signals. Throughout, triangulation functions as a guiding principle rather than a mechanical checklist. When methods align, the finding is reinforced. When methods diverge, the discrepancy is acknowledged as a meaningful signal, for example, the recurring gap between 'checking as a norm' and selective checking in diaries, or between perceived 'unavoidable' exposure and what can be observed in public traces.

Cross-country synthesis draws on a comparative matrix that tracks the relative visibility of themes across national datasets. These proportions serve to indicate emphasis within the coded corpus, not to rank 'severity' or generate performance scores.

4.7 Participatory validation and co-creation

A participatory validation layer was included to enhance interpretation, improve language, and ensure recommendations stay rooted in young people's real experiences and are practical for practitioners. This layer did not replace the evidence base; instead, it acted as a structured 'sense-check' and translation tool.

Youth Advisory Group (YAG)

The Youth Advisory Group (YAG; 12 members) offered a direct youth perspective on the emerging synthesis across three meetings (16 December 2025; 15 January 2026; 5 February 2026).

The kick-off meeting (16 December 2025) introduced the study and the YAG's role and explored what 'success' would look like and which youth groups should receive particular attention. In this discussion, members emphasised the importance of not overlooking young people from rural communities, NEET youth, minorities, non-university youth, young people in secondary vocational education, and those who are not engaged in extracurricular or civic activities. The second meeting (15 January 2026) revisited the pilot synthesis (based on a small sample from two countries and not yet representative) to test whether early patterns 'made sense' before moving into full analysis.

During the third YAG meeting (5 February 2026), members cross-checked the draft of seven main themes and two minor themes, identified what 'rings true', highlighted what felt missing or overstated, and helped clarify key tensions, especially the gap between what young people say they do and what diaries show in practice. The session also served as an early reality check on recommendations, concentrating on their usefulness and feasibility.

'Stop & think' sessions

The study also incorporated 'Stop & Think' activities as structured reflection moments to test early framing, youth-sensitive language, and the practical relevance of emerging insights. These sessions served as a rapid feedback mechanism, enabling the research team to refine how themes are communicated and which everyday behaviours and constraints to highlight. In total, we conducted one group 'Stop & Think' session, complemented by several one-to-one 'Stop & Think' check-ins during delivery (including iterative consultations with key interlocutors) to pressure-test emerging insights and recommendations.

Regional policy co-creation clinic

A regional policy co-creation clinic was used to evaluate implications and identify feasible leverage points. The clinic was organised on 10 February 2026 and brought together 13 participants. The clinic aimed to translate evidence into practical recommendations with clearer ownership among stakeholder groups (education, media, platforms, institutions, and civil society). It also helped refine the balance between youth support and upstream accountability measures.

Integration into the analysis was deliberate: validation inputs were used to refine theme boundaries, enhance the description of mechanisms and tensions, and improve the framing of feasibility. Validation did not introduce new claims without supporting evidence in the underlying dataset.

4.8 Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

First, variation exists in the completeness and consistency of social media diary (SMD) entries across participants and countries, which influences how confidently we can compare patterns or draw conclusions about frequency. Diary participation and episode density vary across contexts, and this should be regarded as a limitation of behavioural evidence rather than a substantive difference in youth experience.

Second, timing effects are important. Data collection happened alongside various national and regional events, platform trends, and news cycles, which may have affected what participants experienced, paid attention to, or decided to record.

Third, differences in platform access and usage profiles shape exposure. Whether participants had accounts, how actively they used specific platforms, and what content algorithms presented to them means that exposure is not uniform; similarly, light social listening detects public, searchable traces and cannot reliably observe private or semi-private spaces (messaging apps, closed groups) where some narratives circulate. As a result, perceived 'unavoidable' exposure may not always be visible through public monitoring.

Fourth, participant selection was purposive, aligned with practical eligibility criteria, and consistent with field access. This means the sample may skew towards young people who are relatively active in civic or community life and, in some cases, already connected to BIRN or British Council activities or networks. The profile also tends to include participants with higher levels of formal education (often at least bachelor-level studies). This does not invalidate the findings, but it may under-represent experiences of less connected or less formally educated young people, and it should be kept in mind when interpreting the prevalence or generalisability of certain patterns.

Finally, as with all research on contentious topics, there is a risk of social desirability bias in group discussions and interviews. The design partly reduces this risk through triangulation with diaries and contextual monitoring, but it cannot fully eliminate it.

These factors do not undermine the validity of the findings, but they do require cautious interpretation – especially when distinguishing between what appears common and what may be influenced by uneven participation, timing, or platform-specific dynamics.

Youth information environments in the WB6

Youth information environments in the WB6 are shaped by a combination of platform design, social connections, and high-volume content flows. Young people describe moving swiftly across multiple spaces (public platforms, semi-private groups, and private messaging), with feeds that are increasingly personalised and 'always on'. In these environments, exposure is rarely intentional: what becomes visible is heavily influenced by recommendation systems, paid content, and engagement cues such as comments and shares.

This chapter provides a descriptive overview of the everyday conditions in which (mis/dis)information is encountered. It draws on a desk review to set context, while the thematic findings in Chapters 6–8 are grounded in qualitative evidence and triangulated across FGDs, KIIs, SMD, and LSL.

5

5.1 Platforms and access

Young people usually operate across multiple platforms rather than relying on just one. Their usage patterns are influenced by convenience, habit, and perceived relevance, with different platforms fulfilling different roles (for example, short-form entertainment, news updates, community discussion, or private coordination). Access is also affected by device and data limitations, which can impact their dependence on mobile-first, low-friction formats.

A key feature of access is the mixture of public and private spaces. Besides mainstream platforms, private or semi-private channels (messaging apps, closed groups, forwarded posts) are widely utilised for social connection and quick sharing. These spaces can be trusted more and operate faster, but they are less transparent and traceable, which influences how claims are shared and how easily they can be verified.

These access patterns help explain why exposure is often described as 'unavoidable' and why visibility can differ between what individuals see in their feeds and what can be observed in publicly available data.

5.2 Content formats and pathways

Content is often found in compressed, highly shareable formats: short videos, memes, screenshots, captions over images, and clipped excerpts. These formats spread quickly because they are easy to consume and share, but they often detach claims from their context (source, time, original framing). As a result, interpretation often depends on surface cues (presentation, 'official' styling, follower counts) or social cues (who shared it, how others react).

Paths into young people's feeds are not restricted to 'news seeking'. Exposure can happen through entertainment content, influencers and creators, recommended posts, and algorithmically amplified controversy. Sponsored content and political advertising may also appear alongside everyday content, sometimes without clear labelling or with limited user awareness of how targeting functions.

When claims travel through closed channels such as forwards and group chats, assessing provenance becomes particularly challenging. In these cases, the pathway itself can serve as a credibility cue: 'it came through someone I know' may be more significant than the original source.

5.3 Peer, creator, and community dynamics

Peer networks remain vital to how information is understood and shared. Sharing is often more social than informational: forwarding can represent belonging, humour, identity, or participation in a group conversation. This can establish a 'circulation layer' in which content spreads even when belief is partial, uncertain, or lacking.

Creators and influencers also act as intermediaries within information environments. For some young people, creators are seen as more relatable or 'real' than formal institutions, particularly when institutions are viewed as slow, political, or inconsistent. At the same time, creator-driven ecosystems are shaped by engagement incentives, and young people included in the research often notice that controversy, sensationalism, and polarisation can be rewarded with higher visibility.

Community dynamics are particularly evident in comment sections and group spaces. Comments can serve as social proof (affirming, challenging, or reinterpreting a claim), but they may also distort understanding through conflict, coordinated messaging, or toxicity. In practice, comments are often used as a quick cue, especially when time or motivation to verify is limited.

5.4 Trust landscape

Trust is rarely expressed as unconditional confidence in a single institution or outlet. Instead, credibility judgements often travel through social trust networks and proxy cues. Young people commonly describe relying on trusted individuals (friends, family, teachers, known journalists) and familiar pages, especially when they feel the broader environment is confusing or manipulated.

Credibility cues are often practical rather than ideological: recognisable branding, 'official-looking' presentation, verification-like signals, and high engagement can be seen as signs of legitimacy, even if these cues are not dependable. When institutional trust is low, young people may turn to interpersonal trust ('someone would tell me if it was false') or avoid it altogether ('I ignore it because it is exhausting').

This trust landscape matters because it influences not only what is believed but also what is shared, ignored, or dismissed as 'just content'. It also clarifies why solutions based solely on individual responsibility ('verify everything') can seem impractical in high-volume environments.

5.5 Risk moments and high-intensity topics

Risk increases during high-salience moments when attention is heightened and uncertainty is greater. Young people report spikes in exposure during politically charged periods, crises, and polarising social issues. In these times, feeds can feel saturated, emotionally intense, and more difficult to navigate, with increased amounts of sensational content, accusations, and mobilising narratives.

High-intensity topics are also more likely to trigger rapid sharing, stronger emotional reactions, and conflict in comments or group spaces. This increases the likelihood that credibility judgements are made quickly, outsourced to social cues, or replaced by avoidance to protect wellbeing. In practice, 'risk moments' are not only about the content itself but also about the pace and pressure of the environment: volume, speed, emotional triggers, and reduced capacity to check.

These conditions help explain why some young people become hyper-vigilant or anxious, while others disengage or treat content as entertainment, responses that can both reduce harm at the individual level and create vulnerabilities at the collective level.

Findings: Seven main themes

The seven main themes in this chapter explain how young people in the WB6 navigate daily information environments shaped by social relationships, platform design, and uneven accountability. While each theme is introduced separately, they are closely linked in practice. Trust often travels through people and familiar sources (Theme 1), while checking is seen as work and is therefore selective or outsourced (Theme 2). Platform systems then influence what becomes visible and repeatedly encountered, shaping perceptions of what feels 'normal' or unavoidable (Theme 3). These dynamics produce important second-order effects. Sharing can act as humour or a sense of belonging rather than endorsement, but it still amplifies content through networks and engagement signals (Theme 4). Over time, high-volume and intense exposure can lead to emotions such as confusion, anxiety, and withdrawal (Theme 5). In response, many young people attribute responsibility to upstream factors, calling for better standards, enforcement, and platform accountability instead of placing the entire burden on individuals (Theme 6). Lastly, they see media and information literacy as intergenerational infrastructure: something that must be supported by schools, families, and communities, and updated as the environment changes (Theme 7).

Throughout the chapter, differences between methods are regarded as analytically significant. When what young people say does not fully align with what is recorded in diaries or during light social listening, this is not viewed as an error. Instead, it often highlights a key mechanism, such as the gap between norms and behaviour, or the limitations of what can be observed in public spaces compared to private and personalised feeds.

6

6.1 Theme 1
Trust travels through people (social proof as the default credibility shortcut)

Young people often decide whether content is credible based on who shared it or who seems to stand behind it, relying on proxy trust cues before (and sometimes instead of) evaluating the evidence.

What it means

This theme captures credibility as a social judgement. Rather than assessing claims directly, many young people rely on signals such as familiarity, reputation, perceived expertise, and 'officialness'. Trust is often attached to a person, a page, or a recognisable outlet, and then carried across networks through reposts, recommendations, and group chats.

This is important because the same cues that help young people cope with high-volume feeds can also be engineered. When trust is 'portable', it can be borrowed, imitated, or expanded on a large scale.

How it works

In practice, three dynamics push credibility judgements towards social shortcuts. Firstly, volume and speed make careful checking seem time-consuming. Many participants described the need to decide quickly what to ignore, what to watch, and what to share. Second, credibility is often 'borrowed' from individuals and brands. Familiar friends, respected public figures (including journalists or professors), and accounts that appear official or professionally produced can serve as credibility anchors. Third, repetition can appear as confirmation. Repeating the same claim across multiple pages or outlets might be seen as reassurance, even if the underlying information has not been verified.

Evidence

Evidence is presented across three complementary lenses: what participants said in focus groups and interviews, what young people recorded in practice through social media diaries, and what was visible in the wider public-facing information environment during the same period. This structure allows comparison between reported attitudes, observed behaviour, and the broader information environment.

What we heard (FGD/KII)

Across focus groups and interviews, participants consistently described 'who posted it' as an early filter for credibility. Trust cues included the identity of the sharer, the perceived status of the speaker, and whether the account appeared official or established.

'It's really important to me who is sharing it. If I see a piece of news that someone I follow has shared, it matters to me who shared it.' (REG, FGD)

'I trust Klodiana Lala because she carries a lot of weight as a journalist in Albania.' (ALB, FGD)

'You have to be careful: some people talk about topics without being in that field at all. Then you realise they can't offer the credibility you need.' (KOS, FGD)

'If a professor from my faculty shares it, I'll have more confidence that it's accurate, because I trust that person, but of course I'll still check.' (REG, FGD)

What we saw in practice
Diary episodes demonstrate proxy trust functioning as an 'in-the-moment' rule. Participants frequently judged credibility based on account identity (such as an official page, a familiar outlet, or a recognised venue), and then engaged (watching, liking, saving, sharing) without further verification.

- In Bosnia and Herzegovina, one participant watched and shared a short reel from a football club and explicitly stated their trust because it was posted on the club's official page. (SMD, BiH)

- In Serbia, a participant interacted with an event announcement and stated believing it because it was an 'official announcement' from the venue, replying by saving and liking the post. (SMD, SRB)

- In Albania, a participant watched a short Instagram video and explicitly stated believing it because it was posted by an official media page ('Yes, because it was posted by the official Klan TV page'), then engaged by liking the post and opening the comments. (SMD, ALB)

'It's really important to me who is sharing it. If I see a piece of news that someone I follow has shared, it matters to me who shared it.'

REG, FGD

What was visible in the wider environment

Light social listening (LSL) reinforces how strongly the 'account layer' shapes visibility and interpretation. High-engagement content often circulates in platform-native formats (short clips, meme templates, repost chains), where the source is represented primarily by a handle, a page identity, or a 'news-style' presentation, rather than a clearly attributable publisher.

LSL fieldwork also revealed a practical constraint: it is difficult to recreate 'real' youth feeds with new accounts. 'Cold start' accounts often featured mostly international content, steering attention toward hashtag searches rather than the locally followed pages and people that shape everyday exposure. This matters because the cues young people most commonly mentioned, familiar people, local pages, and known creators, are precisely the elements that are least visible from a cold start account. (LSL field notes, MNE)

Cross-country patterns and differences

Across the WB6, proxy trust seems like a logical shortcut. Identity, familiarity, perceived expertise, 'officialness', popularity, and repetition serve as credibility anchors, particularly when under time pressure.

At the same time, these cues are unstable. Popularity and professional presentation can reassure, but they can also arouse suspicion (for example, assumptions about paid boosting or agenda-setting). Evidence also indicates a gap between norms and everyday behaviour: young people often describe checking as a principle, but diary entries show that checking is selective and more likely when a post feels personally significant or risky.

Why this matters

If credibility is linked to identity and social proof, then it can be fabricated. This introduces a structural weakness in the information landscape: the issue is not only that 'young people do not check', but also that trust itself can be transferred, borrowed, and scaled. Interventions must therefore go beyond simply encouraging individual verification. They should enhance literacy regarding credibility cues, support the integrity of accounts and identities, and increase the availability of reliable sources in the formats and spaces where trust is established.

6.2 Theme 2
Checking is work, so it gets outsourced (verification friction)

Verification is widelyrecognised as important, but it is experienced as effortful and time-consuming, so young people often outsource it to trusted people, rely on ‘good enough’ cues, or only check when the stakes feel high.

What the theme means

This theme highlights the gap between the ideal ('you should check') and actual practice ('I rarely have the time or tools'). Young people described verification as something that demands attention, skills, and motivation, resources that are unevenly available in fast-paced feeds and busy routines. As a result, checking tends to be selective: it is more likely when a topic feels personally relevant, risky, or significant.

This matters because verification friction does not just lead to 'passive consumption'. It influences which claims are accepted automatically, which narratives spread rapidly, and which risks are overlooked because they do not trigger a 'high stakes' response.

How it works

Verification friction arises from three interconnected constraints. *First, time and cognitive load:* checking conflicts with work, study, and daily life. When overwhelmed, a practical choice is often to move on instead of investigating. Second, confidence in *skills and tools:* some participants could describe basic checking behaviours (searching, comparing sources), but many said they did not have a clear method or were unsure which tools to use and how. Third, *outsourcing as a practical shortcut:* when uncertain, young people often turn to trusted peers, family members, or 'someone who would know', especially for topics they do not feel confident to assess alone.

Evidence

What we heard (FGD/KII)

Across focus groups, participants frequently viewed verification as conditional: they value it, but it is mainly initiated by perceived importance. One participant in Bosnia and Herzegovina explained that they assess when an issue is significant, but regard 'banal' content as not worth the effort: *'It depends what kind of information it is. If it is something really important – about the state or about things that are decisive for our lives – then, of course, it should be checked. But statistics and interesting facts, we tend to take for granted and move on.'* (Bosnia and Herzegovina, FGD).

In Serbia, one participant described trying to understand why they believe or disbelieve something, but lacking a reliable way to verify accuracy: *'I try to filter it and find a reason why I believe or do not believe. But I do not have a specific way to establish whether information is accurate, especially when there is no clear way to do that.'* (SRB, FGD). Outsourcing becomes evident when uncertainty exists. A participant in Montenegro explained that they set aside low-importance items but consult others when something seems significant: *'When I am not sure, it is often about things that are not very important, so I just leave them aside. But if something really matters, I try to find out. I send it to others to see if they have more accurate information.'* (MNE, FGD)

What we saw in practice
Diary episodes demonstrate how verification is often embedded in everyday scrolling as a 'quick follow-up' rather than a formal process. The same participant might check in one episode and not in another, depending on emotion, relevance, and perceived risk.

- In Serbia, one participant came across a post claiming that gold had reached a new all-time high and mentioned the need to double-check online before deciding what to believe: they were 'shocked' and shared it with a friend after verifying. (SMD, SRB)

- The same participant shared a political clip despite not checking the full context: *'Yes, even though I did not check the full video...'* and then forwarded it to friends. This demonstrates how speed and humour/absurdity can override verification intentions. (SMD, SRB)

- In Montenegro, a participant described a 'news explainer' clip as mixed or uncertain, noting they would trust it more if it linked to primary sources and then took a follow-up action rather than accepting it at face value. (SMD, MNE) In Kosovo, a participant saw a TikTok video claiming electricity prices would increase again, noted being unsure because there was 'no official source', and then checked a local news site before deciding not to share it. (SMD, KOS)

- In North Macedonia, a participant came across a Facebook post about the upcoming 'Safe City' system and traffic fines and verified the information by quickly checking the Ministry of Internal Affairs' official website. (SMD, NM)

'It depends what kind of information it is. If it is something really important – about the state or about things that are decisive for our lives – then, of course, it should be checked. But statistics and interesting facts, we tend to take for granted and move on.'

Bosnia and Herzegovina, FGD

What was visible in the wider environment

LSL field notes also emphasise how verification can be limited by platform visibility and research conditions. In Montenegro, the researcher observed that 'cold start' accounts did not surface much local content and that observation depended heavily on hashtag searches. They also mentioned uncertainty when coding 'verification status' for entertainment content that cannot easily be fact-checked, often marking it as 'unverified'. This highlights a broader point: in many everyday formats (memes, trends, satire), 'checking' is not simple, and the line between 'harmless' and 'harmful' is not always clear at the moment of exposure. (LSL field notes, MNE)

Cross-country patterns and tensions

Across the WB6, verification friction consistently manifests as a mechanism: young people uphold a norm of checking, but they practice checking selectively.

A key tension is that 'importance' is subjective and often decided quickly. Some content is regarded as low-stakes until it suddenly isn't – especially during crises or polarising moments. Another tension is that outsourcing can both minimise harm and heighten it: asking trusted individuals can act as a safety net, but it can also speed up spread if the trusted person shares the same assumptions, or if the group treats repetition as confirmation.

Why this matters

When verification feels like a chore, responsibility shifts to individuals who may have limited time, skills, or energy. This leads to predictable blind spots: content that is emotionally engaging, socially endorsed, or presented in 'news-like' formats can spread without checks, while only a few claims prompt follow-up. Boosting resilience, therefore, involves reducing verification barriers through accessible tools, clearer platform cues, and more readily available, reliable explanations in native platform formats, while also promoting social verification routines that do not simply reinforce group bias.

6.3 Theme 3
Platforms shape what becomes ‘normal’ (algorithmic amplification, influencers, comments)

Platforms do not merely host information; through ranking, recommendation, advertising, and interaction features, they influence what young people repeatedly see, what feels ‘everywhere’, and what becomes socially normalised.

What the theme means

This theme describes the platform layer as an active force in young people's information environments. Participants often discussed exposure as something that 'happens to them': content repeatedly appears, certain narratives seem unavoidable, and comment sections can influence how a post is interpreted. In this context, 'credibility' is not only about the claim itself; it also concerns the experience of a feed, what it promotes, what it rewards, and what it makes feel mainstream.

The theme covers algorithmic recommendations, paid amplification (advertising and sponsored posts), influencer and creator dynamics, and the social meaning generated through comments and engagement signals. It intersects with trust and verification, but the main focus here is on how platform design and distribution mechanisms influence perception and behaviour on a large scale.

How it works

Three mechanisms consistently appear in the data.

First, *repetition becomes reality.* When a topic or framing appears across accounts, formats, and days, it can begin to feel true, important, or socially dominant, even before users check it.

Secondly, *platform-native personalities carry narratives.* Influencers and creators often act as interpreters of news and social issues, blending information, opinion, humour, and identity performance in ways that feel relatable and shareable.

Third, *comments serve as a second layer of meaning.* Young people described comment sections as spaces that can either correct misinformation, deepen polarisation, or 'ruin' the experience altogether – sometimes becoming the main reason to believe, dismiss, or disengage.

Evidence

What we heard (FGD/KII)

Participants across countries described exposure as being shaped more by algorithmic delivery than by deliberate searching. *'Because of the way content is imposed – either by algorithms or by a high number of clicks – young people become involuntary spectators.'* (Albania, KII). Even when they acknowledged that feeds are personalised, they still described certain topics as 'everywhere', particularly during high-salience periods like elections, crises, or polarising social debates. They also observed that platform features promote quick engagement and responses. Several participants described the comment section as definitive: it can serve as a credibility check ('someone will say if it's false'), but it can also heighten hostility and confusion.

'I also look at the nature of the comments to verify it. When there are many reactions, it gets discussed.' (ALB, FGD)

'...but it can also heighten hostility and confusion.' (ALB, FGD)

'The worst are the comments underneath. For me, that just makes it even less credible.' (ALB, FGD)

Across discussions, young people also viewed advertising and paid promotion as part of the information environment. When content appears 'pushed', it can raise suspicion about motives, but it can also enhance the perceived importance of a topic simply through visibility.

'One influencer started talking about their mental health. Right at the end, it turned out to be an advert – it was not labelled. After that, I lost the desire to believe or watch anything from that influencer in the future.' (Bosnia and Herzegovina, FGD)

'One influencer started talking about their mental health. Right at the end, it turned out to be an advert – it was not labelled. After that, I lost the desire to believe or watch anything from that influencer in the future.'

Bosnia and Herzegovina, FGD

'Because of the way content is imposed – either by algorithms or by a high number of clicks – young people become involuntary spectators.'

Albania, KII

What we saw in practice
Diary episodes demonstrate how platform features shape daily exposure and interpretation.

- In Bosnia and Herzegovina, one participant described how content 'constantly appears' and viewed this repetition as a reason to pay attention, even without thorough checking. They connected belief to the idea that a narrative is present 'everywhere'. (SMD, BiH)

- In Serbia, diary entries reveal that comment threads can influence how a post is received: participants sometimes view comments as a quick way to interpret things ('comments confirm or ruin it'), and at other times, they disengage when comment sections become toxic. (SMD, SRB)

- In Albania, one participant described relying on comment threads to interpret what they were seeing: after a TikTok video about an 'emergency' in their city appeared, they said they believed it because "the comments confirmed it" (people claimed they had seen it live), and their follow-up action was to check the comments and the posting account for more information. (SMD, ALB)

What was visible in the wider environment
Light social listening (LSL) indicates that visibility is heavily influenced by platform ecosystem dynamics. In Montenegro, the weekly log notes that TikTok was 'overwhelmed' by recurring influencer-led trends and high-engagement formats, while X was more focused on current news. This helps clarify why youth often perceive exposure as shaped by platform-specific 'norms', what is rewarded, boosted, and repeated, rather than by a consistent set of shared headlines. (LSL log, MNE)

LSL also underscores an important methodological tension. Youth often describe narratives as 'everywhere' or 'unavoidable', but LSL can reveal a different picture, either because some narratives mainly circulate in private or semi-private spaces (messaging apps, closed groups, forwarded posts) that social listening cannot reliably observe, or because feeds are highly personalised (algorithmic delivery varies by user, location, language, and network). In reality, perceived exposure reflects the felt reality of a curated feed, while LSL visibility captures public, searchable traces. The synthesis should see these as complementary: diaries help explain what reaches individuals, and LSL offers context for the wider public environment.

Cross-country patterns and tensions

Across the WB6, young people consistently describe feed exposure as personalised but patterned: certain topics rise and dominate attention before dropping, often aligned with political cycles, crises, or highly emotive social issues. Engagement features (likes, shares, comments) become part of how credibility is inferred, even when participants acknowledge these signals can be manipulated.

A key tension is that young people simultaneously feel agency ('I can curate my feed') and powerlessness ('it keeps coming back'). Another tension is the dual role of comments: they can act as crowdsourced corrections, but they can also become a channel for harassment, polarisation, and further disinformation, pushing some users into avoidance and exhaustion (linking directly to Theme 5).

Why this matters

When platforms shape visibility, they determine the boundaries of what feels normal, urgent, and socially acceptable. This means interventions cannot focus solely on individual skills. They must also address distribution and design: how recommendation systems amplify certain framings, how advertising blurs the line between information and persuasion, how creators become de facto 'news interpreters', and how comment architecture influences belief, conflict, and disengagement. Strengthening resilience therefore requires both (a) user-facing support (understanding algorithmic delivery, managing exposure, critically reading engagement cues) and (b) upstream accountability (clearer labelling, stronger integrity measures, and platform responsibilities for amplification and harm).

6.4 Theme 4
Sharing isn't always belief (humour and belonging vs amplification risk)

Young people often share content to entertain, signal belonging, or 'have a laugh', even when they do not believe it is true, yet the act of sharing can still help misleading narratives spread.

What the theme means

This theme highlights a common disconnect between *belief* and behaviour. Participants described sharing as social: sending content to friends or groups can serve to bond, demonstrate 'this is my humour', or comment on politics indirectly. In these moments, the aim is often not to persuade. However, the platform effect remains the same: content is amplified, normalised, and maintained.

The theme includes sharing memes, sarcastic commentary, ironic reposts, and forwarding 'because it is funny' or 'because it fits our group'. It also includes cases where people add a warning ('not sure if true') but still forward. It overlaps with Themes 1–3, but the focus here is on the social function of sharing and the unintended consequences for the information environment.

How it works

The data reveal three recurring dynamics.

Firstly, humour reduces the barrier to sharing. If something is amusing, absurd, or 'so bad it is entertaining', it is more likely to be shared rapidly. Second, sharing is used to demonstrate identity and a sense of belonging. People share to show 'who we are', who they align with, or which in-group they belong to (friend circles, local communities, political micro-groups). Third, intention does not cancel impact. Even when users share 'as a joke', the content reaches new audiences who may not interpret it as irony, and engagement signals can amplify it further.

Evidence

What we heard (FGD/KII)
Throughout the discussions, participants clearly described sharing as a social act that is not always linked to belief.

In Serbia, one participant described sharing tabloid stories as an inside joke within their peer group: *'When I see something from those pro-regime tabloids, like 'the blockers' secret plan to destroy the state', I just laugh and send it to my 'blockers' group chat, like, 'look what we've come up with now".'* (Serbia, FGD). In Kosovo, participants described a similar pattern: questionable content can still be shared 'for a laugh', especially when it aligns with shared interests or local identity: *'With family, I only send news I know is safe. With friends, if something is not true or appears suspicious, I might still send it as a joke, depending on our shared interests.'* (KOS, FGD)

A Montenegrin interviewee clarified how the mechanism works: even joking forwards help spread disinformation: *'These kinds of disinformation get forwarded, as a joke, for a laugh, but I think that still contributes to spreading the content.'* (Montenegro, KII). This pattern also appears in expert reflections: humour can reduce emotional impact while still allowing false or misleading narratives to circulate. *'Misinformation is frequently shared as jokes, memes, or sarcastic commentary. While this can reduce emotional impact, it also normalises false or misleading narratives and keeps them circulating without being questioned.'* (ALB, KII)

'When I see something from those pro-regime tabloids, like 'the blockers' secret plan to destroy the state', I just laugh and send it to my 'blockers' group chat, like, 'look what we've come up with now".'

Serbia, FGD

'These kinds of disinformation get forwarded, as a joke, for a laugh, but I think that still contributes to spreading the content.'

Montenegro, KII

What we saw in practice
Diary episodes demonstrate that sharing is often motivated by entertainment and social bonding rather than belief.

- In Serbia, one participant described a TikTok trend they found amusing and shared immediately, while explicitly stating they did not believe the underlying claim. *'No, I am aware it's just for entertaining purposes.'* (SMD, SRB)

- In another Serbian diary entry, the participant engaged with a meme that felt relatable but still indicated a mixed or unsure belief, illustrating how 'relatable' humour can sit in a grey area between entertainment and implicit endorsement.

- In Albania, one participant shared an absurd clip explicitly as humour/meme content, rather than as something to verify or endorse: *'I shared it as a meme.'* (SMD, ALB)

- In Kosovo, one participant shared a political clip they explicitly did not believe, using the share mainly for social interaction in a family chat: *'I shared it in my family group chat with an emoji.'* (SMD, KOS)

These episodes illustrate a wider trend: even when belief is limited or uncertain, content can still be enjoyed, saved or forwarded, boosting visibility through both interpersonal sharing and algorithmic engagement cues.

What was visible in the wider environment
Light social listening supports the idea that platform-native formats (memes, short clips, ironic commentary) are highly visible and engagement-friendly. These formats often blur boundaries between information and entertainment, making 'truth status' harder to interpret at the point of exposure. This is especially relevant because humorous content can spread widely without ever triggering verification behaviours.

Cross-country patterns and tensions

Across the WB6, sharing for fun consistently occurs, but it is influenced by context. During high-salience periods (politics, crises, polarising social issues), humorous or sarcastic forwarding can serve as a way to cope or comment without direct confrontation.

A key tension is that humour can serve as informal resistance (mocking propaganda, criticising elites), but it can also amplify the very narratives it mocks. Another tension is audience collapse: the sharer's intention ('my friends will understand the joke') often does not extend reliably beyond the immediate group, especially once content is reposted or recommended.

Why this matters

If sharing is seen as 'just a joke', responsibility for harm can seem lessened. However, the overall effect is evident: each share broadens reach, boosts engagement signals, and can make misleading narratives appear familiar and normal. Therefore, interventions must address social motivations, not just knowledge gaps. This involves helping young people recognise when humour still poses amplification risks, encouraging simple 'safety' actions (such as adding context, consistently using warnings, or opting not to forward), and increasing platform accountability for spreading misleading content through entertainment formats.

6.5 Theme 5
Too much information becomes emotional (overload, switching off)

High-volume, high-intensity information environments often evoke emotions such as confusion, anxiety, irritability, and exhaustion, causing many young people to disengage, avoid the news, or become 'hyper-vigilant' in ways that are hard to maintain.

What the theme means

This theme describes the real experience of information overload. Participants talked about moments when exposure stops being informative and becomes draining: there is too much content, too many conflicting claims, and too much 'noise' to handle. For some, this leads to withdrawal ('I ignore it'). For others, it results in a state of constant scanning ('I have to be careful all the time'). Both reactions are aimed at protecting themselves, but they have costs: disengagement can lower awareness of important issues, while hyper-vigilance can be mentally exhausting.

The theme covers emotional responses to political polarisation, crises, and ongoing social conflicts, as well as platform-specific features that heighten exposure (endless scrolling, autoplay, push notifications, and comment hostility).

How it works

Three key dynamics emerge. First, cognitive overload: when feeds become saturated, it becomes harder to distinguish signal from noise. Conflicting narratives can feel impossible to resolve. Second, emotional contagion: anger, fear, and outrage are contagious, and platform design rewards high-arousal content. Comment sections and conflict-driven formats can escalate stress. Third, coping strategies: young people adopt protective routines, such as muting, unfollowing, limiting time spent on the news, ignoring the news, or relying on a small set of 'safe' sources. These are practical responses, but they can also restrict exposure and reduce civic engagement over time.

Evidence

What we heard (FGD/KII)

Across countries, participants described confusion and exhaustion from constant exposure to and contested information. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, one participant conveyed the emotional toll of uncertainty clearly: *'Everything is confusing. I don't know who to trust anymore. It exhausts me.'* (BiH, FGD). In North Macedonia, young people described the erosion of trust as emotionally exhausting, with uncertainty becoming a constant rather than occasional issue: *'You get tired of it. At one point you just stop trying to understand what is true.'* (NM, FGD). In Montenegro, participants described avoidance as a coping strategy, particularly during politically charged moments: *'When it starts again with politics, I just switch it off. It's too much, and you feel bad after scrolling.'* (MNE, FGD)

Experts also described overload as a driver of disengagement and vulnerability. When fatigue sets in, people become more likely to accept simple narratives or rely on shortcuts. *'It happens because young people, generally speaking, are overwhelmed. Because in case I'm going to consume, I don't know, a ton of information in a day, I really cannot find either the time or the energy to cross-check and double-check everything that I see there.'* (Albania, KII)

'It happens because young people, generally speaking, are overwhelmed. Because in case I'm going to consume, I don't know, a ton of information in a day, I really cannot find either the time or the energy to cross-check and double-check everything that I see there.'

Albania, KII

What we saw in practice
Diary entries demonstrate that overload is not just theoretical; it's revealed in everyday exposure habits and emotional responses.

- In Serbia, one participant explicitly linked the tone of the feed to negative mood and described disengaging as self-protection: 'It keeps coming up, and it's always negative' (SMD, SRB; repeated exposure → avoidance)
- In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a participant described being drawn into comment-driven conflict and then regretting the time and emotional energy spent, noting that the comments caused an emotional drain and worsened the experience rather than providing insight. (SMD, BiH; comments → emotional drain)
- In Montenegro, a diary entry illustrates how uncertainty itself can become exhausting: the participant noted mixed beliefs, expressed discomfort, and then avoided further engagement instead of trying a full check. (SMD, MNE; mixed belief → withdrawal)
- In Kosovo, one participant described "scrolling" through a reality-show page and explicitly noted skipping large amounts of content ('...sometimes I was shocked and I skipped a lot of videos'), signalling how high-volume exposure can tip into quick disengagement rather than deeper attention. (SMD, KOS)
- In North Macedonia, a participant encountered a disturbing clip related to the Epstein case and recorded an immediate emotional response ('Confused and worried'), without moving into a full verification process – illustrating how uncertainty itself can become emotionally exhausting and push users towards withdrawal rather than checking. (SMD, NM)

What was visible in the wider environment
LSL emphasises that high-engagement content is often highly arousing: polarising political clips, crisis-related narratives, and emotionally charged commentary are prominent on platforms where virality and reactions are rewarded. LSL field notes also highlight that during high-salience periods, intensity is amplified: content becomes denser, narratives are repeated, and the emotional 'temperature' of comment sections rises, conditions that align with participants' descriptions of feeling overwhelmed.

LSL also helps explain why young people may see content as 'unavoidable'. Algorithmic recommendations and repetition can cause a sense of constant exposure even when a user is not actively searching for information, increasing fatigue and making deliberate verification less likely.

Cross-country patterns and tensions

Across the WB6, overload appears as both a psychological and informational issue: an excess of messages, conflicting truths, and limited clarity on what to trust. Many young people describe avoidance ('I ignore it', 'I mute it') as the most practical coping method.

A key tension is that disengagement can lessen harm in the short term, but it can also diminish informed participation and allow narratives to spread unchallenged. Hyper-vigilance presents the opposite risk: a constant state of scanning can raise anxiety and cynicism, potentially further eroding trust in institutions and media.

Why this matters

Overload is not just a personal experience; it is also a structural aspect of the information environment. If young people are emotionally drained, they are less able to maintain the attention and effort needed for verification and are more likely to rely on heuristics or completely opt out. Therefore, interventions should aim to lessen both informational and emotional burdens: provide access to clear, trustworthy explanations in formats native to the platform; support mental 'off-ramps' (healthy exposure routines, digital wellbeing); and tackle platform features that escalate conflict and repetition. In practice, building resilience involves making reliable information easier to accept and teaching people how to verify it.

6.6 Theme 6
Fix it upstream (policy gaps, enforcement, media standards, platform responsibility)

Young people often identify the problem ‘upstream’: they see mis/disinformation as caused by weak enforcement, low accountability, and poor media and platform standards, and they want responsibility shared beyond individual users.

What the theme means

This theme highlights a shift in where responsibility is assigned. While participants acknowledge individual choices (such as what to follow and what to share), many argue that the burden cannot rest solely on young people navigating an overwhelming information environment. Instead, they point to structural factors: poor-quality journalism, opaque ownership, clickbait incentives, political influence, weak regulation or enforcement, and platform systems that amplify harmful content while offering limited transparency.

The theme advocates for higher professional standards in media, clearer accountability for online outlets, improved institutional responsiveness, and greater platform responsibility for amplification, advertising, and the dynamics of harmful content.

How it works

Throughout the dataset, three mechanisms recur.

First, low accountability fosters a permissive environment. When outlets face few consequences for misinformation, sensationalism, or unethical practices, poor-quality content becomes normalised. Secondly, institutional trust is part of the information environment. When young people perceive institutions as absent, politicised, or ineffective, they are more likely to view the system as fundamentally unreliable and to disengage or depend on informal networks. Third, platform design and business models influence exposure. Participants frequently described platforms as earning profit from attention and conflict, with algorithms and advertising systems that prioritise engagement over accuracy.

Evidence

What we heard (FGD/KII)

Young people clearly expressed concerns about accountability gaps, particularly relating to online portals and the feeling that 'anyone can publish anything'.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, participants attributed the issue to a lack of responsibility and enforcement: 'There's no accountability. Portals do whatever they want. The state isn't doing enough.' (BiH, FGD). In Serbia, participants described poor-quality media practices as commonplace and hard to challenge: *'They publish whatever will get clicks, and nobody is responsible for it. Even if it's proven wrong, it stays online.'* (SRB, FGD).

Participants also linked weak institutional credibility to a broader vulnerability: if institutions are not trusted or fail to communicate clearly, misinformation finds an easier route. *'When institutions don't communicate properly, people fill the gap with whatever they find online.'* (NM, FGD) A regional focus group discussion reinforced the demand for stronger, functional regulation and enforcement, with one participant pointing specifically to the need for an effective media regulator: '*The only way forward I see is through REM – a functional regulatory body that would prevent the placement of sensationalist news altogether, or at least regulate things so that this level of hate speech and violence in the media stops.'* (Regional, FGD)

'The only way forward I see is through REM – a functional regulatory body that would prevent the placement of sensationalist news altogether, or at least regulate things so that this level of hate speech and violence in the media stops.'

Regional, FGD

'Years of political polarisation, corruption scandals, and inconsistent accountability have made many people sceptical of official information. When trust in institutions and traditional media is low, alternative narratives – even unreliable ones – find fertile ground.'

Albania, KII

Key informants echoed and contextualised these concerns. They described how political polarisation, weak accountability mechanisms, and economic pressures can create a 'fertile ground' for unreliable narratives. *'Years of political polarisation, corruption scandals, and inconsistent accountability have made many people sceptical of official information. When trust in institutions and traditional media is low, alternative narratives –even unreliable ones – find fertile ground.'* (Albania, KII)

What we saw in practice

Diary episodes follow the same structural pattern. Participants often responded to posts not just with belief or disbelief, but also with frustration about the wider system: who is permitted to publish, who benefits, and who is held accountable.

- In Serbia, a participant reacted to a polarising clip, noting that the platform environment encourages provocative content and expressing annoyance rather than viewing it as an isolated incident. Their subsequent behaviour was not verification but emotional withdrawal, indicating a perceived lack of genuine recourse. (SMD, SRB; platform incentive → frustration)
- In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a diary entry connected distrust to outlet practices: the participant described ignoring content from certain portals because they are seen as sensationalist or politically motivated, treating outlet reputation as a safeguard rather than verifying each claim individually. (SMD, BiH; outlet quality cue → avoidance)
- In Montenegro, a participant expressed concern about 'news-like' clips and the lack of clear sourcing, framing it as part of a broader issue of platform accountability and transparency, rather than a single misleading post. (SMD, MNE; lack of sourcing → system critique)

What was visible in the wider environment

LSL highlights the visibility of structural drivers: political content clusters, sensational storylines, and influencer-led commentary are shared in engagement-optimised formats. Field notes also show that content varies across platforms (for example, TikTok trends versus X news discourse), which influences where accountability expectations are directed. Participants' calls for 'upstream' fixes match the visibility of recurring polarising narratives and the ease with which content can be reproduced, reposted, and recontextualised across accounts.

Cross-country patterns and tensions

Across the WB6, young people consistently frame the issue as systemic: problems with quality and accountability in media and institutions, combined with platform amplification effects. There is also a strong expectation that schools, regulators, and platforms should have clearer roles.

A key tension is that stronger regulation can be seen as both necessary and risky. Some participants want clearer rules and enforcement, while others are concerned about politicisation, censorship, or selective application. Another tension is feasibility: young people call for 'platform responsibility', but often lack awareness of what realistic mechanisms exist, which can lead to cynicism and resignation.

Why this matters

Treating mis/disinformation solely as an individual skill problem ('young people should check more') causes interventions to overlook key drivers identified by young people: incentives, accountability, and trust. Upstream improvements, such as clearer media standards, transparency about ownership and funding, enforceable rules for online outlets, and platform responsibilities for amplification and advertising, can lessen the burden on individuals. However, these measures must include safeguards: transparency, independence, and proportionality, to prevent increasing political distrust. In practice, resilience is strongest when individual skills are supported by systems that make reliable information easier to find, recognise, and trust.

6.7 Theme 7
Media literacy as infrastructure (intergenerational capability)

Young people view media and information literacy as an intergenerational 'infrastructure': it is developed over time through schools, families, and communities, and it requires support for both adults and youth.

What the theme means

This theme presents media literacy less as a one-time training and more as a shared skill that develops over a lifetime. Participants often described learning about credibility and online safety through a mix of school lessons, family guidance, and peer routines. They also mentioned that adults frequently struggle with the same information environment, sometimes with fewer digital skills but greater confidence, creating risks for intergenerational misunderstanding and the spread of misinformation.

The theme includes calls to strengthen media literacy in schools, to provide teachers with practical support instead of blame, and to extend interventions to parents and caregivers. It also encompasses the idea that young people themselves can be effective messengers, especially where trust in institutions is weak.

How it works

Three patterns recur throughout the data.
First, skills are learned socially. Young people develop routines through observation and shared practice: what their parents transmit, what their friends find funny, and which sources are considered 'safe'. Secondly, teachers and parents require support. Participants often described education as the ideal environment for skills development, but they also acknowledged limitations: teachers are burdened, curricula are dense, and adult digital habits can weaken school messages. Third, peer-to-peer methods can reach a wider audience. In environments where trust in institutions is low, youth-led communication and creator-led explainers might be more convincing than official campaigns.

'It's not enough to say 'don't believe everything'. We need concrete ways to check and understand why something is misleading.'

Kosovo, FGD

'Integrating media and digital literacy into school curricula – from primary to secondary education – would enable students to develop critical thinking, fact-checking skills, and a better understanding of information sources. These modules should be regularly updated and accompanied by continuous teacher training.'

Albania, KII

Evidence

What we heard (FGD/KII)

Across different countries, young people often argued that media literacy education should begin earlier and should not be limited to just 'one lesson' or be optional. They also emphasised the importance of including adults.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, one participant described it as a school responsibility, but with an emphasis on preparing people to manage real-life online environments: *'This should be taught in school. Parents and teachers need support as well.'* (BiH, FGD). In North Macedonia, participants explained how gaps in adult understanding add extra pressure on young people to combat misinformation within the family setting: *'Sometimes I'm the one explaining to my parents why something is not true, because they just forward it.'* (NM, FGD). In Kosovo, young people emphasised that education should prioritise practical skills, how to recognise cues, how to verify information, and how to avoid harm, rather than abstract warnings: *'It's not enough to say 'don't believe everything'. We need concrete ways to check and understand why something is misleading.'* (Kosovo, FGD) They also highlighted that trust and credibility cues are learned socially and often hinge on familiar authority figures, even when young people still apply a quick "check": *'Because if, for example, a professor from my faculty shares it, I'll have a certain level of confidence that it's more or less accurate, because I trust that person – but of course I'll still check it.'* (REG, FGD).

Key informants supported this view and emphasised that capacity-building must be ongoing and regularly updated, as platforms, formats, and manipulation techniques evolve rapidly. *'Integrating media and digital literacy into school curricula – from primary to secondary education – would enable students to develop critical thinking, fact-checking skills, and a better understanding of information sources. These modules should be regularly updated and accompanied by continuous teacher training.'* (Albania, KII)

What we saw in practice
Diary episodes reveal that learning and interpretation often occur through social connections. Participants sometimes used family members or friends as benchmarks for determining if something is believable, and they described sharing content to 'test' reactions or seek a second opinion.

- In Serbia, a participant shared a post with friends to discuss it, using the group chat as a space for interpretation rather than a final decision. The behaviour illustrates how peer networks function as informal learning environments, even when verification is incomplete. (SMD, SRB; 'send to group' → sense-making)
- In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a participant described relying on recognisable 'official' sources and explained that this habit was shaped by prior guidance and routine. This demonstrates how trust habits can become ingrained over time, functioning as everyday infrastructure rather than a conscious choice each time. (SMD, BiH; 'official source' cue → habitual trust)
- In Kosovo, a participant used family discussion as the trigger for sense-making: 'My parents were debating it in the living room, so I looked it up to see the full speech,' and then shared the clip in a family group chat. (SMD, KOS)
- In Albania, a participant shared content explicitly to discuss it with others and process their reaction: 'I shared it to discuss it with others so that I could express my anger about the act.' (SMD, ALB)
- In North Macedonia, a participant shared a reel with friends as a social 'relay' of interpretation/attention ('I liked it and shared with my friends'), showing how peer networks act as a lightweight channel for what gets noticed and passed on. (SMD, MKD)

What was visible in the wider environment
LSL supports the importance of platform-native education formats. 'Explainers', short videos, and creator-led commentary are prominent in youth-focused spaces, suggesting that media literacy messages must reach audiences where they are, through short, practical, shareable formats. LSL field notes also show that some of the most influential content is not presented as 'news' at all, reinforcing the need for cross-curricular, skills-based approaches rather than isolated 'media lessons'.

Cross-country patterns and tensions

Across the WB6, there is a strong shared belief that media literacy should be enhanced in schools and introduced earlier. There is also consistent acknowledgement that parents and teachers need support, both because adults can unintentionally spread misinformation and because young people cannot bear this burden alone.

A key tension is implementation. Participants want schools to take action, but they also recognise teacher workload, uneven resources, and the risk that media literacy becomes a 'checkbox' rather than a practical skill. Another tension is trust: in contexts where trust in institutions is weak, formal messages might be ignored, which increases the importance of peer-led and creator-led approaches that can spread through trusted networks.

Why this matters

If media literacy is considered infrastructure, it requires sustained investment rather than one-off campaigns. This involves supporting teachers with ongoing professional development and classroom-ready tools; integrating critical thinking and cyber hygiene across subjects; and supporting parents and caregivers in ways that avoid assigning blame and instead focus on practical routines. It also entails creating youth-oriented messages through collaboration and peer-to-peer delivery, utilising formats that genuinely engage young people. In essence, fostering resilience requires developing skills across generations, ensuring that young people are not left to navigate a complex, constantly changing information landscape alone.

Findings: Two minor themes

The two minor themes in this chapter appeared throughout the dataset but less consistently than the main themes. They are included because they help explain how young people understand uncertainty and why some information dynamics seem particularly difficult to resolve. In both cases, the themes highlight emerging risks and areas to monitor: how narrative frames influence what is regarded as 'fact', and how new forms of synthetic or manipulated content can weaken everyday cues of authenticity.

7

7.1 Minor theme 1:

No pure facts – only narratives to select from

For many young people, information is experienced less as 'facts versus lies' and more as competing narratives, where the challenge is choosing which framing to trust rather than verifying a single claim.

Short definition (scope and boundaries)

This theme highlights a shift from binary thinking ('true/false') to interpretive thinking ('which story fits, who benefits, what is being framed?'). Participants often expressed that 'everyone has an agenda' and that the same event can be presented through multiple legitimate-looking perspectives. The theme is especially evident in politicised topics, identity issues, and polarising social debates.

This differs from relativism ('nothing is true'). Instead, it demonstrates a practical experience: in disputed environments, young people often encounter multiple versions of reality, and credibility depends on narrative choice, not just fact checking.

Evidence highlights

Quote highlight (FGD/KII)

Participants described facing various interpretations and finding it difficult to identify a reliable reference point.

'Honestly, I don't believe in objective information. I don't think we can access purely factual data. I believe everything is a narrative, and that's fine – the question is who we read, and whose interpretation of what happened we accept, because in the end we only have interpretations.' (Regional, FGD). A key informant also explained how low trust and polarisation foster conditions where alternative narratives gain ground. *'In Bosnia and Herzegovina, it's always a political narrative – everything is tied to politics. Over time, people start to feel that "they're all the same" and "they all lie", and that makes it difficult to change anything.'* (BiH, KII)

‘Honestly, I don’t believe in objective information. I don’t think we can access purely factual data. I believe everything is a narrative, and that’s fine – the question is who we read, and whose interpretation of what happened we accept, because in the end we only have interpretations.’

Regional, FGD

Diary highlight

Diary entries indicate this as 'mixed belief' and hesitation rather than clear acceptance or rejection. Participants sometimes recorded that they believed a post 'not 100 per cent' or that they could not tell what was true, often followed by disengagement or reliance on social cues.

- In Serbia, for example, one participant marked belief as mixed and described the post as relatable but not fully reliable, illustrating how interpretation can lie between truth assessment and identity resonance. (SMD, SRB; mixed/unsure belief)
- In Kosovo, a participant marked belief as mixed because the clip felt 'mostly accurate, but framed from a single perspective', signalling hesitation rather than acceptance/rejection. (SMD, KOS)
- In North Macedonia, a participant recorded 'partly' believing a news post but noted it was 'missing data'; they then used comments as a quick sense-making cue and chose not to share. (SMD, MKD)

Wider environment note

LSL supports the existence of polarised framings and recurring narrative clusters on political and social issues. Even when individual claims are hard to verify from public traces, the consistency of framing and repetition across accounts can create a sense that 'everything is narrative', reinforcing interpretive fatigue.

Where it matters most (countries/contexts)

This theme is most evident where trust deficits and polarisation are significant, particularly in topics related to identity, geopolitics, or high-salience politics. It also occurs in spaces where young people depend on influencers and commentary formats that mix information with opinion, making narrative framing more prominent than chain of evidence.

What to watch (in practice)

These are signals that can be picked up through routine youth-facing work and media monitoring, without running a new study.

1. Youth organisations, schools, and practitioners can listen for shifts in language during workshops, counselling, peer sessions, and classroom discussion: does 'everything has an agenda' sound like critical thinking, or like giving up ('there is no point checking')?
2. Media partners, fact-checkers, and digital teams can track which storylines dominate during high-salience moments by scanning platform trends and comment sections, and by noting when the same framing starts appearing in private channels via screenshots/forwards shared by young people (with consent and privacy safeguards).

7.2 Minor theme 2

AI authenticity (emerging confusion and cues)

Synthetic and manipulated content is increasing uncertainty around what is 'real', weakening everyday authenticity cues, and makes trust decisions more reliant on source identity and platform signals.

Short definition (scope and boundaries)

This theme highlights emerging confusion about AI-generated or AI-edited media, including doubts over whether images, videos, and voices are genuine. It also covers the decline of trust in 'seeing is believing', especially in short-form, highly shareable formats where context and origin are often unclear.

The theme is 'minor' because explicit references to AI were not evenly spread across countries and methods. However, where it appeared, it indicated a high potential risk because it undermines the basic cues young people rely on to navigate information quickly.

Evidence highlights

Quote highlight (FGD/KII)

Participants and informants expressed a rising concern that it is increasingly difficult to discern what is real online. 'Honestly, it's a bit alarming how lately it's been harder and harder even for me to recognise AI content. Sometimes – especially when it's videos – it's a bit frightening how far it's come and how quickly it's developing... I can't tell the difference whether it's fake or not.' (BiH, FGD).

This uncertainty can quickly translate into hyper-vigilance and doubt, even among those who do not actively seek news: 'Not at all – I don't use social media to inform myself, but news keeps popping up for me... and probably because of the rise of artificial intelligence *I feel like I'm becoming paranoid, because whatever news I see... I immediately doubt it... I can't 100% believe it's true; I have to go to some institutional portal...'* (Regional, FGD). A key informant noted that synthetic content can scale manipulation by making impersonation and 'official-looking' outputs easier to produce: *'For example, it's not easy for any of us to know for sure what is real and what is not when we are faced with a deepfake... So it's difficult for everyone, but for those who lack the necessary knowledge and literacy or access to such support, they're definitely extra vulnerable...'* (ALB, KII).

'I feel like I'm becoming paranoid, because whatever news I see... I immediately doubt it... I can't 100 percent believe it's true; I have to go to some institutional portal...'

Regional, FGD

Diary highlight

Diary entries show uncertainty and caution. Participants sometimes marked belief as mixed or unsure when faced with visually compelling content, especially if posts lacked a clear source chain. When they did respond, they often relied on proxy cues ('who posted it', 'does it link to a credible source') rather than assessing the media itself. (SMD; mixed/unsure belief)

Wider environment note

LSL observations show that platform-native formats make it hard to track provenance: repost chains, clipped videos, and meme-like recontextualization reduce traceability. This increases the chance that manipulated or synthetic content can circulate unnoticed, especially when it aligns with existing narratives or provokes strong emotion.

Where it matters most (countries/contexts)

This theme is likely to be most significant during high-salience moments (elections, crises, conflict-related narratives) and in environments with low institutional trust, where source cues are already challenged. It is also important in contexts where young people rely heavily on short-form video and influencer commentary, which often becomes disconnected from the original context.

What to watch (in practice)

These are early signals that teachers, youth workers, and media partners can observe in their daily work and public monitoring.

1. **In schools, youth programmes, and peer spaces,** observe how young people react when they suspect something is AI-generated or edited: do they disengage ('I don't believe anything anymore'), or do they rely even more on 'who posted it' (friends, influencers, 'official' accounts) as a shortcut to trust?

2. **In media literacy sessions and platform-native explainers,** focus on the 'rules of thumb' young people use to identify synthetic content (for example, 'it looks too perfect' or 'the voice sounds off'). Observe whether these cues genuinely help them slow down and verify, or if they are easily dismissed and replaced by social proof ('everyone is sharing it, so it must be real').

Cross-regional synthesis

This chapter ‘zooms out’ from the seven main themes to highlight what is shared across the WB6, where countries show distinctive emphases, and how differences across methods should be interpreted. The synthesis draws on the comparative matrix (theme visibility across the country datasets), country-specific perspectives identified during analysis, and triangulation across focus groups and interviews, social media diaries, and light social listening.

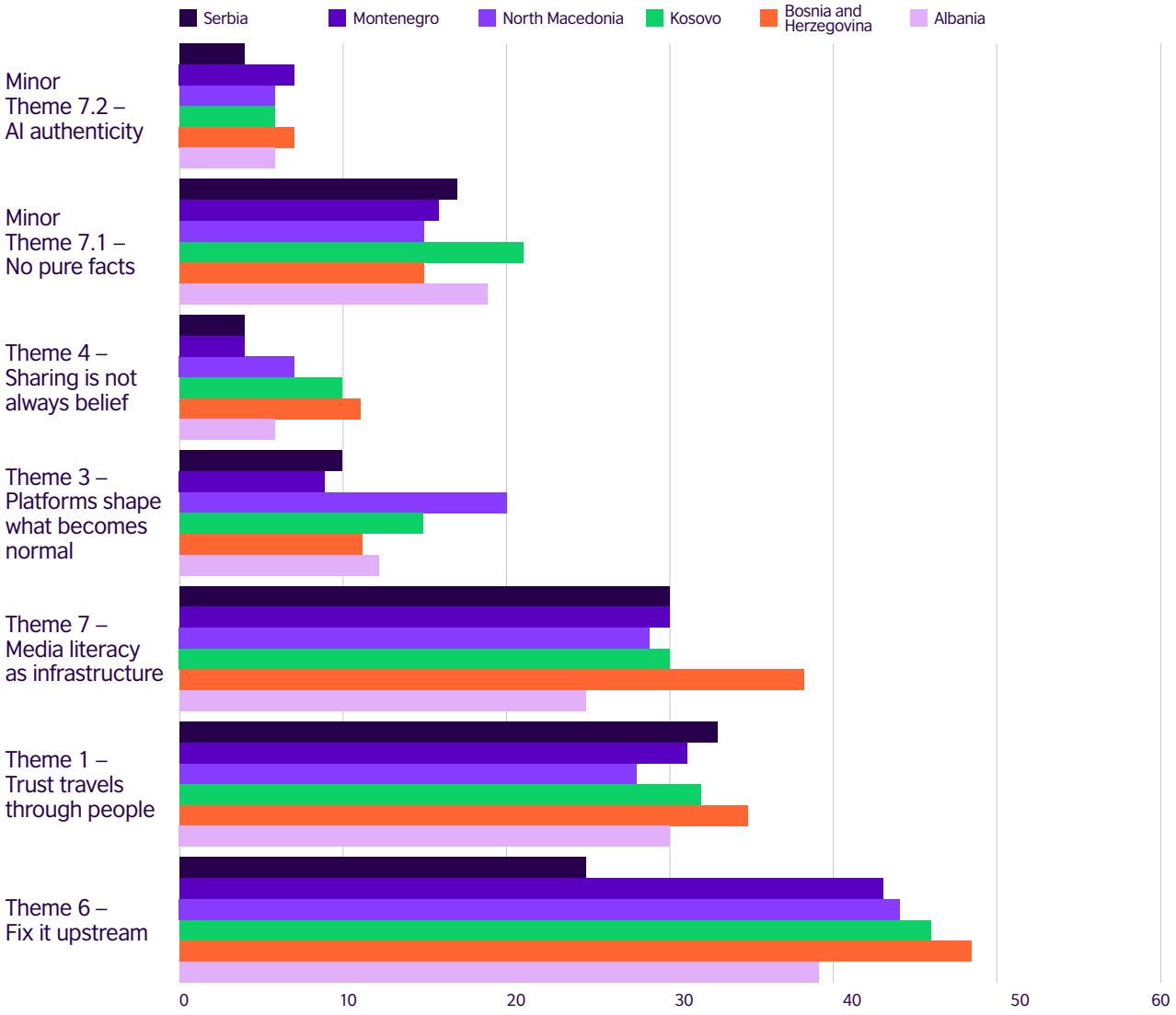
8

8.1 How to read the comparative matrix

The comparative matrix summarises the visibility of each theme across country datasets, based on the share of coded quotations mapped to that theme. These proportions help indicate where a theme is especially prominent in participants' accounts, but they should not be read as a ranking of 'severity' or as a direct comparison of national 'performance'. Differences can reflect local events during fieldwork, the kinds of experiences participants chose to emphasise, and what is more or less observable across methods.

Overall, the strongest cross-country message is the call to 'fix it upstream'. The relative prominence of themes across countries is summarised in the chart below:

Comparative visibility of themes across WB6 country datasets



Theme 6 is the most noticeable theme across all countries, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina (48 per cent), Kosovo (46 per cent), North Macedonia (44 per cent), Montenegro (43 per cent), and Albania (39 per cent). This supports a consistent youth perspective: the burden of tackling mis- and disinformation cannot rest solely on individuals when systems and incentives remain weak.

Two other themes remain notably strong across the WB6. Theme 1 ('trust travels through people') and Theme 7 ('media literacy as infrastructure') consistently appear in all datasets, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Theme 1 at 35 per cent; Theme 7 at 38 per cent). Practically, this indicates that credibility is generally understood through social and relational cues, and solutions are largely seen as collective, intergenerational, and institutional rather than solely individual.

Conversely, the platform mechanics outlined in Theme 3 ('platforms shape what becomes normal') exhibit greater variation across the WB6. This theme is most significant in North Macedonia (20 per cent) and Kosovo (15 per cent), but less so in other areas. Theme 4 ('sharing is not always belief') is generally lower across most datasets, yet it is more prominent in Bosnia and Herzegovina (11 per cent) and Kosovo (10 per cent). This suggests that humour, belonging, and social sharing dynamics are present across countries but are emphasised differently in how young people discuss their environments.

The minor themes are also inconsistent. 'No pure facts – only narratives to select from' (Minor Theme 7.1) is relatively prominent in Kosovo (21 per cent) and Albania (19 per cent), while 'AI authenticity' (Minor Theme 7.2) appears at lower levels across datasets (around 4–7 per cent). Even at these lower levels, the second minor theme remains a significant emerging risk because it disrupts the everyday cues young people rely on to determine what is real.

8.2 Shared patterns across the WB6

Across the WB6, young people describe similarly consistent pressures and shortcuts in their everyday information environments. Our study did not reveal any significant differences by gender – although this may be a topic worth exploring more deeply through further research and analysis. Credibility is often judged socially before being assessed evidentially: who shared a post, how familiar an account appears, and whether a source is perceived as 'official' can be as important as the content itself. At the same time, verification is widely acknowledged as necessary but perceived as effortful. Many young people describe checking as selective, time-limited, or delegated to trusted individuals, rather than a regular routine.

Platform features then influence how these choices unfold. Young people often experience exposure as personalised yet patterned: certain topics quickly emerge, dominate attention, and become difficult to avoid, while comments and engagement signals serve as a secondary layer of interpretation. Sharing is usually described as social rather than persuasive; humour, belonging, and identity signalling are common motivations, but amplification effects persist.

Over time, high-volume and high-intensity exposure often leads to emotional responses. Confusion, fatigue, and irritability cause many young people to adopt coping strategies such as avoidance, muting, or limiting exposure. Others become hyper-vigilant, continuously scanning for manipulation in ways that are difficult to sustain. In this context, it is not surprising that responsibility is often ascribed to upstream sources. Across countries, young people call for improved standards, stronger enforcement, more transparent media ecosystems, and clearer platform accountability. They also see media literacy as infrastructure: something that must be supported by schools, families, and communities and kept up to date as the environment changes.

8.3 Country distinctives (how emphasis differs by context)

While the core dynamics are shared, each country's dataset also highlights distinctive emphases. In Albania, discussions strongly link information disorder to trust deficits and polarisation, with a pronounced sensitivity to competing narratives and emerging authenticity concerns. Bosnia and Herzegovina places a notably strong emphasis on source cues and transparency signals, alongside a high-intensity focus on upstream accountability and the role of education in building critical thinking. In Kosovo, platform dynamics and narrative competition are especially salient, with a strong emphasis on system responsibility and the social dimensions of learning. In North Macedonia, platform 'normalisation' and policy gaps are prominent, with young people frequently describing how platform delivery shapes what feels unavoidable. In Montenegro, the upstream framing is strong and often expressed through a focus on systems and standards, while the everyday practice of deciding what to trust remains constrained by time and uncertainty. In Serbia, verification practices are comparatively foregrounded, alongside a strong concern about accountability and a clear recognition that family and peer networks shape everyday interpretation.

Albania (ALB)
In Albania, youth accounts strongly emphasise the role of polarisation and trust deficits in shaping how information is interpreted. Narrative competition is particularly prominent, with young people often navigating competing framings rather than a simple true/false divide.

- Trust is often seen as a social shortcut, influenced by low institutional credibility and high political polarisation.
- Competing narratives are especially evident, with uncertainty framed as 'whose interpretation to accept'.
- Emerging concerns about authenticity coincide with wider scepticism about what is real online.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)
Bosnia and Herzegovina is notable for how heavily young people rely on outlet and source cues when assessing credibility, alongside a strong focus on accountability deficiencies and weak enforcement. Emotional fatigue is also more prominent than in some other datasets, influencing everyday coping behaviours.

- Credibility is often rooted in transparency and legitimacy indicators, such as recognisable investigative outlets and their identifiers.
- Upstream accountability issues are significant, particularly regarding portal practices and limited enforcement.
- Overload and confusion are common, with avoidance often used as a coping mechanism.

Kosovo (KOS)
In Kosovo, young people often perceive mis- and disinformation as a systemic issue, with a strong focus on platform mechanisms and the influence of narrative framings in politicised and identity-related topics. Sense-making is frequently described as social and relational.

- Responsibility is primarily positioned upstream, focusing on media standards, platform accountability, and institutional responsiveness.
- Platform dynamics are particularly prominent, including influencer-led commentary and engagement-driven dissemination.
- Narrative selection is prominent, with credibility judgements influenced by context, framing, and group interpretation.

North Macedonia (MKD)
North Macedonia is notable for the visibility of platform 'normalisation': young people explain how algorithmic delivery and repetition create a sense of inevitability. Simultaneously, trust in institutions is often seen as declining, which reinforces disengagement and cynicism.

- Platform delivery and repetition are heavily emphasised as factors shaping exposure and what becomes 'normal'.
- Upstream gaps (standards, enforcement, institutional trust) are evident in youth accounts.
- Verification and reporting behaviours are limited by time and fatigue, with little confidence that reporting results in change.

Montenegro (MNE)
In Montenegro, young people's accounts strongly emphasise upstream responsibility and standards, with credibility often judged through presentation cues and source identity. Uncertainty is frequently managed through disengagement or social cues rather than consistent checking routines.

- System-level responsibility is a primary focus, emphasising standards, enforcement constraints, and accountability.
- Credibility is frequently evaluated through 'presentation' cues (tone, style, how 'news-like' content appears), alongside source identity.
- Emerging concerns about authenticity exist, but are usually part of wider scepticism regarding the quality of online content.

Serbia (SRB)
In Serbia, verification norms are comparatively more emphasised than in some other datasets, often illustrated through search and cross-checking. Meanwhile, everyday interpretation continues to be influenced by peer discussion, comment dynamics, and upstream concerns about incentives and amplification.

- Verification practices are described more often, including search and cross-checking routines, even when applied selectively.
- Peer and family networks remain essential for making sense of things, with comments and group discussions shaping interpretation.
- Upstream accountability concerns are significant, especially regarding media practices and platform amplification incentives.

8.4 Cross-method contradictions (and what they may mean)

Triangulation across methods reveals a set of recurring gaps that are important analytically. The most consistent is a norm–behaviour gap. In focus groups and interviews, young people often describe checking as a principle; in diaries, checking appears more selective and more dependent on personal relevance, uncertainty, or perceived risk. This does not imply dishonesty. It reflects how verification competes with time, attention, and emotional bandwidth in everyday use.

A second issue relates to visibility. Young people often describe certain narratives as 'everywhere' or 'unavoidable', especially during high-profile periods such as politics, crises, or divisive social issues. Light social listening can reveal a different picture, either because some narratives are more prominent in private or semi-private spaces that social listening cannot reliably monitor, or because feeds are highly personalised and differ by user location, language, and network. In practice, perceived exposure reflects the felt reality of a curated feed, while social listening captures public, searchable traces. These should be seen as complementary rather than competing forms of evidence.

A third contradiction concerns the dual role of comment sections. Participants sometimes see comments as a form of crowdsourced correction ('someone will say if it is false'). However, diaries and observation suggest that comments can also heighten hostility, deepen polarisation, and cause disengagement. Lastly, humour occupies a similar dual position: it can help young people distance themselves from propaganda and cope with political intensity, but it can also perpetuate misleading narratives through engagement and sharing.

8.5 Interpretation cautions

Three cautions are important when interpreting cross-country differences. First, theme proportions reveal visibility within the dataset, not severity. They show what participants emphasised, how experiences were discussed, and the composition of the coded material. Second, the methods capture different aspects of the information environment. Diaries reflect personalised feeds and everyday practice; light social listening captures public, searchable content and may overlook private circulation. Third, some platform spaces are hard to observe systematically, and 'cold start' constraints can influence what appears in observation records. For these reasons, cross-method triangulation is essential: the strongest interpretation comes from examining participant accounts, diary behaviour, and public visibility together.

Implications

The findings point to a simple reality: young people are not navigating a neutral 'information space'. They move through an environment shaped by social trust, platform design, uneven accountability, and emotional strain. The implications in this chapter stem directly from the seven themes and the cross-country analysis. They are organised by stakeholder area because the burden cannot rest solely on young people. In practice, resilience is strongest when individual capability is supported by systems that make reliable information easier to recognise, access, and integrate into daily life.

9

Across all stakeholder sectors, three overarching implications emerge. First, credibility is often social before it is evidential. Any response that assumes young people will routinely 'check first' will perform poorly unless it also aligns with how trust actually develops: through people, relationships, and familiar voices. Second, friction matters. When checking feels like work, it becomes selective, outsourced, or avoided. Cutting down friction, using practical tools, clearer cues, and more accessible, reliable explanations in platform-native formats, is not just a technical detail; it is the difference between capability that exists on paper and capability that is actually used. Third, emotional capacity is part of the system. Overload and fatigue are not just side effects; they influence what young people can practically accomplish, what they overlook, what they share, and what they are willing to engage with. If interventions add more burden, they might unintentionally push young people further into disengagement.

The table below summarises the main implications for each stakeholder sector at a glance. The subsections that follow provide a more detailed discussion.

At-a-glance implication by stakeholder sector

Sector	What this means in practice
For young people	Credibility judgements are often made under conditions of speed, overload, and social influence. Responses therefore need to support practical checking habits, safer sharing norms, and strategies for managing confusion, fatigue, and exposure.
For education systems	Media and information literacy should be treated as long-term infrastructure, not as a one-off lesson or campaign. This implies curriculum integration, teacher support, accessible resources, and approaches that also involve parents and caregivers.
For media and journalism	Trust is shaped not only by content quality but also by visible transparency and consistency. This implies clearer sourcing, corrections, ownership signals, and formats that fit the environments in which young people actually encounter information. Trust is shaped not only by content quality but also by visible transparency and consistency. This implies clearer sourcing, corrections, ownership signals, and formats that fit the environments in which young people actually encounter information.
For platforms and the digital ecosystem	Platform design affects what becomes visible, repeated, and normalised. This implies stronger attention to recommendation systems, advertising and provenance transparency, moderation, and accountability for amplification dynamics.
For civil society and youth organisations	Effective responses are likely to be practical, locally grounded, and co-created with young people. This implies using trusted peer networks, platform-relevant formats, and interventions that connect institutional aims with everyday digital behaviour.

9.1 Implications for youth decision-making

Young people's decision-making is influenced by the need to quickly process high-volume feeds. In this situation, 'good enough' judgements often replace thorough assessment. This is not just a skills deficiency; it is a logical adjustment to an environment that values speed, reaction, and repetition.

A first implication is that trust cues form a fundamental layer of decision-making. Young people often depend on who shared something, whether the source seems familiar or 'official', and if it looks widely endorsed. These cues serve as practical shortcuts, but they are also susceptible to manipulation: impersonation, professionalised 'news-like' formatting, coordinated engagement, and influencer amplification can all imitate legitimacy. Therefore, supporting youth requires 'credibility-cue literacy': not just 'how to check,' but how to interpret the signals shaping first impressions and recognise when those signals can be engineered.

A second implication is that verification depends on context. Young people do not check everything; they prioritise. They are more inclined to verify when the stakes are high, when uncertainty feels uncomfortable, or when a claim threatens their identity or safety. This means that interventions should aim to develop reliable 'if–then' routines that reflect actual behaviour: 'If it triggers strong emotion, then pause'; 'If it asks you to act, pay, vote, donate, or fear, then check'; 'If it comes through a forwarded chain, then treat it as unverified until you can trace its origin'. These are more likely to be adopted than abstract instructions to verify all content.

A third implication is that sharing is often social rather than persuasive, but it still influences the environment. Young people frequently share content for humour, bonding, or identity signalling, even when belief is low or mixed. The intention may be playful, but the impact can be amplification: the content travels further, becomes more familiar, and can be interpreted differently by audiences who do not share the original context. This indicates the need for non-moralising 'safe sharing' norms – small, low-friction behaviours that reduce harm without requiring young people to sacrifice social connection. In practise, the most effective norms are those that respect motivation ('I'm sharing for fun') while making consequences visible ('it still spreads'), and offer alternatives ('add context', 'use a warning consistently', 'don't forward when the claim targets a group or a vulnerable person').

Finally, overload influences behaviour. When young people are exhausted, they either disconnect or become overly alert. Both are coping mechanisms; neither can be sustained long-term. This suggests that youth support should include digital wellbeing as part of building information resilience. Assisting young people in managing exposure, without shame or blame, helps promote more consistent decision-making and lowers the risk that fatigue leads to resignation ('nothing is knowable') or cynicism ('everyone lies'), which can further weaken trust and make manipulation easier.

9.2 Implications for education systems

The findings position education as a key leverage point, but not in a simple 'teach them to check' manner. Young people are requesting media and information literacy as infrastructure: something that is developed over time, reinforced across different subjects, and supported across generations.

The first implication is that one-off interventions are insufficient. The information environment changes more quickly than static curricula. If schools are to serve a protective role, they require an iterative model that can be regularly updated with practical examples, platform-native formats, and classroom-ready activities. This isn't about adding another 'extra topic' to an already crowded system; it's about embedding credibility judgement, critical thinking, and cyber hygiene into everyday learning.

The second implication is that teachers require support, not blame. Young people recognise limitations in capacity. They also see that adults can struggle with the same environment, sometimes with fewer digital skills but greater confidence. Education systems should therefore prioritise ongoing professional development that is modular and practical: short units that help teachers tackle new tactics (misleading visuals, synthetic media, manipulated clips), and that offer ready-to-use classroom routines rather than just theory. The tone is important: teachers are more likely to adopt approaches framed as supportive capacity-building rather than compliance.

The third implication is cross-curricular integration. Media literacy cannot be confined to a single subject or taught only as an elective. The strongest protection lies in critical thinking as a transferable skill: interpreting evidence, recognising framing, distinguishing fact from opinion, understanding incentives, and learning to ask 'what is missing?'. Integrating these skills across different subjects also lessens the risk that media literacy becomes 'someone else's job'.

The fourth implication is that education must be intergenerational. Schools can reach young people, but parents and caregivers shape everyday practices: what is forwarded, what is considered 'true', and how fear and outrage circulate through family channels. Education systems and partners should therefore provide parent-facing support that avoids shaming and emphasises practical routines, such as how to respond to forwarded claims, how to demonstrate uncertainty, and how to discuss misinformation without escalating conflict at home.

Finally, youth co-creation is important. In settings where institutional trust is low, messages sent 'from above' can be ignored. Peer-led and youth-designed approaches tend to reach further, especially when they use platform-specific styles. Education systems should view youth participation not as an add-on but as a core principle in materials and delivery.

9.3 Implications for media and journalism

Young people's accounts show that media quality and accountability influence the broader environment. They are not merely consumers needing skills; they are citizens who recognise incentives, bias, sensationalism, and inconsistency. When they see media as irresponsible or politically compromised, they disengage, rely on social proxies, or interpret everything as narrative.

The first implication is that trust must be built through transparency and consistency. Young people often rely on credibility signals such as recognisable outlets, investigative brands, authorship, and transparency cues. This indicates that media organisations that focus on clear sourcing, visible corrections, and transparent ownership can boost their credibility. It also implies that regulators and media development actors should view transparency as a practical mechanism for trust rather than merely an abstract governance ideal.

The second implication is that format is as important as content. Young people encounter information through short clips, repost chains, memes, and influencer commentary. Traditional 'article-first' strategies can miss the spaces where trust is built. Media outlets and fact-checkers need platform-native explainers that are concise, shareable, and tailored for the formats young people actually use. The goal is not to 'dumb down' information; it is to make trustworthy information available in the same attention economy as misleading content.

The third implication is that corrections alone are insufficient when narratives are polarised. When young people encounter information as competing interpretations, the question is often not 'is this claim true?' but 'what story is being told, and why?'. Journalism that makes framing visible, by clearly distinguishing facts, interpretation, and opinion, can help young people navigate narrative competition without becoming resigned.

The fourth implication is that comment culture and engagement incentives influence credibility. Even high-quality journalism can become toxic or misleading in hostile comment sections, and young people may view them as credibility cues. Media organisations and platforms should consider moderation and community practices as part of information integrity, not as a separate 'engagement' issue.

9.4 Implications for platforms and the digital ecosystem

The findings clearly show that platforms are not neutral distribution channels. They influence what becomes visible, what is perceived as normal, and what is rewarded. Young people see repetition, recommendations, and comments as forces that shape their reality. Therefore, any meaningful response must include platform accountability alongside empowering users.

The **first** implication is that amplification is a responsibility. Recommendation systems and engagement-based ranking can normalise harmful framings through repetition, even when content is not strictly 'false'. Platforms should be expected to address not only content removal but also amplification dynamics, especially during periods of high salience when polarisation and emotional intensity increase.

The **second** implication is that advertising and boosting require clearer boundaries. Young people interpret 'pushed' content as potentially agenda-driven, but they are also exposed to paid content that appears organic. Clearer labelling, greater transparency around sponsorship and political advertising, and stricter enforcement of rules against misleading ads can help reduce confusion and cynicism.

The **third** implication relates to provenance and authenticity. Even when AI is not yet the main concern, it still poses a significant risk by eroding everyday cues of authenticity. Platform and ecosystem stakeholders should invest in provenance signals that matter to ordinary users, not just technical watermarking that remains hidden. They should also enhance account integrity and protections against impersonation, as young people often rely on 'who posted it' as a key trust indicator.

The **fourth** implication is that comment architecture causes harm. Comment sections can promote correction, but they can also increase hostility and cause users to withdraw. Platforms should consider comment design, moderation capacity, and measures to prevent abuse as part of their information integrity strategies. Since the comment layer is a key space where meaning is shaped, it should not be left unmanaged, as it can cause harm.

Finally, platforms cannot rely solely on users for safety. Reporting is often seen as ineffective. If platforms want users to report, the reporting process must feel meaningful: clear feedback, visible actions where necessary, and realistic options for escalation when harm persists.

9.5 Implications for civil society and youth organisations

Civil society and youth organisations operate at a practical intersection: they possess trust, proximity, and the ability to turn findings into everyday interventions. The findings imply several considerations for structuring this work.

First, work with social trust rather than against it. Since credibility spreads through people, interventions should explicitly engage trusted peer networks and community voices. Peer-to-peer formats, youth ambassadors, and creator collaborations can disseminate messages via the same channels that shape everyday beliefs and sharing.

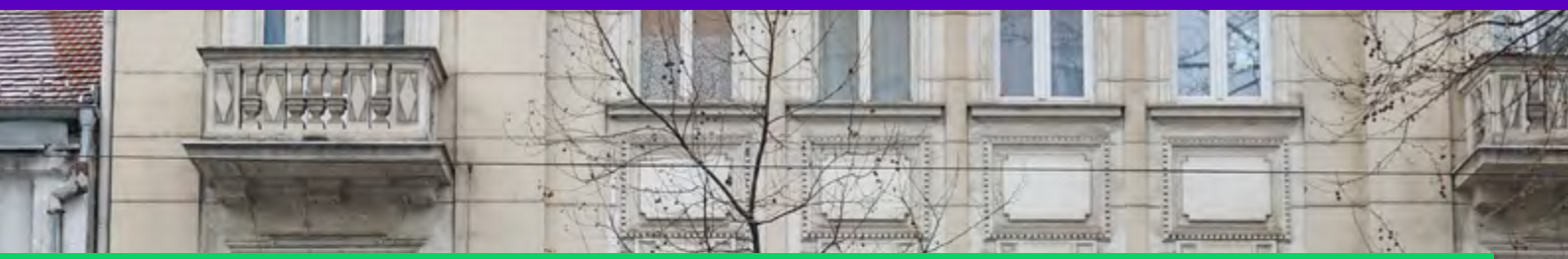
Second, prioritise low-friction interventions. Young people are not lacking awareness; they are navigating constraints. Programmes should focus on routines that fit everyday use: short decision rules, simple cues, and 'safe sharing' habits that protect without demanding constant effort. The most useful outputs are often practical tools, short explainers, checklists, and scenario-based exercises, rather than long guidance.

Third, incorporate emotional resilience. Overload and anxiety are linked to information resilience. Youth organisations can help young people build healthier exposure habits and reduce the shame associated with disengagement. This can safeguard mental wellbeing and lessen vulnerability to manipulation that preys on fear and fatigue.

Fourth, foster intergenerational bridges. Young people often mention needing to correct parents or manage forwarded content in family settings. Civil society can create parent-focused materials and community sessions that avoid blaming older generations and instead emphasise shared routines, respectful discussion, and practical steps to address forwarded claims.

Finally, connect micro-level support with upstream advocacy. Young people are already holding systems accountable. Civil society can turn those expectations into practical policy asks: transparency standards, enforcement capacity, platform accountability, and support for quality media, while safeguarding against politicised misuse of regulation. This is where the 'upstream' theme becomes practical.

Recommendations



These recommendations translate the findings and implications into practical steps. They are intended to be feasible within the WB6 context and to match how young people actually process information: through social trust cues, under time constraints, and using platform-native formats. Recommendations are arranged by stakeholder area, but they should be implemented collectively. Isolated actions will have a limited impact if the wider system remains unchanged.

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10.1 Ten prioritised recommendations (action statements)

1. Incorporate 'credibility-cue literacy' into all youth-focused support and educational efforts.

Move beyond simple 'check the facts' messages. Educate young people about how credibility signals are created and manipulated, such as source identity, 'officialness', engagement metrics, professional visuals, and repost chains, and how to respond with straightforward decision rules ('pause when emotional', 'treat forwards as unverified until you find the origin').

Primary owners: education providers, youth organisations, media partners.
Timeframe: Immediate (next six to twelve months)
Why now: trust is transmitted socially and becomes increasingly easy to imitate (Themes 1, 3, 4, 7).

2. Reduce verification friction with simple, repeatable routines that fit real scrolling behaviour.

Encourage widespread use of a small set of 'if–then' routines across programmes and materials (for example: 'If it asks you to act, pay, or panic, then check'; 'If it is clipped, find the original'; 'If it is forwarded, pause and locate a source'). Combine these with practical tools and real-world examples, not just theory.

Primary owners: education systems, youth organisations, media literacy providers.
Timeframe: Immediate (next six to twelve months)
Why now: checking is seen as work and becomes selective (Theme 2).

3. Treat digital wellbeing as part of information resilience.

Incorporate healthy exposure habits into media literacy and youth support: manage notifications, set boundaries during intense moments, and recognise when doom-scrolling fuels anxiety and resignation. Present this as protection, not avoidance or shame.

Primary owners: schools, youth organisations, mental health and wellbeing partners.
Timeframe: Immediate (next six to twelve months)
Why now: overload affects emotions and influences behaviour (Theme 5).

4. Establish an iterative CPD model for teachers on media literacy and cyber hygiene.

Develop modular, regularly updated professional development resources for classroom use that focus on building supportive capacity. Incorporate practical scenarios such as misleading visuals, synthetic media, influencer 'explainers', and political framing, along with ready-made lesson activities adaptable across different subjects.

Primary owners: education ministries, teacher training institutes, and donors or partners.
Timeframe: Medium term (twelve to twenty-four months)
Why now: media literacy is an essential infrastructure that requires ongoing updates as tactics evolve (Theme 7).

5. Move from standalone media literacy to cross-curricular infusion of critical thinking.

Embed credibility judgement, evidence reasoning, and narrative framing across subjects rather than treating MIL as an elective. Ensure assessment and classroom practice reward critical thinking, not rote compliance.

Primary owners: curriculum bodies, education ministries, and schools.
Timeframe: Medium term (twelve to twenty-four months)
Why now: narrative competition and trust deficits require transferable reasoning skills (Themes 1, 5, 7; Minor 7.1).

6. Extend interventions to early years and families with parent-facing support that avoids blame.

Develop age-appropriate materials for preschool and early primary students, along with guidance for parents and caregivers focused on practical routines: handling forwarded messages, modelling uncertainty, and discussing misinformation without escalating conflicts.

Primary owners: education systems, civil society, parent associations.
Timeframe: Medium term (twelve to twenty-four months)
Why now: family communication habits influence information exposure across generations (Theme 7).

7. Support quality media and fact-checkers to reach youth through platform-native explainers.

Invest in 30–60-second explainers, short carousels, and creator-friendly formats that provide trustworthy information when young people encounter claims. Pair this with transparent sourcing and a clear distinction between facts and interpretation.

Primary owners: media organisations, fact-checkers, donors, youth partners.
Timeframe: Immediate (next six to twelve months)
Why now: platforms influence exposure; youth depend on interpreters and short formats (Themes 1, 3, 5).

8. Strengthen platform accountability for amplification, comments, and advertising transparency.

Prioritise measures that reduce harm on a large scale: clearer labelling of sponsored and political content, stronger enforcement against misleading adverts, and integrity measures that lessen coordinated manipulation. Treat comment architecture and moderation as guardians of information integrity, not merely 'engagement'.

Primary owners: platforms, regulators, regional digital policy actors.
Timeframe: Structural (system reforms and sustained investment)
Why now: platforms shape what becomes normal, and comments influence meaning (Theme 3; Theme 6).

9. Improve account integrity and provenance cues that ordinary users can understand.

Invest in visible signals that assist users in assessing authenticity, such as account verification, anti-impersonation protections, and clearer origin chains for reposted content. Prepare for synthetic media threats by making provenance transparent and enhancing rapid response during periods of heightened visibility.

Primary owners: platforms, regulators, and trusted ecosystem partners.
Timeframe: Structural (system reforms and sustained investment)
Why now: 'who posted it' remains a key shortcut, and AI authenticity presents a growing risk (Theme 1; Minor 7.2).

10. Create a practical 'upstream package' for standards, transparency, and enforcement – paired with safeguards.

Support transparency requirements for online outlets where feasible, such as ownership, funding, and corrections; strengthen independent enforcement capacity; and invest in mechanisms that enhance quality without politicised misuse. Focus on proportionality, transparency, and clear public communication to rebuild trust.

Primary owners: regulators, media councils, policymakers, civil society watchdogs.
Timeframe: Structural (system reforms and sustained investment)
Why now: young people consistently locate responsibility upstream (Theme 6).

10.2 Recommendations by stakeholder group

For education systems
Education actors should prioritise Recommendations 1–6. The focus should be on developing capability gradually (curriculum integration, CPD, early-years support), reducing everyday friction, and supporting teachers and parents as part of an intergenerational model.

For media and journalism
Media actors should prioritise Recommendations 7 and 10. The focus is on enhancing quality and transparency while adapting delivery to platform-native formats that young people engage with, including clearer separation of fact, interpretation, and opinion.

For platforms and the digital ecosystem
Platform and ecosystem actors should prioritise Recommendations 8 and 9. The focus is on amplifying responsibility, promoting meaningful advertising transparency, ensuring integrity protections, and developing comment architectures that do not externalise harm onto users.

For civil society and youth organisations
Civil society should focus on Recommendations 1–3 and 6–7, utilising peer-to-peer formats and trusted networks, incorporating wellbeing, and making youth co-creation standard rather than optional.

For policymakers and regulators
Policy actors should prioritise Recommendations 8–10, emphasising transparency, enforceable standards, and safeguards for independence to prevent politicisation, while endorsing quality media and trustworthy public communication.

10.3 Implementation considerations (sequencing and feasibility)

Implementation should begin with actions that reduce everyday friction and improve access to reliable information in youth-oriented formats, while laying the groundwork for upstream reforms.

In the short term, the most practical 'quick wins' are: teacher support pilots (CPD modules), platform-native explainer partnerships with trusted media and fact-checkers, and practical 'safe sharing' norms integrated into youth programmes. In the medium term, the focus should shift to cross-curricular integration, early-years and parent-facing materials, and more structured platform accountability and transparency mechanisms.

Throughout all actions, co-creation with young people should be regarded as a design essential. It enhances relevance, tone, and engagement, and it helps ensure interventions build trust rather than provoke resistance.

10.4 Monitoring and learning notes (what to track)

Progress should be monitored using a combination of uptake indicators (such as reach and tool usage), capability indicators (such as whether young people adopt low-friction routines), and system indicators (such as improvements in transparency and accountability).

In practice, partners should look for three signals: whether young people find checking more feasible, whether emotional overload and resignation diminish, and whether trustworthy information becomes easier to access in the spaces where youth spend time.

Conclusions

11

Summary of the most important findings

This study demonstrates that youth information environments in the WB6 are better understood as lived systems rather than merely a battle between 'true' and 'false' content. Young people navigate high-volume, fast-moving feeds shaped by platform design, creator ecosystems, and social pathways. Exposure is often incidental rather than intentional: claims come through recommendations, short-form formats, comments, and semi-private sharing, frequently detached from context.

Credibility judgments are therefore made under real constraints. Verification is not an automatic action; it is a process of effort that competes with time pressure, emotional burden, and uncertainty. Young people rely on practical 'credibility cues' and proxy signals to determine what to believe, ignore, or share. These shortcuts can aid understanding in complex settings, but they also create vulnerabilities when 'official-looking' presentation, engagement metrics, or social endorsement are mistaken for reliability.

Trust is uneven and contested. Institutional trust varies across different settings, but scepticism towards political motives and media practices is widespread. In many cases, trust passes through people and familiar intermediaries, such as peers, family members, creators, and community networks. This reliance on social trust can be protective, but it can also accelerate circulation in semi-private spaces where provenance is hard to verify and corrective information is less apparent.

Risk intensifies during high-salience periods such as elections, crises, and polarising social issues. At these moments, young people describe heightened exposure and stronger emotional responses, with some becoming hyper-vigilant while others disengage to protect wellbeing. Overload is not only a matter of quantity; it is a condition that changes how judgement is made and how participation is sustained. The study's triangulation across methods further indicates that 'what is visible publicly' does not always align with 'what feels unavoidable' in personalised feeds and in private or semi-private channels.

Overall, the evidence indicates that effective responses cannot depend on individual responsibility alone. Youth-focused approaches must consider the social aspect of information, the design principles of platforms, and the practical constraints of verification under pressure.

Closing synthesis and forward look

The clear implication is that enhancing resilience in youth information environments demands action on multiple levels. At the individual level, media and information literacy should emphasise practical decision-making skills in real-world situations (such as recognising manipulation cues, managing uncertainty, and employing appropriate verification strategies), rather than expecting exhaustive verification.

At the community level, interventions should treat peers, educators, and trusted intermediaries as part of the solution. This includes supporting teachers through ongoing professional development and classroom-ready materials; equipping parents and caregivers with non-judgemental guidance; and making youth co-creation and peer-to-peer delivery standard design principles where institutional trust is low.

At the institutional and systemic level, credibility cannot be rebuilt through messaging alone. Consistent, transparent, and timely communication, especially during high-intensity moments, matters for trust. Support for quality media and fact-checkers is most likely to reach youth when delivered in platform-native formats and through carefully designed partnerships that safeguard editorial independence.

Finally, the study emphasises that platform accountability is not a secondary issue. The factors that influence exposure, such as amplification incentives, advertising, recommendation systems, and the social dynamics of comments, are crucial in shaping how information becomes 'normal'. Policy and programming should therefore integrate capacity-building with measures that enhance transparency and minimise incentives for manipulation.

The WB6 contexts discussed in this report vary in institutional capacity, media environments, and trust levels. Nonetheless, the patterns are sufficiently consistent to support shared regional learning alongside customised national responses. The key is to shift from reactive corrections towards enhancing everyday information infrastructures: the skills, supports, and systems that allow young people to engage confidently, safely, and with agency.

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Annex. Country snapshots (expanded profiles)

These expanded snapshots provide additional country context to aid in interpreting the findings. They focus on:

(i) the youth information environment and main exposure pathways,
(ii) media and information literacy (MIL) within formal education and related capacity, and
(iii) the features of the institutional, policy, and media ecosystem most relevant to information integrity. They are not comprehensive policy inventories.

A1. Albania

Youth information pathways in Albania are increasingly platform focused. Short-form videos and influencer-led explainers have become key ways for young people to access public affairs content, alongside portals and personal sharing. This trend is supported by regional media monitoring, which notes that social media is the main information source for youth (SEENPM, 2025).

MIL in formal education has progressed through a structured pilot-and-scale approach. UNESCO reported that a new curriculum was created to trial MIL in primary and secondary schools, with piloting scheduled to start in 10 schools by the end of 2021 and then expand (UNESCO, 2021). Later, UNESCO noted that the first phase of piloting was completed and described the implementation in collaboration with the Albanian Media Institute (AMI), the Quality Assurance Agency for Pre-University Education (ASCAP), and the Ministry of Education and Sports (UNESCO, 2022).

Country-level analytical work produced by AMI places these efforts within a broader timeline, highlighting that media and information education has existed in various forms and intensities in the Albanian pre-university system for more than a decade, encompassing both curricular and material/tool-based approaches (Dautaj, 2021). Additional teacher materials have also been developed to support classroom practice (AMI, 2021).

In practice, the key factors for implementation are teacher capacity, the availability of classroom-ready tools, and ongoing institutional coordination to shift from pilots to consistent delivery throughout school years. When MIL is integrated rather than taught as a standalone subject, monitoring classroom engagement becomes especially important to prevent uneven implementation.

UNESCO also highlights earlier agreements with Albania's education authorities to pilot MIL in primary and secondary schools, establishing MIL as a formal education priority within broader digital and civic competency agendas (UNESCO, 2020).

These developments are part of broader education reform efforts. Albania's draft National Education Strategy 2021–2026 emphasises implementing a competency-based curriculum and developing teachers, creating a supportive policy framework for integrating MIL into wider learning outcomes (Ministry of Education and Sports of Albania, 2021).

Most recently, UNESCO reported further expansion of MIL integration through large-scale training of teacher trainers across multiple regions, designed to cascade MIL training to peers and strengthen system-level capacity (UNESCO, 2025).

Baseline and needs-oriented research continues to shape implementation priorities, emphasising the importance of coherent policy coordination, resources for teachers, and classroom-ready materials to ensure consistent delivery beyond pilots (EMI, 2021; Fade In, 2023).

A2. Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina's information environment blends a longstanding role for television with widespread use of social media and significant exposure to politicised and identity-linked narratives. Comparative analysis indicates television as a main news source alongside frequent use of social networks for news among many respondents (BFMI, 2022).

Beyond channel mix, BiH's wider media and information ecosystem is influenced by ongoing vulnerabilities in media freedom and trust. International assessments and monitoring reports describe a difficult environment for independent journalism and public-interest reporting, including pressures that can weaken accountability and allow polarising narratives to circulate unchecked (OSCE, 2022; MFRR, 2024). Meanwhile, digital rights monitoring highlights online hostility and broader risks to freedom of expression in digital spaces, affecting how young people perceive what is safe to say and where public debate is seen as trustworthy (Rule of Law Platform/BIRN, 2025).

MIL development in formal education is influenced by the country's fragmented education governance. UNESCO reports that a MIL curriculum and supporting materials have been developed for piloting, with approval granted through education authorities in Sarajevo Canton, Herzegovina-Neretva Canton, and Republika Srpska, and teacher and librarian training linked to implementation in 30 schools (UNESCO, 2023). The same information is reflected in an official publication note by the Ministry of Civil Affairs, which outlines the piloting plan and institutional pathway (Ministry of Civil Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, n.d.).

At the subnational level, Sarajevo Canton adopted a dedicated strategy to develop MIL within the education system, signalling stronger policy commitment in at least one part of the country's governance framework (Ministry for Education of Sarajevo Canton, 2022). However, policy mapping also notes that BiH lacks a single, state-level media literacy strategy and that MIL is not uniformly embedded as a stand-alone subject, which makes consistent coverage difficult across education authorities (YouthWiki, 2023). In practice, this makes coordination and sustained teacher support vital: coverage and consistency will depend on continuity across multiple education authorities and on the availability of classroom-ready tools.

Regulation and response to harmful content online add another interpretive layer. A national mapping of frameworks for harmful online content (including hate speech and extremism) highlights the complex mix of legislative, regulatory, and self-regulatory arrangements, emphasising the need to safeguard freedom of expression (Mediacentar Sarajevo, 2023). A Council of Europe analysis of co-regulation options also explicitly notes the absence of a strategy and action plan to combat disinformation, pointing to a governance gap between the scale of the problem and the available tools (Council of Europe, 2022/2023). These conditions may help explain why young people often see 'checking' as an individual effort and why responsibility is perceived as diffuse.

In interpreting the findings, this context suggests that young people may experience uneven MIL exposure across locations and schools, relying on informal credibility cues and social trust pathways when formal skills support is limited or inconsistent.

A3. Kosovo

Kosovo's youth information landscape lies between a strong television tradition and a growing dependence on social platforms and messaging for daily information. Regional data show that television remains the primary information source overall, while social media (notably Facebook and Instagram) continues to expand as an alternative route, especially among younger groups (SEENPM, 2025; IREX, 2023).

Within formal schooling, Kosovo's curriculum framework identifies several transversal (cross-curricular) themes that are mandatory across subjects, establishing a supportive structure for digital, civic, and information-related competencies (MAShTI, 2016). However, recent analysis of media education indicates that, under current curricula, it is primarily regarded as a cross-curricular issue, and the level of classroom integration remains uncertain in practice (Hibrid.info, 2024).

Hibrid.info's review further notes that policy-level references predominantly position media education content within 'Language and Literature' and 'Civic Education' areas. However, it contends that tangible institutional initiatives to prioritise media education have been limited, and effective implementation relies heavily on teacher capacity and support (Hibrid.info, 2024). Meanwhile, Kosovo's approved teacher training catalogue includes relevant programmes (e.g., 'media education and its role in social and democratic development'), indicating an available, though optional, capacity-building pathway for educators (MAShTI, 2020).

Kosovo's broader education strategy and action plan (2022–2026) outlines objectives and measures for teacher professional development and enhancing key competencies, creating a supportive framework within which media education and digital literacy can be promoted (MESTI, 2022).

Teacher professional development pathways include specific programmes focused on 'Edukimi Medial' (Media Education), as listed in the national catalogue of approved training programmes, indicating a structured, though not necessarily mandatory, route to enhance educator capacity (MAShTI, 2024).

Alongside curriculum and training frameworks, international organisations have backed media and information literacy programmes in Kosovo, including educational activities and advice on enhancing media literacy through curricula and teacher training (OSCE Mission in Kosovo, 2022; OSCE, 2025).

In interpreting the findings, this context suggests that formal curriculum provisions may not automatically lead to consistent classroom practice, and young people might rely on informal cues, peer endorsement, and platform signals when systematic skills development is uneven.

A4. Montenegro

Montenegro's youth information environment is highly digital, with public platforms connected to semi-private communication channels. Survey data on youth information habits shows that social networks are the main source of information: 94 per cent of young people report using social networks to follow media content, followed by online portals (39.1 per cent) and television (33.1 per cent). The same source indicates that Instagram is particularly popular (with high daily use), while short-form videos also play a significant role through platforms such as TikTok.

Alongside public-facing feeds, messaging apps serve as significant channels for information. Viber, in particular, is not only widely used daily but is also regarded as the most common communication app for staying informed, with a large proportion of respondents reporting that they 'constantly' follow information through Viber. This has practical implications for the broader information ecosystem: it can facilitate the rapid spread of information, but it also reduces the visibility of corrections and makes accountability more difficult to ensure when content moves through closed networks rather than public pages.

Policy priorities recognise these dynamics and position youth information and literacy as systemic issues. Montenegro's Strategy for Youth 2023–2027 includes a dedicated measure focused on establishing a functional youth information system and enhancing young people's ability to utilise available information, including the development of standards, provider training, and a comprehensive youth guide to services and support. However, the same strategy narrative also highlights persistent gaps in practice, such as the lack of a centralised national system for youth information and the challenge that institutions often do not communicate in language that feels accessible to young people.

The strategy also clearly addresses formal education: it aims, starting from the 2024/25 school year, for 'civic education and media literacy' to become compulsory subjects in secondary schools and upper primary grades. This is a notable policy message, but it also raises the familiar challenge of implementation, which is crucial for understanding the findings in this report: whether the planned curriculum change results in consistent classroom practice on a large scale.

Finally, the context includes clear indicators of harm exposure and uneven support pathways. The country desk synthesis (drawing on UNICEF evidence) notes that 64 per cent of young people report noticing hate speech around them, and that when young people encounter hate speech online, large shares respond passively (for example, doing nothing or simply blocking), with reporting and challenge behaviours far less common. This combination of high exposure, limited response options, and heavily digital information routines provides important context for the report's themes around coping strategies, credibility cues, and the perceived costs of 'speaking up' online.

A5. North Macedonia

North Macedonia's youth information environment is predominantly digital and influenced by ongoing political polarisation and low levels of trust in institutions. Official statistics highlight the extent of daily connectivity: in early 2024, 90.8 per cent of households had internet access at home, and 91.2 per cent of individuals aged 15–74 used the internet.

Country evidence also indicates a youth-oriented information pattern that is both platform-driven and politically saturated. The Institute of Communication Studies' survey on youth news habits and disinformation recognition offers national evidence on how young people encounter news, the degree to which they recognise manipulation, and how civic engagement intersects with information behaviours.

Media integrity and trust are examined through various complementary perspectives. The Vibrant Information Barometer offers a structured, ecosystem-wide evaluation of information integrity risks and resilience factors, while UNDP's media integrity guide outlines systemic pressures, stakeholder dynamics, and practical reform strategies. These sources help explain why young people in the qualitative findings often describe a fragile 'trust floor', depend on social proof, and perceive political content as 'agenda-driven' rather than purely informational.

Media and information literacy (MIL) has advanced through education-focused initiatives and the efforts of organisations that regard media literacy as a measurable skill. IREX's 'YouThink' programme documents the integration of media literacy into primary and secondary education and connects it to teacher development, including pre-service training, suggesting a pathway that is not only extracurricular but also increasingly embedded in education systems. Simultaneously, the audiovisual regulator (AVMU) has conducted research on media literacy among first- and second-year secondary school students, bolstering the evidence base for more targeted policy and classroom support. (AVMU, 2024).

Taken together, this context indicates a complex picture that is crucial for understanding the study's findings: high digital exposure and politically charged narratives coexist with an emerging yet inconsistent MIL infrastructure. Implementation will rely on whether teacher support, curricular time, and institutional coordination keep up with the rapid evolution of platforms and narratives.

A6. Serbia

Serbia's youth information environment exists at the intersection of extensive platform use and a contested public sphere where media standards, trust, and safety are continually challenged. Recent ecosystem assessments highlight a sharp divide between a smaller number of professional and investigative outlets and a much larger, high-reach tabloid and politically aligned media segment, with polarisation influencing both what is visible and how events are framed. This context is crucial for understanding youth perceptions of 'agenda-driven' information and the sense that public narratives are rarely neutral.

Another aspect of the environment is the blurred line between information and intimidation in online spaces. The 2024 Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) highlights examples ranging from the sharing of student protesters' IDs to monitoring and data misuse targeting activists, alongside the manipulation or spread of false information aimed at discrediting individuals. The same source records cases where deepfake content was used in political/media contexts, showing how synthetic or altered material can be used not only for persuasion but also for damaging reputations and silencing. These dynamics pose a credibility challenge for young audiences: if 'proof' can be created and shared quickly, and consequences vary, then everyday verification becomes both more essential and more draining.

Available youth-focused research also highlights a highly social-media-centred pattern of news access, coupled with frequent exposure to misinformation. For example, one youth media study reports that social networks are the primary source for informing young people, followed by online portals, while traditional media (especially TV and print) lag behind; it also notes that a large proportion of young respondents frequently encounter 'fake news' (with many more encountering it occasionally). This combination, high exposure and low confidence in institutions, helps explain why young people may rely on social proof, peer networks, and informal 'credibility cues' even when they recognise these cues are imperfect.

Regarding media and information literacy (MIL) in formal education, Serbia has some entry points but lacks a comprehensive system-wide solution. VIBE reports that a course on 'language, media and culture' was introduced as an optional subject in 2018, including elements of media literacy. However, panellists considered this approach inadequate and argued that stronger cross-curricular integration would be more effective. The same source also highlights a broader stakeholder perspective that these competencies should be introduced earlier, including from pre-school, and that the roles of parents need to be recognised, an important context for understanding findings about intergenerational support and the limitations of 'individual checking' alone.

Annexes

The following additional Annexes provide further details, transparency and supporting material for this study. These Annexes are available on request from researchglobal@britishcouncil.org:

- Annex B. Methods detail (optional expansion)
- Annex C. Theme-to-code mapping (traceability)
- Annex D. Triangulation joint display tables
- Annex E. Instruments/prompts/topic guides
- Annex F. Quote bank by theme and country
- Annex G. Social media diary episode tables
- Annex H. Light social listening narrative catalogue

BIRN
Balkan Investigative Reporting Network

Balkan Investigative Reporting Network is a network of non-governmental organisations promoting freedom of speech, human rights and democratic values in Southern and Eastern Europe.

BIRN has developed a specific network structure that includes local independent organisations, gathered around an umbrella organisation – Balkan Investigative Regional Reporting Network (BIRN Hub) – a structure that has the advantage of combining local, country-based expertise with unique regional cooperation.

BIRN has local organisations in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Romania and Serbia, while the Network is editorially also present in Greece, Bulgaria, Croatia, Moldova, Montenegro, Ukraine, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary and Slovenia.

While the country organisations address local needs, BIRN Hub, registered in Bosnia and Herzegovina, also implements regional and international programs. BIRN Hub brings extensive expertise to journalists in post-communist and post-conflict societies, mainly through sharing the accumulated knowledge from the Western Balkan region.

BIRN strives to empower people to access their rights by providing accurate and relevant information and creating opportunities for them to participate in democratic processes.Through high-quality reporting and by creating a pool of skilled journalists, BIRN examines and scrutinises key processes, steers debates and provides the public with impartial and reliable information.

The BIRN Network also monitors and advocates for the transparency and accountability of public institutions and enables civil society organisations, CSOs and citizens to influence decision-makers.

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