# ENCOURAGING YOUTH CIVIC ACTIVISM THROUGH MEDIA ENGAGEMENT



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Skopje, 2024

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*Special thanks go to the participants in the three focus groups who shared their experiences regarding news-consumption habits and participation in civic activities in the community, thus providing us with a deeper insight into the research findings. Their recommendations on how all stakeholders can encourage youth engagement served as useful guidance in preparing the recommendations in this document. We thank them for their cooperation and the time they set aside for discussions and for sharing their insights!*

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Young people (aged 18-29) in North Macedonia mostly prefer social media as a way to get informed about current events, but they show passive habits for keeping up with the news. This passive consumption means they come across news while doing something else on social platforms, rather than actively seeking it out. They usually check/discuss the information they come across in conversations with friends and by following comments in online communities. Young people are interested in topics related to education, science, technology and culture, and express scepticism towards political news due to the frequent presence of disinformation. Their news-watching habits develop with age, especially when they start studying or working.

What is worrying is that as many as a quarter of those surveyed are showing critical levels of social media addiction: around 5 % fall into the highly addicted category, with an additional 19 % close to the most critical level of addiction, meaning that reducing their use of social media poses a challenge for them, even though they are aware that they should cut down.

Young people believe that they can identify disinformation and claim that they oftentimes check the accuracy, purpose and currency (timeliness) of the information, while they check the credibility of the source less often. Although they are confident in their skills, many of them admit that they may have inadvertently and unknowingly shared disinformation. They also know how to report disinformation on social media, but rarely report it. They consider political parties as the main sources of disinformation, which leads to their demotivation and reduced engagement with the news.

The participation of young people in public life is low. Almost half of them have never worked informally with others to solve community problems. Barely a third engaged in such activities in the past year. Among

young people, there is a visible apathy and they are of the opinion that they cannot really make a difference, and when they get involved in civic initiatives, they are mostly related to their personal interests - they volunteer mostly in youth and education organizations. When they become eligible to vote in elections, young people exercise this right in large numbers, but very rarely get involved in any other way in the electoral processes, for example getting involved in a political candidate's campaign. They say they talk to family members about elections and candidates, sometimes ask for their opinion before deciding on their political choice, and that their families regularly vote, but they themselves don't feel pressured to vote. Those who are civically active follow the news more often, usually get information from different sources outside of social media, discuss the news more often face-to-face with their friends, and show more interest in important social topics, such as politics, local news, social justice, and international issues. They say that they check the veracity of media content more often, they think they are more adept at identifying disinformation and are more confident in dealing with it.

The Institute of Communication Studies (ICS) created the publication "Encouraging Youth Civic Activism through Media Engagement", based on the findings from ICS's survey. The survey consisted of a questionnaire with 345 young respondents aged 18 to 29, as well as three focus groups with 33 respondents who belonged to three groups: currently engaged (engaged in civic activism in the last 12 months), occasionally engaged (engaged in civic activism, but not in the last 12 months) and disengaged (young people who have never been civically engaged in their life). The research also revealed what are the basic social drivers for civic activism (volunteer and electoral participation) of young people, with a focus on how family, education, political institutions, civil society organizations and the media shape their engagement. And the ultimate goal of this policy paper is to give practical recommendations for increasing the participation of young people in public life, especially through media engagement.

## Key observations and recommendations

- Early exposure to certain activities in the family that would be categorized as public life participation, such as voting and volunteering, has a lasting effect on the civic and political engagement of young people. Hence, families who regularly discuss socio-political events and encourage youth to participate in civic duties typically produce young people who are more participatory in the public life of the community.
- In schools, young people have real experiences with certain civic and political activities, but they are not integrated in the educational system and structure, but depend on the school and the teacher/professor or are motivated by a specific event. By strengthening civic education and media literacy programs, young people will develop skills for critical reasoning, resilience to the negative impacts of disinformation, and active civic and political participation.
- Political organizations, either at the municipal, ministerial or governmental level, also play a key role in promoting youth activism in public life. Young people identified local youth councils, direct involvement in decision-making processes and maintaining regular communication with government institutions through educational institutions and/or social media as effective strategies.
- Civil society organizations, on the other hand, are key to providing non-formal education and developing critical thinking skills among young people. Creating online communities and offering platforms for discussion of socio-political events can foster a greater sense of civic duty and engagement.
- Young people are also strongly influenced by the media they follow, so a balanced mix of negative and positive news is key to improving their self-confidence and desire to participate in civic and political activities. By practicing ethical and constructive journalism that focuses on solutions, diversity in reporting that corresponds to different values and preferences of young people will be ensured.
- Young people who are more media engaged, that is, who follow the news more often, who are informed from various sources outside of social media, who discuss the news face to face with their friends and check the veracity of media content, are more civically and politically active.

By implementing these recommendations, socialization drivers can better support young people to become media literate, as well as more civically and politically engaged.

# INTRODUCTION

Civic engagement and the involvement of young people in policy-making and decision-making processes is essential for improving the quality of life in a society, both at the individual and the community level. Participative and civically engaged behaviour of young people largely depends on adequate, complete and accurate information about socio-political, social and economic issues and the way the political system functions. Inadequate information and non-participation of young people in decision-making processes can lead to dissatisfaction, apathy and abstinence from engagement for overcoming problems at the local and central level (Held, 2006).

There are several definitions of **civic engagement,** and for the purposes of this research, we start from the definition of media literacy, which entails engagement at its core, as one of the five sets of skills and abilities, that is, "*the ability to act and participate in social flows and in the community through accessing, understanding and using the media, i.e. the ability to initiate solving collective problems at the local, regional, national and international level*" (Trajkoska et al. 2023, Hobbs, 2010). Additionally, as the American Psychological Association in its definition of civic engagement points out, "*it encompasses individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern. Civic engagement can take many forms, from individual voluntarism to organizational involvement to electoral participation*" (American Psychological Association, 2009).

There is interest both from a scientific and from a practical point of view to examine the relationship between media engagement and civic engagement, especially in today's ever-changing media environment.

**Media engagement,** in the context of the research carried out for the purposes of this document, refers to the habits of young people for keeping current on the news (including the most common sources they use for in-

formation, what activities they take in relation to the news, which topics they are most interested in) and detecting disinformation (including self-perception of their abilities to detect disinformation, their views on which topics disinformation is most common, who most often creates it, and the actions they take to distinguish accurate information from disinformation).

Research indicates an overwhelming presence of young people on social media, while the danger of rapid spread of disinformation through social platforms should be taken into account (Oden and Porter, 2023). In a survey by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, in general, young people tend to trust the news less, and think that the media covers less topics relevant to them (Nielsen RK, Fletcher R., 2024).

Distrust in the media and in institutions, the growth of scepticism and disinformation negatively affect civic engagement, undermining citizens' trust in democratic processes. **Disinformation** is defined as "false *information that is deliberately created to cause harm to a person, group, organization, or state* " (Dictionary of Media Literacy, 2023). It is a complex concept that is constantly changing due to the development of new techniques and technologies for the production and dissemination of untruths, half-truths and harmful narratives, especially in the virtual space. The spread of disinformation has a long-term effect on people's judgment because even after a piece of disinformation is corrected, the effect exerts a lingering influence – known as the continued influence effect. Thus, the spread of disinformation is particularly confusing and reduces the motivation of citizens to participate in political elections (Stahl, 2006).

Social factors also play a role in shaping young people's civic engagement and news-watching habits. Parents, school, local and central authorities, civil society organizations and the media are important agents of socialization.

The study by McIntosh, Hart, and Youniss (2007) argues that adolescents whose **parents** often discussed political issues are more likely to participate in civic activities, such as voting and volunteering. Parents also play a key role in shaping their children's news-watching habits. Edgerly's study (Edgerly et al., 2017) showed that despite the fundamental changes in the media, technology and news in the past two decades, parents remain key to the development of interest in news and patterns of media consumption. Children mirror their parents' news-watching habits, being much more likely to follow their parents' behaviour than their words.

**Schools** play a key role in political socialization by providing formal education about political systems and civic responsibilities. Kahne and Middaugh (2008) found that educational practices that encourage discussion of social issues, as well as participation in simulations of democratic processes, are particularly effective among young people. Campbell (2008) found that participation in various forms of school governance and exposure to democratic practices in schools contributed to future political engagement. Extracurricular activities are also important. Youniss et al. (1997) noted that participation in extracurricular activities, such as student parliament and community service clubs, was positively associated with increased civic engagement in youth later in life.

Media literacy is also significant, so schools that integrate media literacy into the curriculum help students to critically evaluate news sources and content (News Literacy Project, 2024). Also, enabled access to news sources is important in the context of encouragement to follow the news. Schools that provide access to newspapers, online news platforms, and that encourage news-related activities are more likely to encourage news following among students (Common Sense Media).

**The media** (television, radio, and newspapers) have played a significant role in political socialization by shaping public opinion and providing information about political events and issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The Knight Foundation (2018) reported that social media can be a powerful tool for civic engagement among young people, helping them mobilize on certain important issues and participate in political discussions, and emphasized the importance of media literacy in recognizing disinformation. The rise of social media is transforming political socialization, so young people increasingly follow political information through platforms such as Facebook, X and Instagram. The research of Loader, Vromen and Xenos (2014) emphasizes the role of social media as a facilitator of political engagement and activism among young people. Furthermore, constructive journalism involves the application of positive psychology techniques in journalistic news production in an attempt to create engaging reporting, without compromising the basic functions of journalism (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2017). Using positive emotions, which are indicators of prosperity, is one technique of positive psychology that can be applied in creating news so that it is more constructive.

**Civil society organizations,** such as youth groups and volunteer associations, also play a role by encouraging civic participation and providing opportunities for political learning (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

## Research approach

Starting from the theoretical discussions, the Institute of Communication Studies (ICS) conducted a survey that explains the connection between civic and political engagement and media engagement, among young people aged 18 to 29 in North Macedonia (the way in which they follow the news and their attitudes towards disinformation). This document analyses in depth the connection of the close social environment (family, peers, school), the wider social environment (local community), the central government (ministries, government), as well as the media and social networks with the civic and political activism of young people.

The main survey question is *whether and how news consumption and the recognition of disinformation are related to the civic and political engagement of young people*. The activity was steered by the following research objectives:

- to identify the habits of keeping up with the news: the nature and type of sources of information from which young people are informed;
- to determine which strategies, if any, young people use to recognize disinformation;
- to examine what type of participation in public life (civic and political engagement), if any, is characteristic of young people;
- which drivers (socialization agents - family, school, local and central government, civil society organizations, media) are related to youth participation in public life and the recognition of disinformation.

To achieve these research objectives, a two-phase research activity was conducted.

In the first phase, an online survey was conducted from December 2023 to March 2024 (Institute of Communication Studies, 2024). The questionnaire consisted of 31 questions with one or more alternatives, which related to the following four areas: (1) media and news consumption habits of young people, (2) self-perception of one's success in recognizing disinformation in the media, (3) participation in public life: manifesting civic and political engagement and (4) addiction to social media. Questionnaires that were used in other researches of a similar nature were taken into account while preparing this survey's questionnaire. To check the appropriateness

and comprehensibility of the questions, a pilot survey was conducted before conducting the main survey. The survey included 345 respondents aged 18 to 29 (see more in Methodology).

In an attempt to understand if and how news-watching habits, disinformation recognition, and civic and political engagement are related to certain social factors, additional research was done on a smaller group of respondents (33 in total). In this second phase of the research, which was conducted during May and June 2024, three focus groups were organized to gain insights into young people's early experiences and social influences on their civic and political activism, as well as to provide guidance about how young people can be encouraged to have an active attitude towards social and political events, to think critically about the news they consume in the media and to deal with disinformation. The questions for the discussion were grouped into blocks that referred to family, school and faculty, public institutions, civil society organizations and the media. The 33 respondents were selected from the survey sample, based on the results obtained from the Index of Civic and Political Engagement (Andolina et al. 2003).

## Relevance of the document

This document analyses the connection between civic activism and media engagement of young people and looks into the social drivers that play a role in encouraging these two types of behaviour.

In a democratic society, youth civic activism (civic and political engagement) is of essential importance for the constant development and improvement of the quality of life, therefore it is key for policy makers, but also all other stakeholders (educational institutions, the media and civil society organizations) to actively involve young people at all levels, starting from their school age, when making important decisions. The recommendations given at the end of this document are based on the thoughts of the young people that they shared in the focus groups, but also on the findings of a large number of research activities and practices throughout the world.

Therefore, we hope that this document will stimulate public discussions about what the stakeholders can do to overcome the "apathy" of the youth and encourage their confidence as important actors in achieving the changes they all wish to see.

The document is structured in four parts. The first part describes the problem of keeping up with the news, disinformation recognition, and civic and political engagement of young people and it looks into their current habits and perceptions, synthesizing findings from a survey report and focus group data related to the role of the drivers of socialization (family, schools, municipalities and the Government, civil society organizations and the media) in the news-consumption habits of young people. The second part presents data from focus groups on the role of socialization drivers in encouraging civic activism among young people, presenting their views and opinions on how much these drivers influenced their civic and political engagement. The third part, the conclusion, summarizes the main findings of the research, and the fourth part, gives recommendations for families, for education institutions, local and state institutions, civil society organizations and the media, which can be practically implemented immediately or over a longer period of time.

# MEDIA (DIS)ENGAGEMENT AND CIVIC (IN)ACTIVISM AMONG YOUTH



**The majority of young people choose Instagram, Facebook and YouTube as the most interesting platforms for keeping up with the news, and education, science and technology are the most attractive news topics to them.**

**Although they believe that only some of the information on social media is true, and almost a quarter spend a disconcertingly large amount of time on social platforms, actively searching for and responding to information is not common for young people.**

**They consider themselves able to recognize disinformation in the media, but more than half may have shared disinformation unknowingly. According to young people, politics and political parties are the source of the most incorrect or misleading information.**

**However, their political views on social events in the country are inaudible.**

## Young people are passive in seeking out news

Only a small number of young people choose not to be informed about current events, most of them want to know what is happening in our country and in the world. Although raised in families that watched television and read newspapers, traditional media is losing its power over the youth. They prefer social media (mostly Instagram, then Facebook, TikTok, YouTube) and that is how they access the news most often. Neither sex/gender, place of residence (urban/rural), or age are significant variables, they

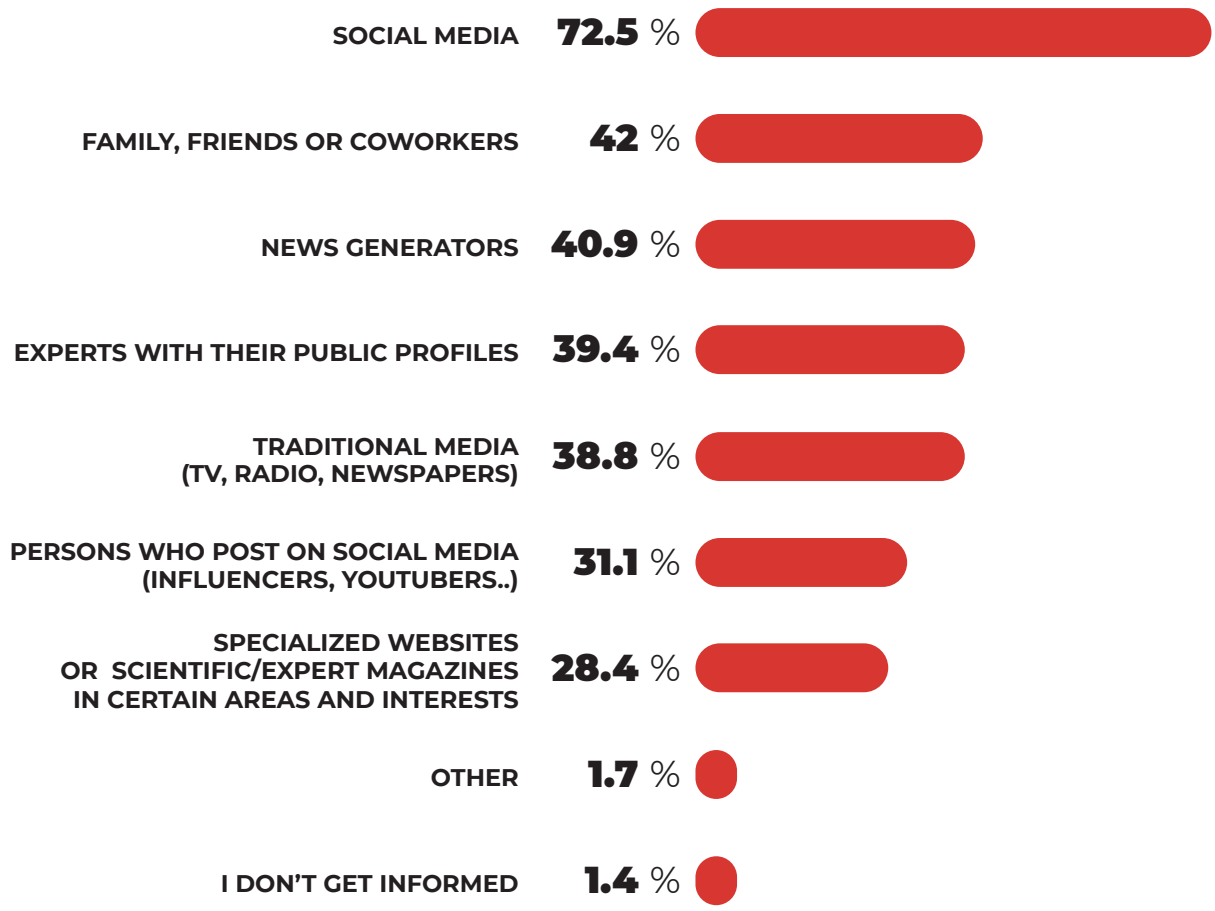



**Chart 1: Sources from which young people are informed about the happenings in our country and in the world**

all use social media just as often! The next most frequently used sources of information for our young respondents are: family, friends and colleagues (for 42 % of young people), female more often than male[1]; news generators (for 40.9 % of young people), more often from urban areas[2] and more often for the older subgroup (26-29 years old)[3]; and experts with their own public profiles (for 39.4 %). Traditional media, that is, television stations, radio stations and newspapers, were chosen as sources of information by only 38.8 % of the surveyed young people, and women/girls more often than men/boys[4]. Both influencers and YouTubers are sources of information for 31.1 % of young people, as are specialized websites or scientific/professional magazines for certain fields and interests for 28.4 % of young people.

The passive consumption of news is characteristic of young people: almost two-thirds declared that they mostly come across news while doing other things, and only one-third actively search for news and information.

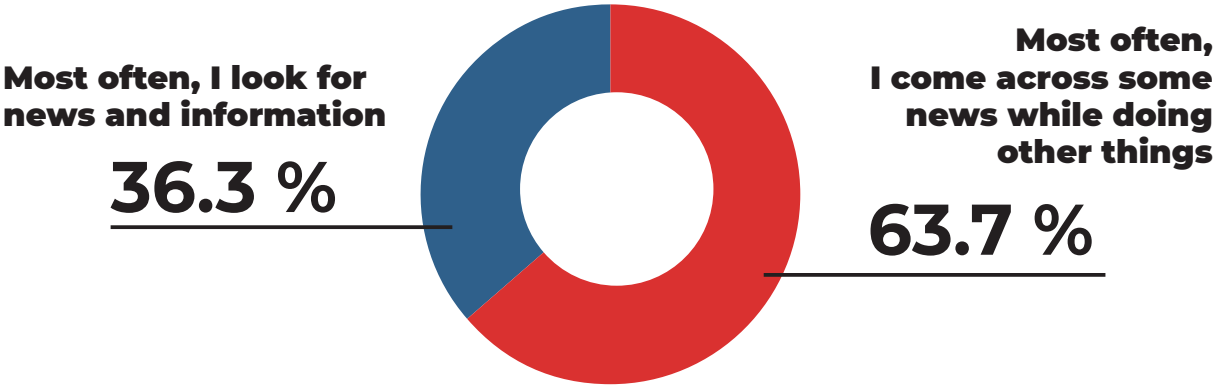



**Chart 2: Active or passive receiving of information**

1. X=8.52, p<0.01
2. X=6.87, p<0.01
3. X=19.92, p<0.01
4. X2= 4.96, p<0.05

Young people need to talk (face-to-face) or online with friends and colleagues about the news they read (more often this refers to women/girls[5]), and read comments on social media posts. Very rarely do they practice directly and publicly reacting, i.e., expressing their opinion on a certain news item. 21 % of young people share news via messaging apps. Commenting on news is more common on social media than on websites.

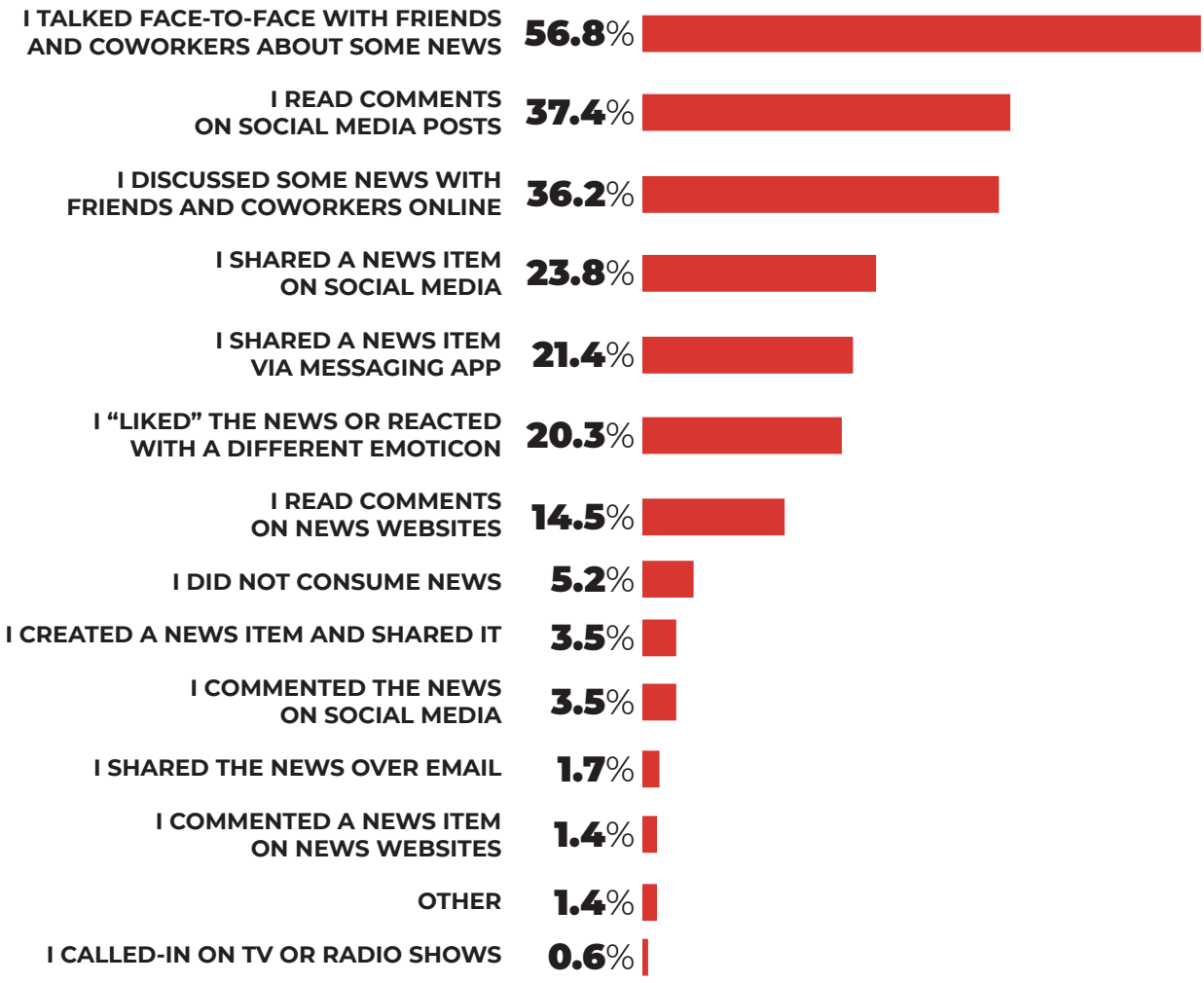



**Chart 3. Behavior of young people when reading news**

5. Face to face H2=10.32, p<0.01; Online with friends and colleagues X=6.92, p<0.01

Several participants in the focus groups confirmed that the news is an important topic in their daily socializing and social offline and online contacts. Some of them pointed out that "*it is not good to be in an information vacuum*", and "*as much as we want to avoid it and not see and hear, it still happens when we are part of society and are concerned by a certain topic*". Or they feel uncomfortable if they are not up to date with events.

> *"If I miss some important news during the day and you sit at the table and you don't know what happened, I feel embarrassed."*

A high percentage of young people who were questioned (82 %) said that they are interested in topics concerning education, science and technology; culture (76 %), as well as local news, health, crime and corruption (70-76 %). A smaller percentage of young people are interested in sports and social justice (only 37-38 %).




**Chart 4: Types of news that young people are interested in or that they avoid**

It is interesting that young people are interested in news about health, but not in sports, they are interested in news about wars in the world, but not in social justice. Their interests are largely determined by their gender and place of residence, so for example, men are more interested in news regarding politics[6], wars in the world[7], business and economy[8], and sports[9]. Women, on the other hand, have more interest in news about entertainment, celebrities and lifestyle[10]. News about culture (film, music, art, books), social justice (gender or ethnic inequality, LGBT+ rights, etc.), as well as climate change and the environment, are more interesting for young people from urban areas[11].

*"When I was a teenager, I didn't watch or read the news that much, but now as I'm getting older, I'm more interested in what's happening, specifically in our society, to see what's currently in the public eye, and I try to be involved in it as much as I can."*

*"Since I became eligible to vote, I began to more actively follow the debate shows and the events in the country in general, I'm talking politically. Before, I was more interested in other things, but after I started voting, I definitely follow them much more actively."*

Most of the young people in the focus groups said they noticed a change in their news-consumption habits as they grew older, especially after they started university studies or work.

In the discussion in the focus groups, young people pointed out that they don't watch television that much *"because the wrong programs are on offer"* and that there is *"only politics" there.*

6. X2=11.18, p<0,01
7. X2=11.16, p<0,01
8. X=16.4, p<0,01
9. X2= 22.45, p<0,01
10. X2=13.46, p<0,01
11. Culture X2= 7.35, p< 0.01; Social justice X=8.64, p<0.01, Climate change X=4.57, p<0.05

Most of the young people believe that they have noticed incorrect or false information on political topics (62.3 % of young people, more often those over the age of 23[12]) and famous people (57.1 % of young people, more often women[13]). The next topics where young people notice incorrect information are crime and corruption (44.3 % of young people, more often those over the age of 26[14]), health (39.4 % of young people), education (37.1 %) and topics about the cost of living (34.5 % of young people, more often those over the age of 26[15]). The smallest percentage of young people said that they notice incorrect or false information in the news related to climate change and the environment (28.7 % of young people).

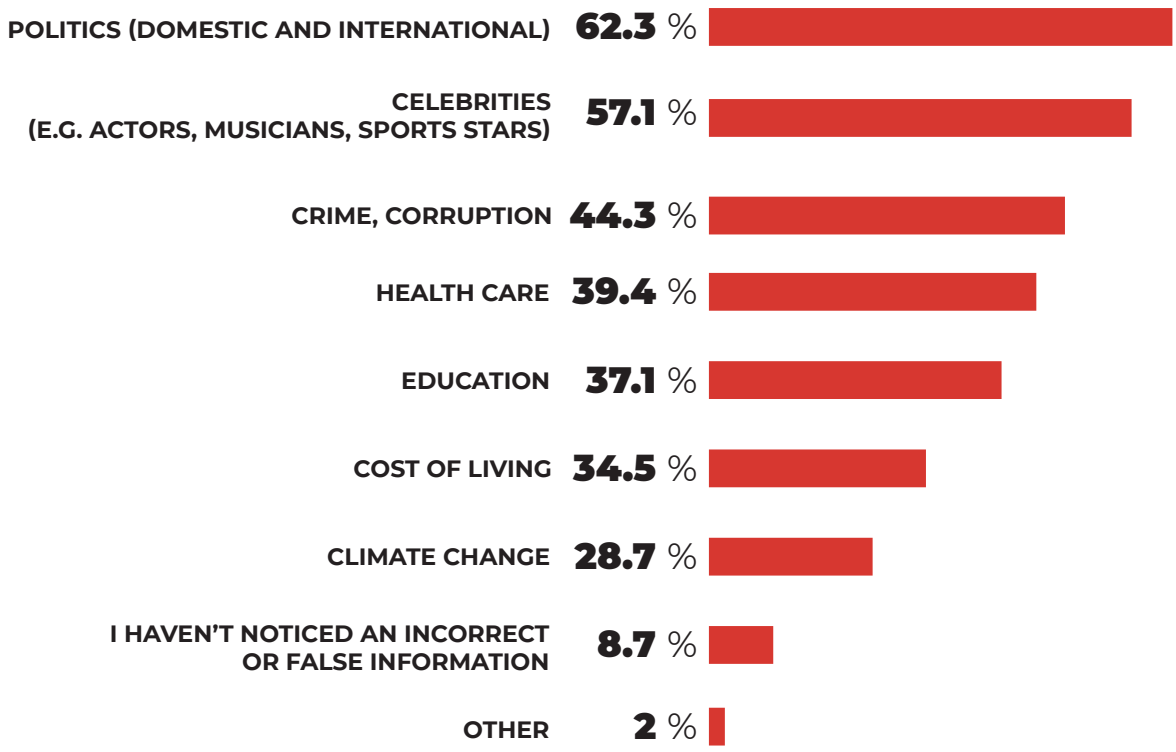



**Chart 5: Topics on which the respondents have noticed incorrect or false information**

12. X2= 23.52, p<0.01
13. X2=16.91, p<0.01
14. X2=11.24, p<0.01
15. X2=8.19, p<0.05

## Social media addiction among young people

Young people are quite addicted to social media. Regarding the use of social media, 5 % of the young respondents belong to the critical group of high addiction to social media, but the percentage of respondents (19 %) that are close to the critical score for diagnosing such addiction is also notable. They feel an increasing need to use social platforms for a large part of the day and spend a lot of time thinking and planning how to use them. They often try, but to no avail, to reduce the use of social media.

**Table 1: Mean values of responses to the Social Media Addiction Scale**

| | Very rarely | | | | Very often |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Claims** | **1** | **2** | **3** | **4** | **5** |
| **I spend a lot of time thinking about social media or planning how to use it.** | | | **2.8** | | |
| **I feel an urge to use social media more and more.** | | | **2.8** | | |
| **I use social media to forget about personal problems.** | | | **2,4** | | |
| **I have tried to cut down on the use of social media without success.** | | | **2.5** | | |
| **I become restless or troubled if I am prohibited from using social media.** | | **1.9** | | | |
| **I use social media so much that it has a negative impact on my studies / job.** | | **2.1** | | | |
| **Total test score** | | | **14.52 (2.4)** | | |

The assignment of the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale by young respondents showed that:

| | |
|---|---|
| Categorization of young people according to the total score | Worryingly, 5 % of respondents belong to the critical group of high dependence on social media, but the percentage of respondents (19 %) that are close to the critical result for diagnosing such dependence is also noteworthy. |
| Gender and social media addiction | Compared to the men/boys, the women/girls respondents use social media much more often to forget about personal problems and more often unsuccessfully try to reduce their use of social media. |
| Age | Young people aged 18 to 21, in contrast to those aged 26 to 29, say that they use social media more often to forget about personal problems and more often that it negatively affects their studies and/or their job. |

Research has confirmed that social media causes the release of dopamine in the brain, which stimulates users to keep going back to them. According to Nancy DeAngelis, director of the Center for Behavioral Health, "social media is designed to 'hook' our brains, and teenagers are especially susceptible to social media addiction" (Miller S., 2022). Shares, likes and comments on these platforms activate the brain's reward center, which results in a dopamine high, similar to what people feel when they gamble or use drugs, DeAngelis explains. This type of addiction falls under the category of behavioral addiction.

In people who are addicted to social media, it is possible to notice: anxiety, especially in the case when there is no availability of social networks; constantly checking their phones when a notification sound is heard; when uploading a picture on social media, the comments and likes are constantly checked; using social media is the first and last thing in the day, i.e. the usual routine; events are rated by how "postable" they are. Relatives notice that the person spends more time on social media than socializing with them face to face (Vimala, 2024). One study (Riehm et al., 2019) found that teenagers who use social media for more than three hours a day may be at increased risk of mental health disorders (increased depression and anxiety, low self-esteem, eating and sleep disorders, and body dysmorphic disorders).

## Young people say they check the veracity of the information

From the reported frequency with which the young participants in the research check the truth of the information, it can be seen that they mostly check **the accuracy** (argumentation) of the information (mean value of the group (M=3.2), then they check **the intention** of those who have produced the information (M=3.1) and its **currency (timeliness)** (M=3). Less often (statistically significant compared to the previous ones, M=2.7) they check **the source** of the information (its credibility).

The following are the data (expressed in mean values) about the self-perception of young people concerning the way they evaluate the truth of the news. Respondents answered whether they check: the currency (timeliness), source, accuracy and purpose of information on a scale from 1 meaning Never to 5 - Always.

## Table 2: Young people's self-perception of evaluating the veracity of news

| | Never (1) | Sometimes (2) | Often (3) | Very often (4) | Always (5) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| When was the information published? | | | | | |
| Has the information been revised/ updated? | | | | | |
| Are the links working? | | | | | |
| Summary score for CURRENCY (TIMELINESS) | | | 2.96 | | |
| Who is the author? (What are their qualifications?) | | | | | |
| Who is the publisher/source? (Is there contact information, e-mail address?) | | | | | |
| Is it sponsored and by whom? | | | | | |
| Summary score for checking the SOURCE | | | 2.7 | | |
| Is the information supported by evidence/arguments | | | | | |
| Is the information correct, comparing it to another source or from personal knowledge? | | | | | |
| What is the tone of the information - emotional or neutral? | | | | | |
| Are there typographical, grammatical, or spelling errors? | | | | | |
| Summary score for ACCURACY | | | 3.2 | | |
| What is the purpose of the information? Is it to inform, educate, sell, entertain or persuade? | | | | | |
| Are there political, ideological, cultural, religious, institutional or personal biases in the text? | | | | | |
| Who is affected by the information and what are its consequences? | | | | | |
| Summary result of INTENTION | | | 3.1 | | |
| Total score of the entire test | | | 3 | | |

Connection of verification of truth of information with other factors:

| | |
|---|---|
| Gender and age | There is no difference between men/boys and women/girls, as well as between different age categories in the way young people check the veracity of information. |
| Place of residence | Place of residence makes a difference in the overall score of the truth check test, but also in terms of checking the source and accuracy of the information.[16] This would mean that young people who declared that they come from urban areas check the truth of the information more often by checking the source and its credibility, as well as the accuracy (the argumentation of the information). |
| Connection between the way news is accessed and the way news is verified | Young people who have an active attitude towards the news (seeking out news and information) in contrast to those who have a passive attitude towards the news (they come across it by chance when they are on social media) are much more likely to do all the steps with which they check the truthfulness of the information[17]: they check how recent the information is more often, they check the source and its credibility, the accuracy and argumentation for the information and they check more often the intention of those who have created the piece of news and the information.[18] |

16. For the total test score t=2.25, p<0.02, for the source check t=2. 63, p<0.0 1,
for the accuracy of the information (t=2. 33, p<0.02).
17. t=3.49, p<0.01
18. Currency (timeliness) of the information t=3.36 (p<0.01); source and its credibility t=3.11, p<0.01; accuracy and argumentation about the information t=2.96, p<0.01; intention of those who produce the news and information t=2.24, p<0.05

## Young people are confident that they know how to recognize disinformation

The highest percentage of respondents (86 %) declared that they are able to recognize disinformation: 28.8 % declared that they "can fully recognize it", and 57.2 % that they can "partially" recognize it. Only 3.2 % declared that they were not able to recognize disinformation (of which 2.2 % declared that they "partially cannot" recognize them, and 1 % that they "cannot recognize them at all"). This data indicates that young people think they are successful in recognizing disinformation. There is no difference between men/boys and women/girls, nor between different age categories, nor between respondents from urban and rural areas in terms of the (self-perceived) ability to recognize disinformation.

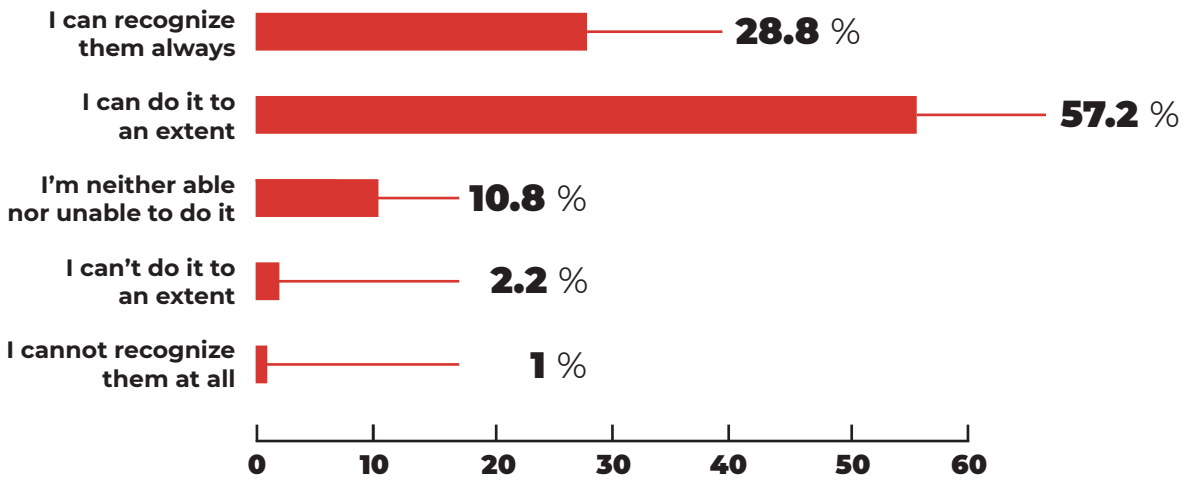



**Chart 6: Ability to recognize disinformation**

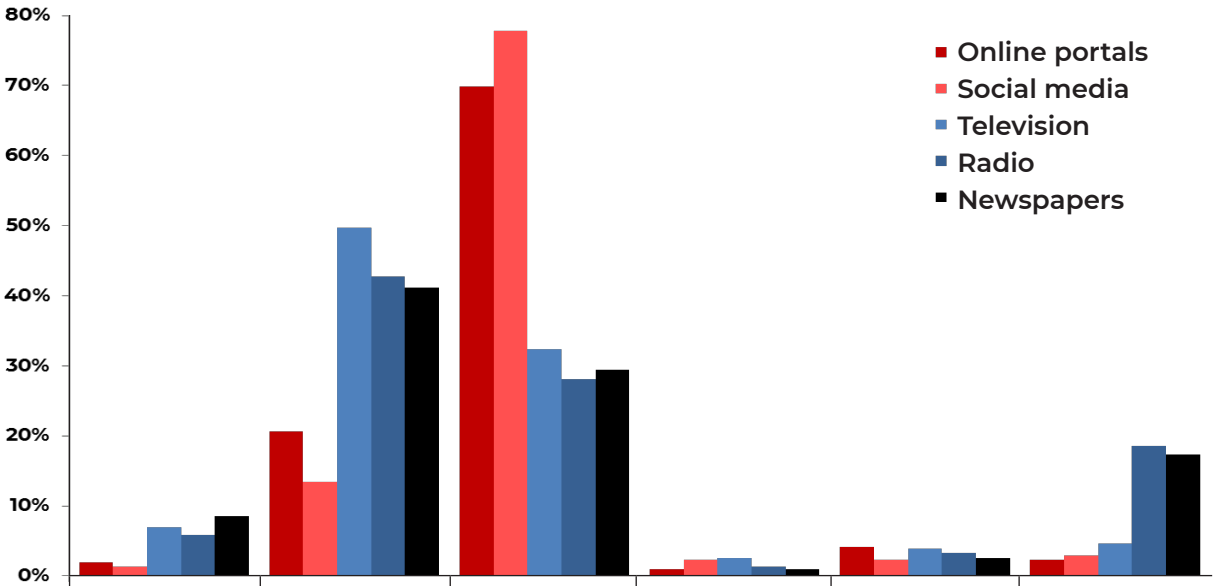
The assessment that they know how to recognize disinformation is related to the habit of checking the veracity of information[19], so the young people who say that they can fully recognize disinformation check the source of the information, its accuracy and intention much more often.

> *"Disinformation makes me check the news more to see if it's true or fake. And yes, you have to find another source, and a source outside of Macedonia, to know what is really going on."*

> *"I would rather be uninformed than misinformed." So, I've always been careful about where the news comes from, because it makes me think about what's going on, and I try to relate the real picture to what we always hear. From what I have observed, it always dissociates. And it is very important to see from which source it is, how quickly the news item was published and then whether the news will change over time."*

19. r=-197**, p<001

For almost 50 % of the young respondents, television and newspapers are media where most of the information is true. Only 20.6 % of respondents believe that most of the information shared by online portals is true, while most of the information on social media is true for an even smaller percentage of respondents (13.4 %). In fact, the highest percentage of respondents believe that only some of the information on online portals and social media is true.




| | They are all true | Most of them are true | Some of them are true | None of them are true | I don't assess the veracity | I don't know |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Online portals | 2% | 20.6% | 69.9% | 1.0% | 4.2% | 2.3% |
| Social media | 1.3% | 13.4% | 77.8% | 2.3% | 2.3% | 2.9% |
| Television | 6.9% | 49.7% | 32.4% | 2.6% | 3.9% | 4.6% |
| Radio | 5.9% | 42.8% | 28.1% | 1.3% | 3.3% | 18.6% |
| Newspapers | 8.5% | 41.2% | 29.4% | 1% | 2.6% | 17.3% |

**Graph 7: The truthfulness of information in the media**

Almost 2/3 of the young respondents (mostly women/girls[20]) believe that political parties are one of the main creators of disinformation. According to the subjective perception of the respondents, in addition to the political parties, the following are consisted to be the main creators of disinformation: domestic media (36.2 % of the respondents think so), the Government (31.9 %), but also ordinary citizens (31 % of the respondents). A very small percentage of young people (mostly men/boys[21]) believe that "foreign embassies" (5.5 % of young people) and non-governmental organizations (7 %) are the main creators of disinformation.

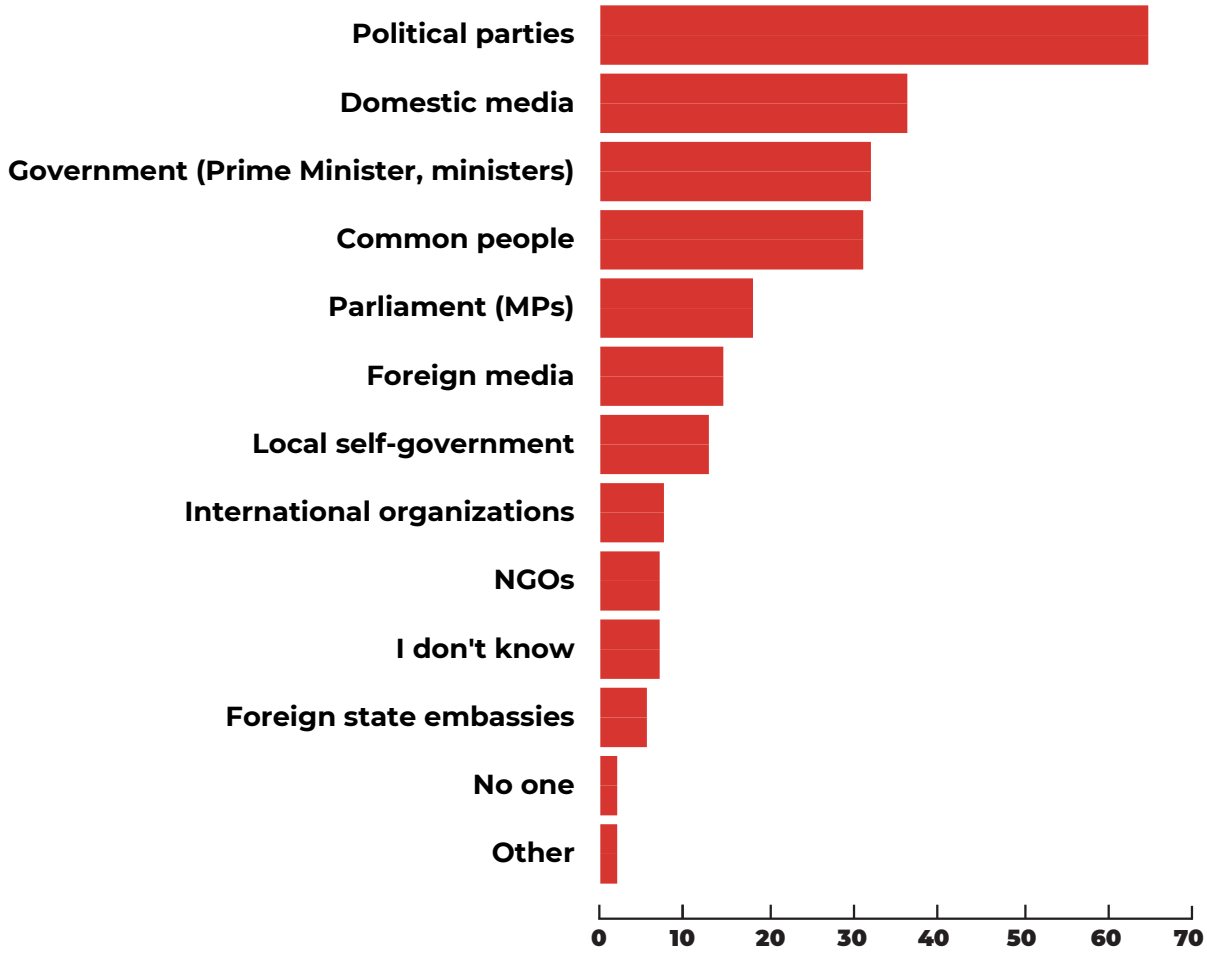



**Chart 8: Main creators of disinformation**

20. X2=8.54, p<0,01
21. X2=7.96, p<0.01

The highest percentage of respondents declared that they know where to report disinformation if they come across it on social media (79.1 %), and the least they know where to report false information if it is published on the radio (19.9 %) or in the newspapers (19.6 %). And to the question "Have you reported disinformation so far?", only 34.3 % answered that they have reported in the media.

**Table 3: Knowing how to report disinformation depending on the type of media**

| Type of media | Answer percentages: Yes, I know |
|---|---|
| **Social media** (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, etc.) | **79.1** |
| **Web platforms** | **40.2** |
| **Television** | **24.8** |
| **Radio** | **19.9** |
| **Print media** | **19.6** |

Only 7.8 % are sure that they have shared disinformation, but over half (51 %) declared that they may have shared information without knowing it was disinformation. This data deviates from the fact that almost all respondents (86 %) agreed that they recognize disinformation well. 41.2 % are sure that they have not shared any disinformation. Men/boys, unlike women/girls, report disinformation in a higher percentage[21].

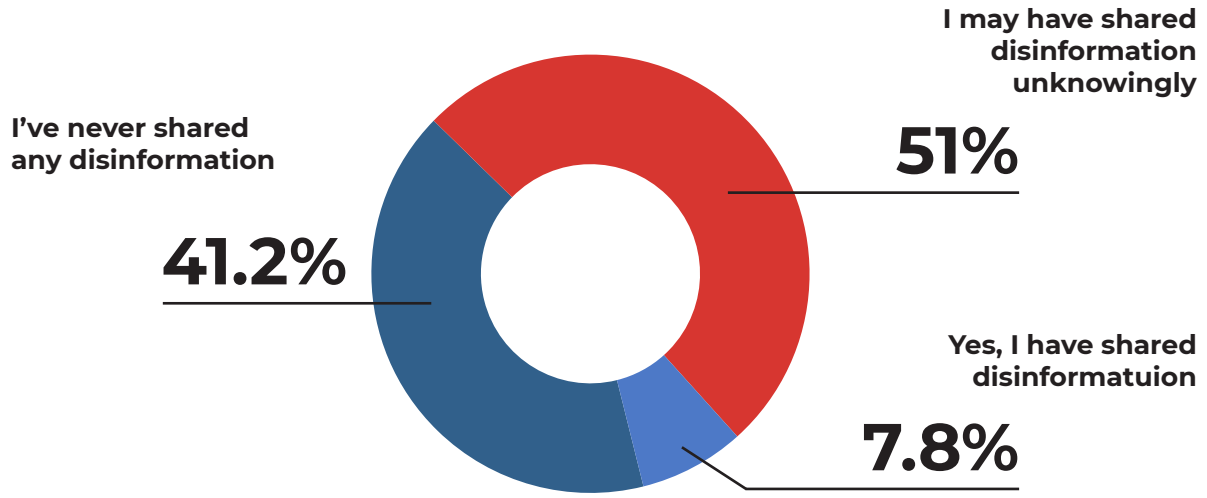



**Chart 9: Sharing disinformation**

22. x2=19.82, p<0,01

Some young participants in the focus groups talked about their ability to recognize disinformation, as well as the negative impact of disinformation.

*"And very often it's not like obvious disinformation, but it's like the information is a little twisted, or something is omitted, or unproven, or it has some suggestions, it's not very clear and easy to recognize."*

*"I personally have not (seen) disinformation, but those click bait headlines where something in the headline makes you click on it, we categorize it as disinformation because it says 'murder' and you will click on it and it has nothing to do with Macedonia, but about Uruguay."*

They say that disinformation demotivates them and influences them not to watch the news, but the perceived impunity makes them more passive with less faith in the possibility of changing something in society.

*"Not sanctioning disinformation makes young people feel more passive than they are, because if something is not punished and it is clearly wrong, then how can we change or fix something if there are simply no laws, no executive power, no nothing. Nothing works because of that."*

*"Disinformation is precisely why the media have a demotivating role that they share and continue to do so, and they are not sanctioned for it in any way. With that alone, they contribute to demotivating me. How could I do anything and change?"*

## Civic and political engagement among young people at a low level

### *Volunteer involvement*

Almost half of the young people (47 %) have never participated in a volunteering work or action, actually they have never worked informally with someone else or with a group to solve a problem in the community in which they live. Barely a third of them (29 %) have done such engagement in the past year (last 12 months). Youth, children's, educational and environmental organizations are groups in which the highest percentage of active young people volunteer regularly or occasionally.

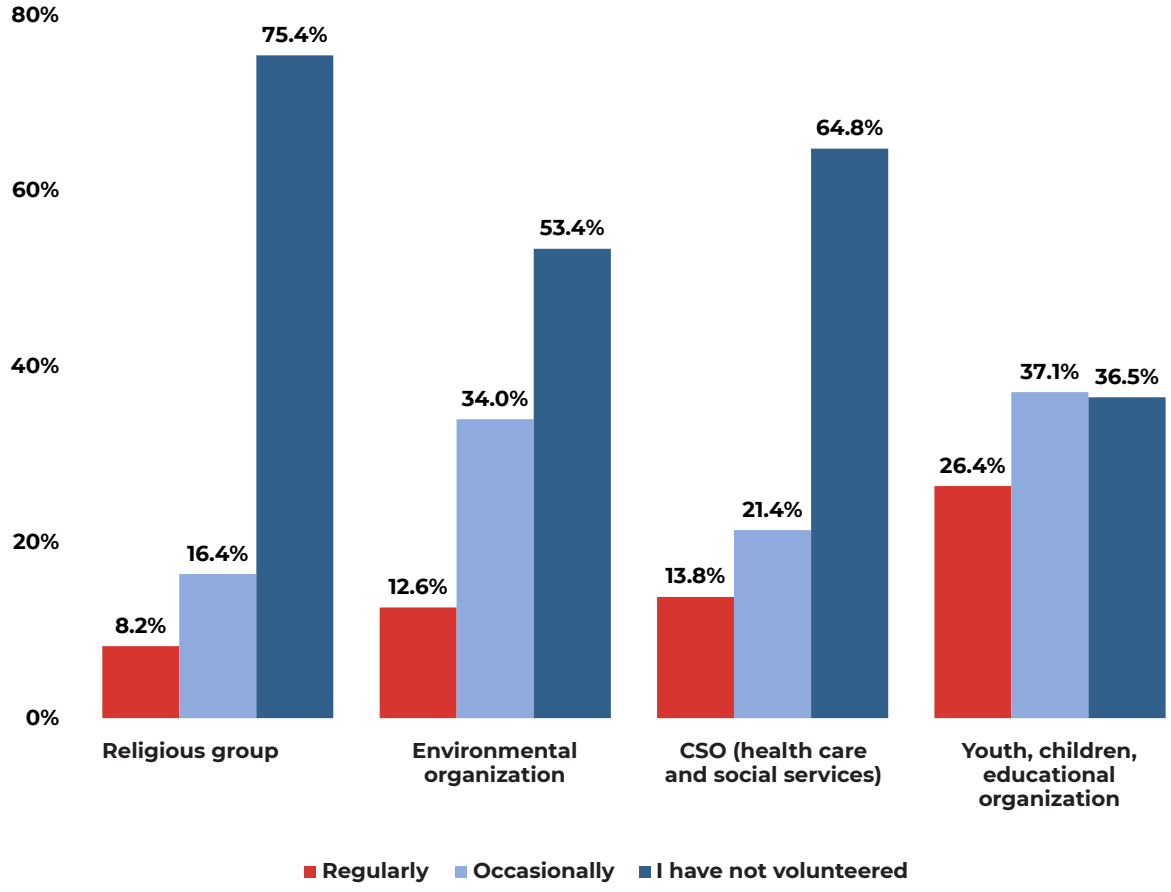



**Chart 13: How often young people are involved in the work of groups/organizations**

### *Electoral involvement*

2/3 of young people (65.4 %) show a marked interest in government or public affairs, but only half of the eligible voters vote in elections (40 % vote regularly, 16.7 % sometimes vote). Only a few, however, are truly motivated to participate in conversations and persuasion during elections, and donating funds for political purposes is completely uncharacteristic for them. The political voice of young people is hardly heard. They will very rarely raise their political voice if it means contacting a politician, signing a written petition or participating in protests, marches or demonstrations. The only thing in which they show any activity is collecting funds for charities, but not donating money and boycotting or "buycotting[23]" a company because of certain social values.

**Table 4: Types of activities aimed at expressing attitudes**

| | No, I haven't done that | Yes, I have, but not in the last 12 months | Yes, I have done that in the past 12 months | I have done it, but I don't know if in the last 12 months |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Have you contacted or visited any political officials?** | **78.9 %** | **8.2 %** | **11.2 %** | **1.7 %** |
| **Have you participated in a protest, march or demonstration?** | **59.5 %** | **19.7 %** | **16.7 %** | **4.1 %** |
| **Have you signed a written petition (on paper)?** | **78.2 %** | **10.2 %** | **8.5 %** | **3.1 %** |
| **Have you NOT PURCHASED something from a certain manufacturer because you disagree with their social or political values?** | **67.7 %** | **6.5 %** | **18.7 %** | **7.1 %** |
| **Have you PURCHASED a product or service because you like the company's social or political values?** | **66.3 %** | **8.2 %** | **19.0 %** | **6.5 %** |
| **Have you walked, run or cycled for charity?** | **73.8 %** | **13.3 %** | **11.9 %** | **1 %** |
| **Have you ever done something to raise money for charity without considering donating money?** | **38.1 %** | **27.6 %** | **24.8 %** | **9.5 %** |

23. Political consumerism refers to the intentional avoidance or purchase of products because of political, social, or ethical concerns. The intentional avoidance (boycotting) and the intentional purchase (buycotting) of products constitute a growing form of political behaviour (Kam & Deichert, 2020).

## Differences between civically active/engaged and disengaged youth

Based on respondents' answers to questions about group or organization membership, volunteering, and community problem solving, which are indicators of civic activism, as well as questions about voting, persuading others to vote for a particular candidate or party, donating to a campaign, party or group, volunteering for a candidate or political organization, which are indicators of electoral/political activism, respondents were grouped into 4 categories: **disengaged** - these are young people who have never had ei-

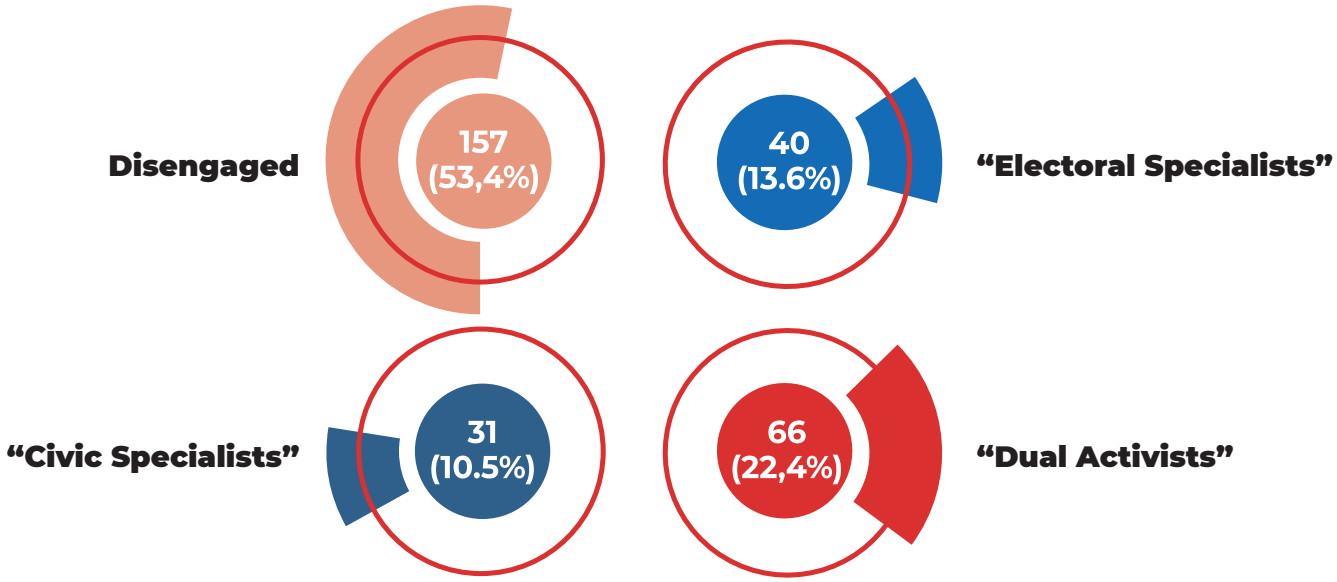



**Figure 1: Frequencies of respondents according to civic and electoral/political engagement**

ther civic or electoral engagement; the so called **“electoral specialists”** - young people who sometimes or regularly have only electoral engagement, “**civic specialists**” - young people who are sometimes or regularly engaged in civil society affairs, and “**dual activists**” - young people who regularly or occasionally engage in both civil and electoral activities[24].

In summary, civic activism is positively related to media engagement, so young people who are civically and politically active/engaged, unlike those who are not engaged: are much more often informed by news generators and websites, and not only by social media; they put emojis and create news more often; show more interest in important social topics, such as politics, local news, conflict and international developments, and have a greater ability to notice disinformation in topics related to politics, health care, education, climate change and the environment; they fact-check more often - whether the news is current, whether it is supported by evidence, who is the author/source and what is the intention of the one who made it, and they have more confidence in the fight against disinformation.

24. The names of the categories are taken from the original instrument, although there the index is calculated only on the basis of the answers that mean only regular civic and/or electoral engagement. In this research, the percentage of young people who are regularly involved both civically and politically is very small, and therefore it was necessary to include in the three categories of respondents “Election Specialists”, “Civil Society Specialists” and “Dual Activists” those young people who they occasionally get involved in civic and electoral/political activities).

In more detail, the data speak of the following differences between the four categories of respondents:

| | |
|---|---|
| From which sources do they get informed about developments | "Dual activists" are much more likely to be informed by news generators and websites than those who are disengaged.[25] |
| Actively seeking out news | Civically engaged youth ("civic specialists", "electoral specialists" and "dual activists") actively seek out news more often than disengaged youth[26] |
| What do they do with the news? | "Dual activists" much more often than all others:<br>• They react with emojis[27]<br>• They create news[28]<br>The disengaged (compared to everyone else), on the other hand, mostly talk face to face[29] |
| What topics do they notice disinformation about? | "Dual activists" along with "electoral specialists" are more likely to notice disinformation about politics[30]<br>"Civic specialists" are more likely to comment on health care[31] and education[32]<br>Disinformation about climate change and the environment is least noticed by the disengaged[33] |
| What topics do they show more interest in? | "Dual activists" show greater interest in local news.[34]<br>All three groups of engaged youth are more interested in news on politics[35], business[36] and international affairs[37].<br>The wars in the world are most interesting to "dual activists" and "electoral specialists".[38]<br>Entertainment and celebrity news[39], as well as health news[40] are the most interesting for the disengaged. |
| Truth-check actions taken | The more engaged they are (both civically and electorally), the more often they undertake various truth-checking activities[51]<br>• is the news current[52]<br>• is it supported by evidence[53]<br>• who is the author/source[44]<br>• what is the intention of the one who created it[45] |
| Assessment of one's ability to recognize disinformation | The younger people are involved in public life, the more their self-confidence grows in the fight against disinformation.[46] |

25. X2=13.16, p<0.01; 26. X2=11,99, p<0,01; 27. X2=9.45, p<0.05; 28. X2=19.25, p<0.01; 29. X2=7.78, p<0.05; 30. X2=33.07, p<0.01; 31. X2=8.64, p<0.05; 32. X2=14.98, p<0.01; 33. X2=7.94, p<0.05; 34. X2=8.6, p<0.05; 35. X2=32.28, p<0.01; 36. X2=13.74, p<0.01; 37. X2=14.48, p<0.01; 38. X2=8.16, p<0.05; 39. X2=10.97, p<0.01; 40. X2=11.60, p<0.01; 41. r=.276, p<0.01; 42. r=.210, p<0.01; 43. r=.21, p<0.01; 44. r=.25, p<0.01; 45. r=.26, p<0.01; 46. r=.210, p<0.01

# YOUTH'S EARLY EXPERIENCE AS AN INCENTIVE FOR GREATER CIVIC AND POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT



Civic and politically active/engaged young people come from families that often discuss civic and political involvement and the importance of being humane and active in public life.

In schools, discussions about youth involvement in public life are less frequent, with primary schools offering more volunteer experiences (civic activism) and secondary schools more political activities (political activism).

Civic and politically engaged youth have more experiences with volunteering and political activities with local and central authorities compared to their disengaged peers.

Civil society/non-governmental organizations are a bright example for all young people, and especially those engaged testify to the success of the projects in motivating youth activism.

All young people have negative attitudes towards the media, while the civic and politically engaged have a greater understanding of the negative impact of political news and disinformation on the participation of young people in public life.

The experiences of young people with different socialization drivers - family, school, local and central authorities, non-governmental organizations and the media - are also different. According to young people, family, school and civil society organizations are more important, more meaningful and positive, and political organizations and the media are less significant and more negative drivers for encouraging civic and political engagement. In the survey, young people were grouped according to their civic and political activity into three focus groups: **completely civically and politically disengaged** - young people who have never volunteered nor have been electorally engaged, **occasionally civically and politically engaged** - young people who have volunteered and/or have been electorally engaged, but not in the last 12 months, and **currently civically and politically engaged** - young people who have volunteered and/or have been electorally engaged in the last 12 months. In this section, we explain their early experience with socialization drivers in terms of encouraging their civic and political activism, that is, how much these drivers contributed to the youth being civically and politically engaged.

## Family influence on fostering civic and political engagement

*The research showed that almost all families vote and take part in volunteer activities. The difference between engaged (either occasionally or continuously) and disengaged youth is that in the families of disengaged youth, socio-political events are not often discussed and youth are not directed or pressured to vote. In the families of the young people from the engaged groups, examples of civic involvement and volunteering are more common, and the importance of being humane and civically active is more often discussed.*

Regarding the influence of the family, several aspects were considered, such as voting habits in the family (primarily of the parents), conversations related to political events in the family and specific experiences with civic engagement in the family. Almost all young people said that they grew up in families where they regularly voted (meaning their parents) and that there were always some kind of volunteer activities in their families. The difference between engaged (occasionally or continuously) and disengaged youth is in the sharing of electoral preferences among family members, in conversations about political events, but also in activism and volunteering in the family, as well as in some guidance by the family to go out to vote.

**Disengaged youth** say that conversations related to political events in their families were rare, and their parents are not interested in whether they go out to vote.

*"My parents were not at all interested in whether I go out to vote, they know that I am not really interested in that."*

*"Whether we go home to vote or not, no one really cares about that."*

These young people said that the early experiences with civic activities were reduced to individual initiatives in the family, not through organizations or institutions, and all of them said that they were mainly activities of donating clothes, food to people in need, some also mentioned donating blood, taking care of street animals.

**Engaged youth (occasionally engaged and currently engaged)** say that they all vote basically regularly, but in some families even political preferences are shared. In most of the families, conversations related to political developments are a topic that often arises. All respondents said that daily socio-political events are a topic of conversation, consultation or discussion both at home and with friends. These young people shared that certain activities are undertaken in their families, and with some, humanitarian actions are discussed. The activities undertaken by their parents and themselves range from donating computers to families who need them, through volunteering in various organizations such as the Red Cross, "Cleaner Macedonia", to actions to clean up the environment, helping victims of domestic violence and the like.

*"As a family, we have often helped Borce ("Donate a Computer"), we have been in contact several times. My father teaches in a village, he helps deliver computers and laptops, and we have donated, for example, old parts or something to repair them. However, I have been a part of the Red Cross before because my father was involved, we have helped by collecting clothes, donating food to families in need, etc. I've also been a part of projects in high school, but I think it's more like an influence from my father. Because he is an educator and was much more involved and still teaches in an environment where there are more vulnerable families and you see the real picture."*

*"My close family members have participated in activities to help victims of domestic violence and also help with donations, especially for Roma children who come from marginalized families. We are also animal lovers at home. We take active part in supporting actions concerning dogs. We donate and help with everything."*

## School influence on fostering civic and political engagement

*Discussions and conversations in the schools are less frequent, although young people remember more what they did (actions) than what was talked about. According to them, primary school offers more experiences in terms of volunteering and civic activism, and high school focuses more on political activity. The most likely reasons for their experience with political activism are the organized student protests that took place in 2015, when these young people were in high school. Engaged young people (both occasionally and continuously) have far greater experiences with both volunteer activities and political activities in schools compared to those who are not engaged.*

Regarding the impact of schools, the following aspects were considered: discussion within the educational institutions about socio-political events and experiences of civic and political engagement within those institutions. Almost all young people said that conversations in their schools concerning socio-political events and civic and political activism are rare or incidental. Almost everyone pointed out that real experiences with participation in public life exist, but they are not systematized. Instead, they are individualized (depending on the school and the teacher/professor) and are prompted by a specific event. A difference between an engaged and a disengaged youth is in the frequency of both volunteering and political involvement in the school environment.

According to the shared experiences of **disengaged youth,** it seems that primary education is what gave them some opportunities and encouraged them to some kind of civic engagement. Humanitarian drives happened often both in primary and secondary schools, such as collecting funds for classmates who are in need or donating blood. However, there were also young people who said that they could not remember any activities.

*"I only remember that in primary school the focus was mostly on things like reforestation, cleaning, I also remember that we were at some environmental fair. They took us to museums a lot, it was more geared towards science, we learned about history, I remember that. And the only thing we studied was Civics (education) in the eighth grade."*

*"There were humanitarian drives in high school as well. Not sure if some of the students had a brother or sister and money had to be collected for medicines. We also collected donations for those who couldn't afford to go on a school field trip."*

More than half of the group of **occasionally engaged youth** shared experiences with political activism, primarily from the organized boycott in 2015, while they were in high school. They emphasized that the encouragement of civic and political involvement is not systematic but individualized and isolated: depending on the particular school or the particular professor.

*"We were studying at university when the Student Plenum began. The professors were not so open to talk, except for two of them who were with us during that time. This happened in 2016. The professors motivated us constantly, and those who went with us, with whom we discussed the political situations, who helped us see things in a different way, and not as they were presented in the media, literally predicted some movements, more or less... Most of them tried to make us stay in the classrooms and not be politically or socially active. We were driven mostly by the sense of injustice because the form that was proposed was too harsh a solution, and it seems to me that the activism then was not so much caused by the media as it was by a personal urge do act unjustly. And young people have enthusiasm to fight against injustice."*

*"In the "Mirce Acev" high school, where I went, we had a youth community. We elected a president who would represent that youth community and voting was done by class. There was an election round and it was voted who would be the most competent to represent that youth section. The youth organization always defended the goals, plans, ideas of all high school students in the school. And from that aspect, donor dinners were organized in honour of a holiday, some important events where, for example, we observed the interests of the students."*

Almost all participants from the group of currently **engaged youth** shared their experiences of civic engagement in both primary and secondary school.

*"There are much more (activities to encourage civic engagement, a.n.) in primary school than in secondary school. In my primary school, for example, there was a lot of environmental activities like we would clean the school yard, plant a tree, then there were some exercises in natural sciences, biology, bringing flowers to school to plant them, and then move them to the yard. Later on in high school, everything quieted down."*

*"Primary school encouraged me to volunteer, for the first time in the seventh grade in a non-governmental organization with environmental and humanitarian drives. In high school, I got involved in bigger projects, even international ones, so that already at the end of high school and the beginning of college I could get involved in creating youth policies, with laws concerning the youth etc."*

*"Through MOF, mostly the debate clubs that are organized in different cities. Not only debates, there is also creative activism and We Learn Law."*

*"In secondary school, in addition to debating and environmental clubs, we had a club where political topics were discussed and we were educated from an early age, although that project was initiated by a teacher who taught me in primary school, we continued with it in high school and so it went. I think it's a very good initiative because a child should be educated politically from the youngest age, even though they don't have the right to vote."*

## The influence of political organizations (municipalities, ministries and the Government) in encouraging civic and political engagement

*Disengaged young people have almost no experience with local and central authorities, while engaged young people, especially those currently engaged, have both positive and negative experiences. The negative experiences are from the aspect of outdated data on the websites of the municipalities or, on the other hand, the lack of interest of young people to get involved in the activities of the municipality. The positive aspects are the usefulness of the projects undertaken by some of the municipalities, but also the enthusiasm of young people to participate in the creation of policies at the local level.*

In terms of the influence of political organizations, the experiences with communication and activities undertaken by the municipalities, the Government and the ministry were considered, and refer to civic and political engagement and involvement of young people. Almost all young people said that the central government involves young people much less in the creation of their policies and contributes very little to the civic and political involvement of young people. The difference between engaged and disengaged youth is precisely in their experiences with the work of municipalities, the Government and ministries.

### *Political organizations at the local level*

**The disengaged young people** have no interest in following the events in their municipality. Similarly, most of them are not aware of any communication channel that the municipality offers or uses. They are hardly familiar with the events that the municipality announces related to young people.

They are sceptical about the functioning and sincere intentions of the municipalities when they state that they are working on something or that they themselves, as young people, can change something.

*"Nothing is happening in our municipality... I can see that they haven't even put in a single nail to fix things, let alone anything more."*

*"The communication is probably done through the party."*

*"I think that when they publish information, they don't bother with it reaching anyone, the only important thing is that they are published. If you see it, fine, if you don't, never mind.*

*"No one is informed. This is the first time I've heard that there was a call to join a youth council. I, for example, would sign up for something like that if I knew it was an option... I would sign up, but it never reached me."*

"The only thing they notice is *"putting bins and painting stripes on the street – and that's it" or, perhaps, "some cultural events".*

**Occasionally, those who are engaged** say that they usually receive information from the municipality only during elections. And that only applies to informing young people, not involving them. Some of them have had more positive experiences from a younger age, and some believe that not only does the municipality discourage civic and political activism, but even inhibits it. Others, on the other hand, believe that the municipal authorities react only when they serve notices of lawsuits.

*"It's just during pre-elections. After that, everything is forgotten and everything goes back to the way it was."*

*"When there are local elections, the young people are also concerned, we are all involved."*

*"They need votes, to show in public that they care about young people. I am only talking about informing; they are more involved. I mean, they direct the information to young people as well."*

*"Our municipality does not have a PR service; it is not interested in informing us now... I had a very different experience as a child. Maybe I had the experience because I was a scout, the municipality always relied on us, especially for some eco-actions and often helped us, also many times the municipality arranged some sort of trip for us..."*

*"The municipality does counter civic activism, always. I mean not officially, I'm from Aerodrom, but projects that essentially destroy the environment have always been covered up. For example, when there were protests about raising buildings where they shouldn't be, I don't think the municipality will ever say - come protest. Thet are against it. They've called the police on us."*

In the group of **currently engaged,** the discussion took place in the context of two perspectives - one from the perspective of residents, and the other from the perspective of employees in the municipal administration (there were two of the group who work/have worked in two different municipalities).

From the residents' perspective, two types of experiences of the municipality's attitude towards encouraging young people to engage in civic engagement were discussed in general: one type of experience of negative examples and one of positive ones. The negative aspects that were mentioned refer to the inaccessibility and how closed off the municipal authorities are to young people and their demands, but also to the citizens in general, as well as the insufficient communication by the municipality about what is happening or planned in general, and especially for the young people.

*"The municipality of Cair is not doing its job, let alone going above and beyond that. For example, when you go to the main gate of the municipality, there is no one there to give you directions. You go up and ask around, no one listens. I mean, we had some cases regarding the sewerage system, we had a really hard time in resolving that case."*

*"There's employees' contact information on their website and when I call, they say I am retired. I wonder why their contact details are still up on the website!"*

*"I don't remember a single activity from the Municipality of Stip, not a single one. Either I am not informed or there really is nothing. But I don't remember a single activity."*

*"Somehow I think that my municipality works like a closed system - the information does not reach everyone or information is published today about something that is happening tomorrow morning at 9 o'clock, but all the people are already organized and all the chairs are filled. It's all just done as a formality."*

Positive experiences, on the other hand, include membership in municipal youth councils and participation in projects and activities or initiatives organized by the municipality.

*"I am from Prilep and many times we have been part of projects where the municipality was involved. In 2019, for the first time, I became part of the youth council of the municipality. I'm currently in my second term in the youth council. There was a call. To all organizations and at the municipal level. I check their website. We are often faced with the problem of insufficient interest, i.e, not enough young people are getting involved. They are informed, but I can't knock on your door and tell you - come on out now, let's go together. Otherwise, it works and could work efficiently. It depends on politics because there are a large number of members who are employed in different institutions, so now they are not, or their mandate passes and new members are needed. We are in such a moment now."*

*"In our municipality, for example, the Youth Council works very well. Communication with young people is made very often, mostly through public calls, also in schools, everywhere in our municipality there are posters placed for anyone who would like to sign up and participate in the activities. Otherwise, they do a lot of humanitarian and environmental activities and initiatives and encourage young people to get involved. There are quite a few young people, I am involved in it myself, and many young people are becoming more and more involved."*

From the perspective of the young people working in the municipality, several things were shared, with both participants coming from the municipal administration testifying that they encounter very little interest of the young people to be involved in activities promoted by the municipality, and the ignorance of the citizens about the competences of the municipality, as well as the socio -economic structure of the population in the given municipality.

*"I work in a municipality. A municipality is a municipality, the citizens do not understand that it's not all so easy. The municipality is like a center for all changes. People don't know that for some problem they should not come to the municipality, instead they should go, say, to the Ministry of Agriculture if they have that particular type of issue. They always get the institution wrong, or the sector is wrong, say, they should go to Finance, but they go to the Urban Planning sector."*

*"I also work in a municipality. Young people are not very interested in politics, there's very few of them. And if you organize an event at which 60 young people should come, in the end, only six will come and the project stands no chance. At the moment Shuto Orizari cooperates with several non-governmental organizations - for women's rights, education, for children living in the street. There are multiple NGOs that come, bring projects and you approve the project, but it also depends on how it will be implemented, and as a municipality we have a budget. We have a project, it has been realized from a budget item, funds have been provided somewhere, it all depends on the interest of others who want to do the project, what they will do... It's not like a mayor can gather these children or encourage you to do something. At the moment, we in the municipality have planned a program and cooperation with the association of children on the street, and the municipality contributes to that. It depends on each municipality, what types of problems they are facing."*

### *Political organizations at the central level*

Only young people who are currently civically and politically actively engaged have had any experience with activities undertaken by the Government and the ministries. Their experiences were negative.

*"Students are running away from the Ministry of Education as far as they can. Because they are late for everything, scholarships are late, funds are late, transportation reimbursement is late... If you call one department, they simply redirect you to another."*

*"Good ideas, bad execution."*

*"The Ministry of Education is not functioning well. We cannot look into all of the scholarships that are offered and given to us; the website is not updated. However, I still think that it requires a much bigger and individual initiative, individual responsibility is needed from us as part of the academic community. "*

## The influence of civil society organizations in encouraging civic and political engagement

*Civil society organizations are a bright example for young people, even for the disengaged youth. Engaged youth testify to a number of useful projects aimed at young people. In particular, the current engaged youth see the NGOs as successful in the way they reach the youth and encourage their activism and participation in the public life of the community.*

Regarding the role of CSOs, we looked into the experiences of young people with the work of NGOs and how much they contribute to civic engagement and involvement of young people.

**Disengaged youth** do not have much experience with civil society organizations, but their attitude is positive. Two participants shared that they have some experience, one participated in the Erasmus+ program and the other participated in trainings organized by several organizations, including the Institute of Communication Studies. Two other participants shared a memory that in high school they had activities with Hera (sexual health training), Red Cross and Pakomak.

A large part of the young people from the group **occasionally engaged** have a lot of experience and a positive opinion about CSOs. They believe that only civil society organizations put young people in their focus, provide space for young people's opinions to be heard and help them in building various skills, raise awareness, encourage initiatives, etc.

*"In terms of raising awareness of one's responsibility, membership in a scout squad has influenced me the most. I've been a member for 5 years and the instructor we had changed our character, honestly. And he always knew how to point us to some kind of socially beneficial work, like spending a month in Struga in the scout squad to help him clean up the park."*

*"One bright example are your polls, podcasts and everything (speaking about the Institute of Communication Studies a.n.), because I have followed them. By reading your texts I've learned that a lot of bad things are happening with our rivers, with hydro power plants, and that the state is simply not helping."*

*"If it weren't for the non-governmental organizations, there would be no focus on the youth. I think that only NGOs or institutes, like the Institute of Communication Studies, focus on the youth. While the state institutions seem to be playing a game with young people, saying - wait, there is time for you. It's as if we are subjugated somehow, degraded, I can even say oppressed..."*

*"I also have a positive experience and was a participant in a training - businesses for green ideas from ARNO. I volunteered and was selected. It was a three-day training in 2022. It was a very positive experience; it was really a great opportunity to learn how to be civically active."*

The experience of all the participants in the group of **currently engaged** is positive and they think that what they got as skills, knowledge and encouragement from civil society organizations is very useful, something that they could not get from formal education. They believe that civil society organizations know how to reach young people because they have a well-defined target group and specific activities.

*"NGOs have a good target group and they know well how to reach the target group, for example through social media."*

*"I think that NGOs such as MOF and other Macedonian NGOs are still good and do a great job. The only way for us to get informed on something or to be engaged in something is through non-governmental organizations, there is no one else."*

In addition to acquiring skills and knowledge, thanks to civil society organizations, they also participated in projects and initiatives of importance to their municipality and beyond.

*"I have some experience with Roma Veritas. I was lucky that I was in high school, and then at university, so that all of us Roma were provided with different trainings, targeting secondary and primary schools. I personally think that NGOs offer much more knowledge and skills than you can get in a classroom from a school teacher because NGOs capture our interest and connect us with people who can improve some of our skills, it's a good way to learn. You learn more and remember more than in a classical education system. The system itself must be changed from above because in schools there is learning by heart, while here you learn by doing. Meaning, you're doing a project yourself."*

*"The last project I was on was "Citizens Against Corruption". On that project, right now in Ohrid, there was a School for Corruption in Higher Education Institutions, that is, for faculties. It was organized by ISIED. Honestly, I started all my experiences initially through the Institute of Communication Studies, I was in the first generation of the Media Literacy Master Class, which means that all of the paths leading me here at this moment with you were through NGOs, and then the connection with the ministries and everything else. Therefore, my opinion is that they are the most active, up-to-date, organized for the improvement of society and involving young people as much as possible."*

*"In terms of civic activism, I have participated in several projects through "Coalition Now", mainly for the urbanization of Prilep Lake. We provided different proposals, of which I think even 80 % were implemented in the end."*

*"Non-governmental organizations take care to see if promises are delivered and those principles of transparency, accountability and other values are demonstrated in action. I have participated in a short project of IGGEP - Institute for Good Governance and Euro-Atlantic Perspectives, in relation to public officials and the President of the Government and the President of the State, to the mayors of each municipality, in terms of how responsive they are, how active they are on social networks. Do they respond to the messages or not? We were honestly disappointed by many municipalities, especially the smaller ones. Their profiles don't work and they're outdated or they only have private profiles."*

## Media influence in encouraging civic and political engagement

*There is a prevailing negative attitude of all young people towards the media and media news. Those engaged have a much greater insight into the way the media works and a greater awareness of the negative impact of political news and disinformation on civic and political involvement.*

Regarding the role of the media, we looked into the experiences of young people with media news and how much they contribute to civic and electoral engagement and involvement of young people.

In general, the assessment of all **disengaged youth** is that the media (especially disinformation) do not encourage youth participation in public life, and not only that, they even make the youth even more demotivated. According to them, the media are too oriented towards news related to political parties, and very little, if at all, do they offer educational, informative or other types of programs and content that would attract and motivate young people.

*"The media only conveys information; they don't really focus on educational content."*

*"There is no content that would make us better people."*

*"They have influence on the passive citizens, but not the active ones."*

*"The media do not promote either culture or activism, at all. I 'm talking about the media in our country."*

Participants from the **occasionally engaged group** reiterated the experience of the disengaged youth group regarding the role of the media in demotivating young people to follow the news and participate in public life. This refers more to traditional media (TV stations), and as a reason for the demotivation they cite: lack of trust in the media, scepticism due to the ownership structure, or simply sharing the news verbatim as the political parties present it.

*"The media cannot encourage such activism, there is a very high level of distrust in the media. This whole "Don't trust, verify" thing caused us to develop trust issues with the media, especially traditional media."*

*"We know the media, who owns them, especially of the traditional ones, everything comes down to political interests, and it's ones against the others. There is no objectivity, so we are sceptical of everything they say."*

*"For me, the problem is that 90 % of the news is related to politics and that news is shared by politicians appearing on-screen to say something and there must be video cameras to record them. And that leaves no room to report on more important things that need to be seen, so the politicians might be prompted to go out somewhere and solve social problems."*

*"There is more talk about politics than anything else that concerns the citizens."*

*"The media only talk about politics. Everything else that is important is said in two seconds."*

*"If a young person watches the media every day, they will only hear about the problems in our country - a problem with hospitals, a problem with transportation, a problem with the citizens, and that will deactivate them. What can a citizen fight for, they can't fight to solve all problems. Activism is negatively influenced by the media."*

In the discussion of the participants from the **currently engaged group,** it was emphasized that the media is recognized as an inhibitor of activism due to the overload of the media with political-party topics or partisan problems in society, on the one hand, and on the other hand, disproportionately much less time and space is left for other important social topics that would encourage some activity among young people.

*"I think that the total television air-time and website space is mainly devoted to politics and nothing else. You can't find space for other topics, or see anything different and more important than politics."*

*"In the media, politics is channelled into such a narrow path of elections, political parties, partisanship, and then of course we will have an extremely negative opinion of the media. The media do not talk about individual rights, human rights, individual freedoms, etc. and because of this the aversion to politics is born, and this will lead us to the destruction of civil and political activism. A huge part of society, especially the youth, is apathetic and doesn't want to participate at all."*

# CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Research on media engagement and civic activism of young people has shown that traditional media (primarily television) are no longer the primary channel through which young people keep up with latest events. The majority of young people are on social platforms, the time that they spend there is worrisome, and the main sources of information for them are social media. Only a small number of young people choose not to keep up with the news. **Therefore, developing awareness of the impact of social media and the potential dangers of its excessive consumption on the young person should be an objective of the educational programs for young people.**

As expected, according to the development period in which they are, the interests of young people are primarily focused on news about education, science, technology and culture. In the field of politics, young people notice incorrect or false information, hence probably the reduced interest in such topics. But the fact that young people have no interest in social justice topics is worrying, given that understanding and investing in social justice is the cornerstone of active and sustainable citizenship. **The media must find a way to bring this important topic closer to young people, if we want to have aware and active citizens that will invest in the implementation of social justice, equity and equality.**

Young people have a need to share the news they hear in their offline and online communities: they want to talk with friends and colleagues about them, they want to read the comments, as well as share a comment or an emoji, which says that (peer) communities do not lose their significance as agents of socialization and sources of information. **Investing in such communities and forums (offline or online) in which media content will be discussed in a safe and constructive way, should be one of the goals of educational institutions.**

The young participants in this research show great awareness of the existence of disinformation, they are confident in their ability to recognize it, and some young people (in the focus groups) even emphasize that it is especially important for them not to be misinformed. They say that they often check the veracity of the information they receive through the media and that they know where to report disinformation if it appears on social networks, and more than a third of them have already reported disinformation in the media. Of course, this does not mean that they are really successful in recognizing false information. On the contrary, it is necessary to continue making efforts in education. Especially since more than half said they may have shared disinformation unknowingly. **Media literacy programs must be constantly present and updated.**

Disinformation demotivates young people and affects young people's tendency to avoid the news, and the perceived impunity for spreading disinformation makes them more passive with less faith in the possibility of changing something in society. **If young people are not equipped in the fight against disinformation, it is unlikely to reach a media-engaged and media-literate young person with the faith and strength to make changes in society.**

Young people in North Macedonia are characterized by relatively low civic activism/engagement: a little over half of the young respondents were involved in some kind of volunteer activity for the purpose of solving local problems, and barely a third had such involvement in the past year (the last 12 months). Considering that the sample of respondents was purposive (non-random), it means that this percentage in the general population may be even lower.

Organizations for youth, children and education and environmental organizations are groups in which the highest percentage of active young people volunteer regularly or occasionally. The interest in this type of organization is encouraged by families and schools, as well as the positive examples of the work of a large number of civil society organizations that the young people highlighted in the focus groups. However, these drivers and motivators are neither constant nor systematic. On the contrary, they are incidental, sporadic, individualized. **It seems as if it is left to the will and desire of certain teachers and professors and only certain schools to encourage activism on their own initiative.**

Young people show more interest than they actually invest in electoral activities: young people say they are interested in the developments in the government and public policies, but only half of those with the right to vote do vote in elections. Few, however, are truly motivated to participate in persuasion or donating to political causes.

Young people will rarely raise their political voice if it means personally contacting a politician or signing a written petition. They show some kind of active participation through protests, marches or demonstrations. The only thing they show more involvement in is fundraising for charity, not counting donating money. In this context of raising a political voice, it should be taken into account that some of the young people involved in the research are the same young people who were in high school or college when the organized high school and student protests took place.

Young people who are more civically and politically engaged compared to those who are less engaged or not engaged at all: they more often discuss socially important topics and volunteer activities in their families and schools, they witness a greater number of volunteer/humanitarian drives both in their families and in their schools, have richer experience with the work of the local and central government, but also with civil society organizations, and are more educated and more aware of the influence of the media and disinformation on civic activism and the involvement of young people in social processes. So, **social factors, formal and informal education seem to have priority in encouraging activism (and civic and political engagement), and this is precisely the challenge for those who work in the field of education, socialization and upbringing of young people and a real challenge in policy-making, which is of concern for the whole society.**

An important fact in this research is that **civic and political engagement also means media engagement, that is, greater, more active, but also more critical media involvement.** That implies more frequently getting information from news generators and websites, not only from social networks; more frequent face-to-face conversations about media content, reacting with emojis, creating news and reading comments; greater interest in important social topics; and a greater ability to spot disinformation in them. It is very important that civic and political engagement and active participation in public life means more frequent verification of the truth of information and greater confidence in one's own potential to recognize disinformation. In fact, that was the basic research objective of the research.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

The young person belongs, grows and develops in a family environment, then in different school environments, in wider social environments, including the municipality and the entire state, they can participate in civil society organizations and are influenced by the media - traditional and social. Therefore, each of these environments can do a lot to encourage the appropriate skills for a young person to be media literate, interested in social trends, engaged and willing to contribute to a better quality of life as well as an inspiring life in society. To reach this goal, the following recommendations are provided:

**For the family:**

- Involvement of young people in discussions about the media and their way of reporting and about important socio-political topics;
- Encouraging young people's participation in extracurricular and civic initiatives and discussing why that is important;
- Respecting and supporting the choices of young people and encouraging their independence;
- Involvement of young people in finding solutions to common problems and in making decisions important to the family.

Family is a segment of several narrower (for example, the school) and wider (for example, the municipality) social environments, hence, the recommendations should be viewed in that context. Educational institutions and local and central authorities have an obligation to consider the family, that is, parents / legal guardians as an active and important stakeholder in the implementation of their policies and to initiate, organize and include them in activities. These activities can have an educational role, with the aim of motivating family members to encourage civil activism and media engagement in their children, from an early age. In particular, local authorities should foresee joint actions that are important for the local community, which include families – both parents, children, and young people.

## For educational institutions:

- Strengthening civic education through more frequent use of research activities and discussions on current events, which will encourage young people to actively keep up with the news;
- Implement media literacy programs for young people to develop critical thinking skills and resilience to negative news influences, thus supporting their self-esteem;
- Encouraging cognitive reflective skills through analytical activities, rather than memorization activities, which will enhance their active civic participation and support the development of media literacy skills;
- More media clubs established in schools and universities;
- Increasing initiative and openness to cooperation with civil society organizations and municipalities in educational processes;
- Encouraging initiatives to form offline and online peer communities.

Educational institutions - primary and secondary schools - are under the jurisdiction of local authorities, so initiatives to promote civic activism and media engagement of young people should be implemented in cooperation with these authorities, as this will ensure more sustainability and expediency. The status of civic education can be strengthened through initiatives organized by the municipal authorities to encourage the civic activism of the school itself and involvement in solving the problems of the local community. In this way, children and young people will have opportunities for involvement in local and wider social trends and problems early on, when they're still in school, with the support of the educational staff to participate in solving them and thus develop awareness of activism, motivation and faith in change.

The current inclusion of media literacy in the curricula, as part of the subjects of mother tongue and civic education can be reinforced by opening media clubs in primary and secondary education and through increased cooperation with local authorities in activities for the preparation of various informational contents. in various media formats for the needs of municipalities, but also with local or national media organizations.

## For political organizations (municipalities, ministries and the Government):

- Establishment local youth councils and widely promoting them;
- Creating policies for the development of young people with direct involvement and consultation of young people;
- Direct and regular communication with young people through schools - student communities, etc., when making decisions that affect them;
- Opening specific channels for communication with young people on social media, organizing lectures and meetings and conducting various consultation processes;
- Providing access to mental health resources for young people affected by negative news, as well as their overall well-being.

In addition to the obligation of the local authorities - the municipalities, the municipalities of the City of Skopje and the City of Skopje, which derives from Article 16 of the Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies ("Official Gazette of RNM", no. 10/2020), to establish and put into operation the local youth councils and the local youth assembly, very few municipalities have implemented this legal provision - only 19 municipalities formed, and in 15 the formation was in progress according to the 2023 monitoring of the National Youth Council of Macedonia[47]. Considering the advisory and representative role of local councils on issues of youth interest to local self-government, these bodies represent a broad platform for encouraging civic activism and can also encourage media engagement of young people. Local youth councils, together with the National Youth Assembly, are a solid basis for enabling the participation of young people and motivating them to contribute to a better quality of life and conditions that foster the development of young people. Unfortunately, the National Assembly has not yet been established and only a small number of municipalities have established local councils.

Since municipalities are responsible for primary and secondary schools, they have open access to schools and should strengthen communication with them regarding the civic participation of young people. As stated above in the recommendations for educational institutions, municipalities can launch joint initiatives with schools in which young people will play a key role in their development as civically responsible and media-literate persons, and, of course in the framework of municipal budgets, funds should be provided for the implementation of those initiatives.

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## For civil society organizations:

- Greater involvement of young people in creating projects and activities related to media and civic engagement;
- More options for non-formal education to develop critical thinking skills;
- Teaching young people to critically evaluate news sources and news content, and to refrain from sharing unverified information;
- Promoting the use of fact-checking websites and tools to help young people verify information and improve their thinking skills;
- Creating (online) communities where young people can discuss socio-political events and news about them;
- Greater number of lobbying activities and advocacy for the interests of young people in decision-making bodies - local and central authorities.

## For the media:

- Offering broader content of interest to young people;
- Improving the balance between negative news and positive stories to improve the impact of news coverage on young people's confidence that they have the power to influence events;
- Application of constructive journalism that focuses on solutions and positive developments;
- Providing a wide range of reporting that will suit the different values important to young people - from adventure stories, stories related to a variety of activities and topics for those who value stimulation, to in-depth analysis for those who value independence and independent decision-making based on information and facts;
- Fostering high-quality journalism by supporting credible news that will develop critical thinking skills and will improve cognitive reflection among young people;
- Encouraging ethical journalism that respects and addresses different values, which can build trust and credibility among young people.

Media organizations should increase the production of multimedia content that is of interest to young people, having it available not only on traditional but also on digital/social media; expand news programs with topics of interest to young people, with a reduced focus on daily political events, but also include young people as interlocutors in various informative, entertaining and educational media products.

Journalists who want to work more constructively should aim for balanced reporting in terms of positive and negative events and information. That is, to report on achievements, growth, importance, good relationships, engagement, positive emotions, post-traumatic growth and resilience, and not only on negative emotions, bad relationships, conflicts, disagreements, post-traumatic stress and victimization. When presenting the real state of affairs in the world, questions are asked about the good (positive) and bad (negative) aspects, and the choice is up to the journalist where to place the focus, but it is important for the audience to hear both aspects to get the full and sufficiently nuanced image.

Journalists can nudge citizens towards engagement when they decide to evoke positive emotions through their stories even when reporting on typically negative topics because the audience thinks along the lines of "Well done! So, there is a way to improve things, I can also contribute to that!". Furthermore, when making their news reports, they should ask questions like: Who cooperated? Who solved the problem? and What was gained?, as opposed to the questions: Who is suffering? Who is in conflict? Who caused the problem? and What was lost?. When making a story, the journalist could focus, for example, on what politicians agree on and how they can work together. It makes room for the story to continue and is more likely to leave the audience with a sense of hope, as opposed to a story that focuses on the problem.

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|---|---|---|---|
| **Responsibility of the family** | Encouraging independence; Development of a value system | Building confidence in the young person about their own choices | A young person with high self-esteem, who makes choices based on values |
| **Responsibility of educational institutions** | Developing media literacy skills: Encouraging extracurricular activities | Encouraging the use of skills outside of school, to solve real problems | Analytical young person, with developed skills for critical thinking and broad interests |
| **Responsibility of political institutions** | Involvement of young people in decision-making processes | Exercising the right to express one's opinion and feeling that one can influence events | A young person who knows how to express their political voice |
| **Responsibility of CSOs** | Encouraging the initiative and engagement of young people | Developed awareness of community issues and own role | Socially responsible and engaged young person |
| **Responsibility of the media** | Encouraging the curiosity and interest of young people through a broader offer of appropriate content | Developing habits for keeping up with the news and information in the media | An informed and media-literate young person who knows how to distinguish information from disinformation |



# METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted considering the global findings from a large body of research that attempts to "unravel" the complex relationship between young people's media and news-consumption habits and their civic engagement, with the intention of making informed, evidence-based recommendations on ways to improve the situation with the youth in the country. There were multiple research goals: to identify the nature and type of information sources from which young people get informed; to determine if and which strategies young people use to recognize disinformation, as well as what they do after identifying disinformation; to gain insight into whether and what type of civic engagement is most often present among young people; as well as to check which socialization agents (family, school, municipality, political organizations, non-governmental organizations, media) are related to youth civic activism and detecting disinformation. Additionally, the goal was to determine how all these factors are interlinked.

## Research questions

The main research question is whether and how news consumption and the recognition of disinformation are related to the civic engagement of young people in North Macedonia.

- **What are the media and news consumption habits of young people?**

Regarding the habits of using the media and news among young people, the research will aim to answer which media young people follow, how often and for which topics they follow certain media, how often and from where they watch, read or listen to the news, as well as which news and topics are of interest to young people.

- **How do young people recognize disinformation in the media?**

In an attempt to understand their ability to spot disinformation, young people will be asked about their self-perception of their skills and abilities to detect disinformation. In addition, the research will examine what kinds of behaviours are caused by receiving disinformation.

- **To what extent and how are young people civically active/engaged?**

Given the youth's levels of civic engagement or activism, the research questions will focus on examining the levels of individual volunteering, organizational participation, and electoral participation of the target youth.

## Sample

***The sample for the research*** was purposive[48] in the first stage and for the second stage there was convenience sampling, consisting of 345 respondents aged 18 to 29, of which 130 (37.7 %) were male, 213 (61.7 %) were female, one respondent chose the option "other", while one respondent refused to answer. In terms of age, about a third were 18 and 19 years old (19.1 %) and (16.2 %) respectively. The smallest age-group of respondents were 28 years old (4.6 %), 29 years old (4.9 %) and 26 years old (4.9 %). 78.6 % of respondents were Macedonian, and the next most numerous, with 13.9 %, were Albanians, and Serbs, Vlachs and other ethnic groups that were not listed in the answer options comprised 0.6 %. According to the place of residence, 86.4 % (298 respondents) lived in cities, while 13.6 % (47 respondents) were from rural areas, distributed in different regions of the country. More than half of respondents lived in Skopje (56.8 %), and the smallest number of respondents were from the north[redacted]. It is important to note that the sample includes respondents from all eight planning regions in the country. The largest number of respondents in the sample have completed secondary education – general secondary school (grammar school) (31.6 %). The next most numerous in the sample are the respondents who have completed undergraduate studies (24.9 %), completed secondary vocational school (4-year schools) (23.8 %), completed postgraduate master's studies (9.9 %), completed primary education (4.9 %), completed postgraduate specialist studies (2.6 %). There were two respondents in the sample

48. The recruitment was according to age and type of studies and employment: regular school students 18 years old (high school and professional), students (social, natural and computer sciences), unemployed, employed (private, state, civil sector) and engaged in political parties.

who had PhD degrees, two who have finished secondary vocational education (3-year schools), two who have completed half of primary education and two without education. At the time of filling out the questionnaire, most of respondents were undergraduate students (32.8 %) and young employees (32.2 %), while the smallest number of respondents were students of specialist, master's or doctoral studies (1.7 %) and other (1.7 %), that is, a category that is not mentioned in the list of statuses. Around 10 % of the sample was a group consisted of unemployed persons, students from general secondary schools (grammar schools) and students from vocational secondary schools.

***The focus group sample*** was selected from the survey sample, based on the results obtained from the Index of Civic and Political Engagement (Andolina et al. 2003). According to the index, the respondents were grouped into three focus groups: a) completely **disengaged** (those who have not had any civic or electoral engagement in their lives up to now), b) **occasionally engaged** (who have been more or less civically and/or politically engaged, but not in the last 12 months) c) **currently engaged** (young people who have been civically and/or politically engaged in the last 12 months). The three focus groups consisted of a total of 33 respondents (according to the groups: 12 - currently engaged, 10 - occasionally engaged and 11 - disengaged), of which 11 were male and 22 were female. The respondents were aged 19 to 29 (6 respondents were aged 29 and 22, 5 respondents were 24 years old, 3 respondents were 23, 25 and 26 years old, the other ages were represented by one or two respondents. Regarding education, 30.3 % were secondary general (grammar) school students (4th year), 18.2 % were students from secondary vocational schools (4-year), 24.2 % were students of undergraduate studies, 6.1 % students on specialist studies and 21.2 % students on master's studies. The highest percentage of respondents were employed 48.5 %, unemployed 12.1 %, students 3 % and one respondent, i.e. 3 % declared other.

## Research instruments

**Survey questionnaire.** The survey questionnaire consists of four groups of questions and a total of 31 closed type questions (with one or multiple alternatives). During its preparation, questionnaires that were used in other surveys of a similar nature were taken into account. In order to check the appropriateness and comprehensibility of the questions, a pilot survey was conducted before the main survey was conducted.

The survey questionnaire covered the following areas:

*1. What are the media and news consumption habits of young people in Macedonia?*

This part of the questionnaire aimed to find out if, how and how often young people consume news, through which media, how often they check the news, whether they actively seek out news or passively consume it, and what type of news and media content is of interest to young people. The questions were taken and adapted from the Reuters Institute's 2023 YouGov online survey of digital news consumption (Newman et et al., 2023).

*2. How do young people recognize disinformation in the media?*

The respondents were asked if and how they detect disinformation, but also what kind of behaviour it causes in them. Blakeslee's CRAAP test was used to evaluate currency, relevance, authority, accuracy and purpose of information (Blakeslee, 2004). The Relevance dimension, which refers to the verification of scientific or professional texts, was not included because it is not the subject of analysis in this research. Each question was answered with one of the following alternatives: "never", "sometimes", "often", "very often" or "always". Other questions in this section were about young people's ability to recognize disinformation that is spread through the media and whether they have shared disinformation, whether they know how to report and whether they have reported disinformation, how they acquired the knowledge to recognize disinformation and, according to them, what is the truth of the information received through the media and who are the main creators of disinformation.

*3. In what way do young people in Macedonia manifest civil and political activism?*

The questions in this section referred to the respondents' own insight into their civic and political engagement and activism, including voting in elections, engagement in non-governmental and activist organizations, and volunteer activities focused on solving social and political issues. The questions are derived from the Index of Civic and Political Engagement (Andolina et al. 2003). Civic activism includes voluntary engagement aimed at solving problems for the community and individuals, such as maintaining and developing the local community, solving local problems through organized activities or by providing certain resources. Indicators of civic activism are: active membership in a group or organization; fundraising for charitable purposes; regular volunteering; community problem solving; participation in organized activities to raise awareness among citizens (or to raise funds)

such as running/walking/riding. Electoral activism includes activities related to election campaigns, which are aimed at promoting and supporting a certain party or a certain party candidate. Indicators of electoral activism in this questionnaire are: regular voting, persuading others to vote for a particular candidate or party, donating to a campaign, party or group; volunteering for a candidate or political organization. The survey also includes the "political voice" dimension, which refers to how active citizens are in expressing their views regarding social developments. Indicators of "political voice" are: boycotting; signing written petitions; contacting officials; signing petitions via e-mail; contacting the media; protesting.

*4. Addiction to social media.*

The final set of questions are questions from the Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale (BSMAS[49]), which measures young people's habits and the extent of social media use (Andreassen et al., 2016 ). The scale consists of six questions and it was shown that it has solid psychometric characteristics on a Macedonian sample[50].

The questionnaire was designed to be filled out voluntarily and anonymously by a selected sample of subjects, in the form of an online questionnaire, in sessions organized by the Institute of Communication Studies.

**Focus groups.** The aim of the focus groups was to gain insights into early experiences and social influences on civic engagement, as well as thinking about how young people can be encouraged to take an active approach to social and political developments and how to think critically about the news and information they encounter in the media and how to deal with disinformation. The groups were led by two researchers, one of whom led the discussion and the other had the role of assistant. The focus groups were done in the period May-June 2024 and each of them lasted from 1.5 to 2 hours. The questions were grouped into the following blocks of questions about: family, school and university (faculty), public institutions, civil society organizations and the media. With the consent of the respondents, the focus groups were recorded in order to show their reflections on their early political socialization experiences as authentically as possible.

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49. The Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale is an adapted version of the Bergen Facebook Addiction Scale with a simple modification of the term Facebook to social media. It is a short instrument used in psychological research and is widely accepted by the psychological community. The 6- statement scale is designed to reveal the difficulties an individual faces due to excessive use of social media and to assess the severity accordingly. The six BSMAS items are all answered with 5 standard answers "very rarely", "rarely", "sometimes", "often", "very often".
50. (Cronbach's alpha=0.77, the scale is saturated by one factor and a high item-total correlation was established)

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