

# Youth Partnership

---

Partnership between the European Commission  
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth



## Supporting young people's critical thinking in the digital age

### Background reader

*Author: Veronica Stefan*

**April 2026**

*Disclaimer: The opinions expressed in this work, commissioned by the European Union–Council of Europe Youth Partnership, are the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of either of the partner institutions, their member states or the organisations co-operating with them.*

## Contents

<b>Purpose and scope</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Key concepts and definitions</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>1. Societal and technological context</b> .....	<b>5</b>
1.1. Technology as an opportunity and a challenge for democratic participation .....	5
1.1. AI as a new frontier .....	6
1.2. Critical thinking at the cross-roads between new information architectures and cognitive development issues.....	7
<b>2. Responses from the youth sector</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>3. The work of the Youth Partnership, European Union and Council of Europe</b> .....	<b>13</b>
3.1. Youth Partnership.....	13
3.2. European Union.....	14
3.3. Council of Europe .....	15
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	<b>17</b>

## Purpose and scope

This document aims to serve as a background and discussion paper for the preparation of the seminar “Supporting Young People’s Critical Thinking in a Digital Age” and the follow-up work foreseen by the Youth Partnership developing a supporting tool for youth workers - aligned with the 2026-2028 goal of [empowering the youth work environment](#). It frames the socio-technical context in which the seminar takes place and provides an overview on some of the youth work responses as well as the work and policies advanced by the Youth Partnership and the two partner institutions - European Commission and Council of Europe.

Developing critical thinking is a key component of youth work. In this context, the seminar positions critical thinking not merely as a component of media literacy work, but rather as a foundational competence to participate meaningfully in democratic life, and ultimately, to navigate the digital world. Accordingly, this paper looks at the broader issues which youth workers and other professionals might be expected to navigate and tries to respond to the questions: What are the implications of the fast-paced information society to development of young people’s cognitive capacities? Who governs and who decides how digital platforms function? What are the power relations between technology users and creators of digital platforms?

The increasing interest in these topics builds on the growing body of evidence that suggests potential negative implications stemming from the use of digital platforms, ranging from young people’s mental health issues, increased manipulation to reduced capacity to critically engage with the world. Global policy responses indicate an interest from governments to address such issues by supporting a ban on social media access up to the age 14-16<sup>1</sup>, including a similar support within the European Parliament<sup>2</sup>.

Last but not least, the paper and the seminar invite for a reflection on how ready the youth workers and young people are to deal with the evolving changes in the digital age. More important than individual efforts are capacities of organisations to address the complexities of the new digital realities. The paper and the future work should be understood in light of emerging evidence around the pressing technical and policy issues.

## Key concepts and definitions

This section provides a set of definitions and explanations that are meant to support a shared understanding of the key issue addressed in the present paper, aligned with the work of the Youth Partnership and the two key institutions.

Critical thinking	The ability to form our own opinion from a variety of sources, to think through complex issues in a complex way. Critical thinking opens our minds in the face of stereotypes and any attempts of
-------------------	---

<sup>1</sup> Sky News. (2026, April 1). *The countries that have social media bans, or are planning to implement one*. Available online at <https://news.sky.com/story/the-countries-that-have-social-media-bans-or-are-planning-to-implement-one-13526116>. Accessed 6 April 2026

<sup>2</sup> European Parliament. (2025, November 26). *Children should be at least 16 to access social media, say MEPs*. European Parliament. Available online at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20251120IPR31496/children-should-be-at-least-16-to-access-social-media-say-meps>. Accessed 6 April 2026.

	<p>manipulation. It is a tool through which we can develop a more in-depth understanding of social, political and economic realities and power relations.</p> <p>Source: <a href="#">Youth Partnership Glossary on youth</a></p>
Youth participation in democratic life	<p>The participation of young people is a determining factor for a sustainable democratic future of Europe. Youth participation means that young people have the right, the means, the space, the structures, the opportunities, the tools and the necessary support to participate in and influence decision making at local and regional levels.</p> <p>Youth participation is essential not only in times of democratic stability, but also in situations of armed conflict, forced displacement and post-emergency recovery, as it contributes to safeguarding democratic values and fostering civic trust.</p> <p>Source: <a href="#">Council of Europe (2026)</a></p>
Meaningful youth participation	<p>Participation in the democratic life of any community is about more than voting or standing for election, although these are important elements. Young people are motivated and interested in political issues in our societies, however they find that traditional avenues for participation are not delivering on their promise. Youth civil society has been particularly affected by the shrinking civic space, and yet has been delivering support in times of crisis, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic and to refugees fleeing the war in Ukraine. Discrimination of all kinds, along with a general othering and infantilisation of youth, keeps adding barriers to youth engagement with democratic processes and institutions, creating an atmosphere of mistrust and disenfranchisement.</p> <p>Source: <a href="#">Council of Europe (n.d)</a></p>
Information disorder	<p>The broader concept that differentiates between three types of information, usually covered by the notion of “fake news” or “false information”. The distinction below allows a nuanced understanding of messages that are true from those that are false, and messages that are created, produced or distributed by “agents” who intend to do harm from those that are not.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Dis-information. Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country.</li> <li>● Mis-information. Information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm.</li> <li>● Mal-information. Information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country.</li> </ul> <p>Source: <a href="#">Council of Europe (2017)</a></p>

Democratic resilience	<p>While there is no proposed institutional definition to capture the entire concept, democratic resilience can be framed as the capacity of a country/society to withstand, adapt to, and recover from pressures that undermine democratic systems. Special attention should be given to hybrid threats such as foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI), disinformation, cyberattacks, and the erosion of trust in institutions.</p> <p>Resilience can be seen as the result of a broader systemic approach, including institutional protection, electoral integrity, media freedom, societal preparedness, and civic participation.</p> <p>Based on the <a href="#">European Parliament Study (2025)</a></p>
Artificial Intelligence	<p>An AI system is a machine-based system that, for explicit or implicit objectives, infers, from the input it receives, how to generate outputs such as predictions, content, recommendations, or decisions that can influence physical or virtual environments. Different AI systems vary in their levels of autonomy and adaptiveness after deployment.</p> <p>Source: <a href="#">OECD (2024)</a> - the definition has been seen as the global standard and has been used in the development of the <a href="#">EU AI Act</a> and <a href="#">Council of Europe Framework Convention on AI</a>.</p>

## 1. Societal and technological context

As society has embraced new technologies, from the widespread adoption of digital platforms to increased usage of computers and smartphones, new opportunities and challenges have emerged. Starting with 2010s social media and, more recently, algorithms and artificial intelligence (AI) have been widely recognised as important factors shaping youth development, critical thinking and, ultimately, democratic participation.

### 1.1. Technology as an opportunity and a challenge for democratic participation

In order to understand the current reality it is important to keep in mind the different stages through which we have developed as a digital society. While new research indicates emerging risks posed by these technologies, early studies looking into Arab Spring revolutions but also other civic movements organised in Spain (Indignados movement), Greece, Ukraine (Euromaidan) or USA (Occupy Wall Street) or the worldwide Fridays for Future movement spoke about the power of the internet and social media platforms. The so-called “Twitter” and “Facebook” revolutions have been recorded as the first time when young people did not use digital platforms just to communicate but also to get organised more easily, thus, playing an important role in democratising participation and empowering citizens (Passini, 2012<sup>3</sup>).

However, the role of digital platforms in society has changed as their adoption has accelerated. Notably, the percentage of the global population using the internet reportedly

<sup>3</sup> Passini, S. (2012). The Facebook and Twitter revolutions: Active participation in the 21st century. *Human Affairs*, 22(3), 301–312. <https://doi.org/10.2478/s13374-012-0025-0>

increased from 28% in 2010 to 74% in 2025. During that period, newly launched digital platforms often reached very large user bases within increasingly short timeframes. For example, if most platforms needed between 3 to 5 years to reach 100 million users, it took TikTok only 9 months and ChatGPT 2 months after being launched to reach this important threshold (Visual Capitalist<sup>4</sup>, 2023). In this new context, understanding how young people use and are equipped to navigate such digital developments has become critical.

The high adoption rate of digital platforms across Europe has raised interest in how young people actually use them. Data from the most recent Eurostat surveys<sup>5</sup> indicates that virtually all young Europeans use the internet daily (97%), primarily using it to participate in social media (88%) with much lower interest in other activities such as civic and political participation (24%) or participating in an online course (22%). When looking at broader trends of how social media is used, it becomes obvious that younger age groups prefer such platforms to get information on social and political affairs, compared to older age groups (65% of young people aged 15-24 vs. 27% adults aged 55+), at the same time, being rather passive consumers of such content, instead of active seekers (European Parliament, 2025<sup>6</sup>).

Considering the changing habits of information consumption facilitated by digital platforms, a growing body of literature has emerged in the past decade, looking to understand the implications for (mis-)/(dis-)/(mal-) information in the new era, also known as information disorder or the post-truth era. A 2025 research, in 25 countries across all continents, identifies that the spread of false information online is seen by most individuals (72%) as a major threat to their country, indicating a global concern about the new reality (Pew Research, 2025<sup>7</sup>). In a comparable survey, 86% of EU citizens agree that the rapid spread of disinformation is a major problem for democracy, with 79% being worried that it influences electoral processes<sup>8</sup>. Other research pin-points to how various forms of online misinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic led to increased health risks, whilst political-themed messages resulted in social unrest and undermining of public trust in relevant authorities (Xu et al., 2025<sup>9</sup>). To explain such dynamics, insights into the functioning of digital platforms has highlighted that their openness, combined with anonymity functionalities and speed of information can surpass true information in popularity, complicating efforts to govern them (Ibid).<sup>10</sup> The deeper mechanisms through which social media platforms specifically work have opened discussions about the technologies that power them (e.g. algorithms) but also about the psychological

---

<sup>4</sup> Visual Capitalist blog (2023). How Long it Took for Popular Apps to Reach 100 Million Users. Available online at <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/threads-100-million-users/>. Accessed 19 March 2026

<sup>5</sup> Eurostat (2025). Young people - digital world. Available online at [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Young\\_people\\_-\\_digital\\_world](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Young_people_-_digital_world). Accessed 20 March 2026.

<sup>6</sup> European Parliament (2025). Eurobarometer, Social Media Survey 2025. Available online at <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3592>. Accessed 20 March 2026.

<sup>7</sup> Pew Research (2025). International opinion on global threats. Available online at <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2025/08/19/false-information-online-as-a-threat/>

<sup>8</sup> European Commission (2025). Special Eurobarometer 568, "Protecting and promoting democracy". <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3383>

<sup>9</sup>Xu, G., Qian, M. & Meng, L. Misinformation dissemination on social media: key research themes and evolutionary paths between 2013 and 2023. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* 12, 1775 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-025-06067-1>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

approaches they enable. In this context, experiments carried out in recent years show vulnerabilities of such platforms and indicate the need for alternatives.

### 1.1. AI as a new frontier

When it comes to AI systems, there are a number of issues that connect this technology with spread of disinformation and democratic participation.

On the one hand, scrutiny has been placed on **recommendation algorithms** that power digital/social media platforms, as they have been described to shape public debate but also increase polarisation. The 2026 Sitra study on algorithms and democracy<sup>11</sup> concluded after an experiment auditing experiences of virtual personas - avatars of young people aged 18-24 - on three platforms (Instagram, TikTok and X) in three EU countries (Finland, France, Romania) that feeds are marked by ideological imbalance, in most cases right-wing political content being the most prevalent. The same study identified a further challenge: much of the content in question could not be easily classified as factually false, because many claims were framed as opinion, entertainment, irony, memes, or humour.

This shift in online communication styles suggests an adaptation to platform governance and moderation logics, creating opportunities for malicious actors to influence civic discourse in less detectable ways. The situation raises questions on the efficiency of known strategies to fact-check/debunk and even media literacy efforts. It further strengthens previous perspectives that the very design of digital platforms enables behaviours which are especially harder to change in frequent users of social media, which ultimately become responsible for spreading most false headlines (Ceylan et al., 2023)<sup>12</sup>. Digital platforms are seen responsible for the distorted reward system they have enabled (likes/comments/re-shares), incentivising users to engage with the content because they are interested in the attention, sometimes regardless of the ideological nature of the content they distribute (Ibid)<sup>13</sup>.

On the other hand, the emergence of **generative AI** (GenAI) has brought different challenges, among them, the ease to create synthetic or false content (e.g. deepfakes), a so-called “democratisation of tools for deception”. A systemic literature review concluded that from 50 countries holding elections in 2024, in the vast majority (80%) there were cases of generated AI content, with predominant harmful or misleading rather than positive narratives (Farooq & de Vreese, 2025)<sup>14</sup>.

Another critical factor stemming from the use of such a technology does not lie only in the increased capacities to produce false content (cheaper, faster and potentially easier to process and remember) but also in the very attitudes of individuals when they hear criticism about GenAI usage. Thus, experimental studies in the Netherlands and Canada revealed that citizens exposed to news which negatively framed AI-generated disinformation contributed

---

<sup>11</sup>Sitra (2026). *Algorithms and democracy: How social media shapes young Europeans' worldviews*. <https://www.sitra.fi/en/publication/algorithms-and-democracy/>

<sup>12</sup> Ceylan, G., Anderson, I. A., & Wood, W. (2023). Sharing of misinformation is habitual, not just lazy or biased. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 120(4), e2216614120. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2216614120>

<sup>13</sup>Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Farooq, A., & de Vreese, C. (2025). (Generative) AI and disinformation—Introduction. *International Journal of Communication*, 19.

to decreased trust in journalism - a particular finding especially in the context in which media trust levels are usually high in countries such as the Netherlands.<sup>15</sup>

Although research on the intersection of GenAI and disinformation are still in early stages, current conclusions guide to broader implications that need to be taken into account when designing literacy initiatives. AI literacy can be useful to better navigate deepfakes than traditional digital literacy initiatives, yet, emotional responses to synthetic media cannot be ignored, since users who identify with the figures portrayed in the deepfakes can still be sympathetic to such content. Additionally, such interventions should be carefully tailored so that they strengthen discernment without inadvertently encouraging blanket scepticism or generalised distrust in legitimate journalism.

## **1.2. Critical thinking at the cross-roads between new information architectures and cognitive development issues**

In order to create efficient strategies to develop critical thinking it is important to distinguish between concepts and phenomena that have shaped high level cognitive processes during the recent decades.

In the early 2010s it was already estimated that the information generated every 2 days was similar to the one produced since the beginning of human civilization and 2003. This phenomenon has been extensively analysed as **information overload**, negatively affecting most aspects of life - from health and general well-being, performance and ultimately decision making capabilities (Arnold et al., 2023)<sup>16</sup>. In this context, not just the quantity of information has been found to be relevant but also its quality, especially since brain complexity has been found to be reduced when processing false content. This draws attention to the capacities of young people but also of educators to navigate information-saturated environments with a higher need to integrate critical thinking and media/digital/AI literacy as a transversal pedagogy and strongly embedded in initial training of educators/youth workers (Chara-DeLosRios et al., 2025)<sup>17</sup>.

The information overload should also be understood in the wider spectrum of filter bubbles and echo chambers, as digital platforms have been designed to address abundance through personalised curation (see the relevance of recommendation algorithms above). A meta analysis of selected social media platforms, while producing mixed findings, provides additional arguments for how such environments may contribute to self-censorship (vocal minority shadowing silent majority), affective polarisation (positive emotions towards members of a similar group, such as their favourite political party/personal close circle) or

---

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>16</sup> Arnold, M., Goldschmitt, M., & Rigotti, T. (2023). *Dealing with information overload: A comprehensive review*. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, Article 1122200. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1122200>

<sup>17</sup> Chara-DeLosRios, T., Bejarano-Álvarez, P., Poma-Cornejo, H., Quispe-Munares, M., & Reyes-Contreras, K. (2025). *Critical thinking in the information age: A systematic review on the role of MIL and information overload*. *Seminars in Medical Writing and Education*, 4, 445. <https://doi.org/10.56294/mw2025445>

reinforcing confirmation bias (selective exposure to a certain type of content) (Hartmann et al., 2025<sup>18</sup>).

Adding to these challenges, the extensive use of GenAI has opened new doors, especially through the availability of Large Language Models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude and many others. GenAI is used for educational and professional purposes, but also for emotional support - including counselling, friendship and romantic interactions (Youth Partnership, 2025)<sup>19</sup>. Evidence indicates high usages both by young people aged 16-24 (64%)<sup>20</sup> but also by children aged 9-16 (72%)<sup>21</sup>. These realities require an understanding of how these technologies impact cognitive developments and what might be the implications in the long run.

One emerging concept is that of **cognitive debt**. It reflects on the results of an 2025 MIT experiment<sup>22</sup> which differentiated between neural and behavioural consequences in three instances - using an LLM, a regular search engine or no external tools (brain only) in carrying out a task (e.g. writing an essay). In a nutshell, the results caution against the excessive use of LLMs as it can reduce cognitive engagement, memory performance, personal satisfaction or ownership. The concerns are relevant to critical thinking as users might be inclined to more easily accept input from such AI tools without questioning them and, over time, increasing the echo chamber effect. The situation is relevant since the results of AI systems can be influenced by how they are trained; they sometimes (inadvertently or intentionally) reproduce social biases or even promote hidden agendas of the technology companies that design them.

The latter, also concerns the way of functioning of GenAI tools, as they have been observed to display a characteristic called "sycophancy" - a positive reinforcement towards user's own biases and errors, looking to rather please the user than contradict, and potentially lead to creation of infinite virtual echo-chambers (Youth Partnership, 2025). From a critical thinking perspective, the situation becomes concerning as such behavioural enforcement has led academics to question the role of **human agency** - the capacity to choose and act on choices. In an environment where emerging technologies seem to impact decision-making capacities over a multitude of life areas, it is uncertain if human agency can be fully preserved. This calls

---

<sup>18</sup>Hartmann, D., Wang, S. M., Pohlmann, L., & Berendt, B. (2025). *A systematic review of echo chamber research: Comparative analysis of conceptualizations, operationalizations, and varying outcomes*. *Journal of Computational Social Science*, 8, 52. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42001-025-00381-z>

<sup>19</sup> Stefan, V. (2025). *Insights into youth mental health and well-being: Existing practices and new trends*. Youth Partnership between Council of Europe and European Commission. <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/105305579/Insights+into+youth+mental+health.pdf/f1557676-1001-54bd-9835-680a3ac6d21b>

<sup>20</sup> Eurostat. (2026). *64% of 16–24-year-olds used AI in 2025*. <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/edn-20260210-1>

<sup>21</sup> Staksrud, E., Mascheroni, G., Milosevic, T., Ní Bhroin, N., Ólafsson, K., Şengül-İnal, G., & Stoilova, M. (2026). *European children's use and understanding of generative AI: EU Kids Online 2026* (EU Kids Online Reports 1). EU Kids Online, The London School of Economics and Political Science. <https://doi.org/10.21953/researchonline.lse.ac.uk.00137132>

<sup>22</sup>Kosmyrna, N., Hauptmann, E., Yuan, Y. T., Situ, J., Liao, X.-H., Beresnitzky, A. V., Braunstein, I., & Maes, P. (2025). *Your brain on ChatGPT: Accumulation of cognitive debt when using an AI assistant for essay writing task*. *arXiv*. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2506.08872>

for an increased attention in the design of pedagogical approaches, on how the AI-human interactions are embedded and reflected upon (Viberg et al., 2025)<sup>23</sup>.

Considering the input above, take some time to reflect on the following questions:

- Which of these issues represent something new to your practice? Which ones are less familiar?
- Are youth work (media/digital/ AI) literacy strategies aligned to these realities?
- Is critical thinking and AI literacy sufficiently embedded in youth work development opportunities?
- To which extent are youth work organisations considering these new trends in their strategic planning (e.g. in design service, types of programmes offered, youth needs assessment)?
- Did you/your organisation develop an ethical code on how to integrate new technologies and how to approach them in youth pedagogies?
- What can be done differently to preserve youth agency and foster critical thinking in this new socio-technical context?

## 2. Responses from the youth sector

In a constantly changing landscape, the youth work sector has sought to respond to these challenges in different ways. As identified in previous research of the Youth Partnership on topics related to the impact of digitalisation and AI on the youth sector, many of them are project based and do not benefit from long-term financial or institutional support ([Youth Partnership, 2020](#); [Youth Partnership 2024](#)). However, considerable efforts have been made since the early 2010s and new ones continue to emerge, confirming the critical role of youth work in responding with agility to uncertainties.

[No hate speech youth campaign](#) is a noteworthy example. Running primarily between 2013-2017 with the support of the Council of Europe, the campaign was an essential instrument that put young people at center. It focused on promoting human rights education against hate speech and the risks it poses to democracy and the well-being of young people, including by preventing and countering hate speech and intolerance online and offline. It acted strategically to promote media literacy and digital citizenship, while also supporting young people's participation in Internet governance. The latest version of the [Bookmarks manual](#), created during the campaign, is a valuable resource to explore human rights online and digital rights.

National Agencies (NAs) for Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps are also running the Digital Youth Work Strategic NA Cooperation (DYW SNAC) which has developed two important instruments meant to guide development of [digital competences of individual youth workers](#) and strategic [digital capacities of youth work organisations](#). The two frameworks are tailored to advance a whole-organisational approach, supporting long term planning in digital youth work by considering diverse dimensions such as youth engagement,

---

<sup>23</sup>Viberg, O., Poquet, O., Kovanović, V., & Khosravi, H. (2025). Fostering human agency in age of AI: A learning analytics perspective. *Journal of Learning Analytics*, 12(3), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.18608/jla.2025.9485>

digital rights, digital identity, organisational culture or quality assessment. The work contributed to the implementation of the 2019 [EU Conclusions on Digital Youth Work](#).

Important initiatives from civil society organisations have contributed to the development of digital youth work and capacities of youth workers in Europe. The table below offers an overview of different initiatives and tools developed ranging from online courses to online or paper-based games.

Digital Systemic	<p>An Erasmus+ co-funded <a href="#">cooperation partnership</a> aiming to support digital transformation in the youth work sector and beyond systemically and strategically.</p> <p>Using as a starting point the frameworks developed within the DYW SNAC (mentioned above), the project has developed a series of <a href="#">online training courses for youth workers</a> addressing the main competence areas such as supporting creative self-expression, shared guidelines and peer learning, digital rights, critical digital literacy, and identity growth.</p>
Disinformation Analyst: hands-on crash course	<p>Developed by <a href="#">Debunk.org</a>, an NGO that researches disinformation and runs educational media literacy campaigns, the <a href="#">online course</a> aims to cover basics of discerning disinformation and misinformation, gain knowledge about narratives often used by government-managed media channels, and study the main strategies and rhetorical techniques used in crafting false information.</p> <p>The organisation has developed various courses on connected topics, such as identifying, analysing, and explaining <a href="#">Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI)</a>.</p>
Bad news game	<p>The <a href="#">game</a> is designed for young people aged 14+ by researchers at the Cambridge Social Decision-Making Lab, Cambridge University. It aims to expose the tactics and manipulation techniques that are used to mislead people and build up a following. Reportedly, playing it builds cognitive resistance against common forms of manipulation that might be encountered online.</p>
Evoke: Transforming education to empower youth	<p>Developed by the World Bank Group <a href="#">the online game</a> is described as an educational experience that supports critical thinking. It uses project-based learning, game mechanics, graphic novel content and storytelling designed to engage young people and inspire them to solve global challenges while developing 21st Century skills.</p>
Media Literacy Card games	<p>Developed by <a href="#">Shokkin Group Estonia</a> - a membership-based organisation providing young people, youth leaders and educators with tools and opportunities for personal, professional and social growth - the card games are used to kickstart conversations about media literacy and responsible consumption of media.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Data Rush</a> is a strategic card game where players compete to collect different types of personal data and convert them into economic value. By building data-driven engines and responding to changing events, players experience how data fuels modern business models.</li> <li>● <a href="#">Manipulators</a> is a discussion-based social deduction game that helps young people recognize manipulation in everyday conversations. Players debate real-world statements while secretly using specific manipulation techniques, challenging others to identify them as the discussion unfolds.</li> <li>● <a href="#">Algorithmica</a> places participants in the role of tech company CEOs, competing to collect data and activate algorithms. Through interactive card play, players experience how data is constantly gathered, combined, and turned into power.</li> <li>● <a href="#">Who Hacked You?</a> is a witty card game with a touch of role-play that introduces essential digital security principles alongside common mispractices of everyday life online.</li> <li>● <a href="#">MOO!</a> is a fast-paced card game where players take turns questioning each other to spot fake and misleading information. By analyzing headlines, images, emotional language, authority claims, and stories, players practice distinguishing real facts from manipulation.</li> <li>● <a href="#">The truth seekers</a> game invites players on an immersive and thorough exploration of different media manipulation techniques and ways to approach information we encounter in our daily lives. This is a game suitable for escape rooms</li> </ul>
--	---

Additional efforts have recently appeared to support capacities in dealing with AI literacy. They range from toolkits to free online courses freely accessible to youth workers and educators in all sectors.

Our Futures and AI: A Youth Work Toolkit	Published by YouthLink Scotland in 2026, the <a href="#">toolkit</a> was developed with young people in Scotland. It reveals deep concerns about jobs, body image and misinformation, alongside a clear call for ethical, transparent use of artificial intelligence.
AI generation - online course & methodology	The <a href="#">programme</a> is developed by the UiPath Foundation (Romania) in partnership with the App Inventor Foundation, an MIT initiative. The initiative includes a curriculum to teach AI literacy based on the <a href="#">UNESCO AI competency framework for students</a> and focuses on three main aspects: Human-Centered approach, Ethics of AI, and AI techniques and applications. Originally designed for highschoolers, the methodology "Introduction to Artificial Intelligence" can be used for all groups of young people in all settings (including formal and non-formal).

	The organisers <a href="#">provide free access</a> (based on registration) to the entire methodology for educators interested in delivering the course in English or Romanian. The course can be delivered both online and residential formats
Elements of AI - online course	The <a href="#">Elements of AI</a> is a series of free online courses created by MinnaLearn and the University of Helsinki. While not created exclusively for young people or youth workers, it is one of the first educational opportunities created to encourage and support broad AI literacy. It aims to empower learners to discover what AI is, what can (and can not) be done with AI. The courses combine theory with practical exercises and can be completed at everyone's own pace.

Considering the input above, take some time to reflect on the following questions:

- Which of these tools, opportunities or methodologies could be used in your future activities? Make a list with the three most interesting ones that you would like to follow-up on.
- What are other similar practices that you/your organisation has contributed to? Prepare a list (and be ready to share it) with those that could be relevant for critical thinking, media/digital/AI literacy, democratic resilience.
- Which resources would be a priority for you - dedicated to developing capacities of young people or of youth workers? What kind of resources do you feel you are missing?
- Are you familiar with other resources that should be added to the list? Be ready to share them during the seminar.

### 3. The work of the Youth Partnership, European Union and Council of Europe

Over the past decade, institutions have increasingly acknowledged the new challenges brought by the fast digital transformation of our society, in addition to what was previously addressed under media and information initiatives. This has been clearly reflected in the efforts carried by both the European Union and Council of Europe, seeking to uphold human rights, democracy and rule of law while providing a variety of instruments - designed to empower citizens but also to enhance governance of digital platforms.

#### 3.1. Youth Partnership

The **Youth Partnership** has approached digital and AI influences on young people, youth sector and democracy broadly through the intersection of policy, practice and research, complementary with other efforts done by the two institutions. The first major events that invited for a reflection on the impact of digital transformation on the youth sector took place in Tallinn (2018) "[Connecting the dots: young people, social inclusion and digitalisation](#)" and Tirana (2022) "[Navigating transitions: adapting policy to young people's changing realities](#)".

Until today, a body of knowledge and resources have been produced to respond to identified challenges and opportunities. Publications such as “[Insights into Artificial Intelligence and Its Impact on the Youth Sector](#)” (2024), “[Shapers & Shakers – Young people’s voices in the world of Artificial Intelligence](#)” (2023), “[Youth Work and Techlash: What Are the New Challenges of Digitalisation for Young People?](#)” (2022), the [Youth Knowledge Book](#) (2021) and [Study](#) (2020) on social inclusion, digitalisation and young people **provide extensive analysis of the main factors shaping the new realities for both youth workers and young people**. Collectively, these resources draw attention both to good practices and to persistent shortcoming, including the fragmented nature of the youth sector and the limited systemic capacity of organisations, professionals, and volunteers to address current challenges or participate meaningfully in emerging governance frameworks.

Despite a global pandemic that forced the education and youth sector to rely exclusively on digital technologies, resources to integrate them and address their impact have been limited, often project-led. Nevertheless, the resources created by the Youth Partnership propose pathways and actionable recommendations for various stakeholders looking to overcome barriers, guiding them to practices and resources aimed at developing their own capacities as well as empowering young people in navigating the opportunities and risks of the digital era.

At a macro-policy level, the **EU and Council of Europe have contributed extensively to the wider understanding of the new phenomena, engaging in long-term evidence-based policy processes that aim not only to address current challenges but anticipate future risks and enhance the digital opportunities**. This section offers an **overview on the most recent policies** relevant to the topic of democratic resilience and, specifically concerning the youth and education sectors. It does not aim to be an exhaustive account of all initiatives taken by the two institutions since the last decade has seen a continuous development in terms of adopted policies either in the field of digital governance, media and information, rule of law or human rights, proof of the high importance of this topic on the political agenda and European society as a whole.

### 3.2. European Union

Within the **European Union** we take note of several outstanding initiatives, which add to its multi-annual policies:

The 2025 [EU Preparedness Strategy](#)<sup>24</sup> is designed as a response to anticipate, prevent and respond to emerging threats - from geopolitical tensions to hybrid threats (cybersecurity, disinformation, foreign information manipulation risks), climate change and natural hazards. It supports whole-of-society and whole-of-government approaches and proposes 30 key actions, among them it identifies the role of the EU Youth Programmes (Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps) to “promote preparedness, resilience, participation in democratic life and civic engagement”. It specifically emphasises the importance of empowering citizens in accessing quality and reliable information with a special role for schools, teachers, youth workers and trainers in “fostering digital and media literacy and critical thinking, promoting civic engagement, and teaching democratic citizenship”.

---

<sup>24</sup> European Commission (2025). Preparedness Union Strategy. [https://commission.europa.eu/topics/preparedness\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/topics/preparedness_en)

The 2025 [European Democracy Shield](#)<sup>25</sup> (EDS), part of the broader 2020 European Democratic Action Plan and 2023 Defence of Democracy package it sets to further coordinate and mobilise collective efforts through 3 main priorities: 1) reinforcing situational awareness and support response capacity to safeguard the integrity of the information space; 2) strengthening democratic institutions, free and fair elections and free and independent media, 3) boosting societal resilience and citizens' engagement. A core component of this initiative is the [European Center for Democratic Resilience](#) (launched in February 2026), a hub for exchange, cooperation and coordination across EU institutions, Member States and civil society, particularly focusing on strengthening democratic resilience. A platform for independent stakeholders (civil society, research, academia etc) is planned to support the work of the center.

The [Digital Services Act \(DSA\)](#), adopted in 2022 and largely applicable since February 2024, is one of the central EU regulations governing today's digital platforms. It is a legally binding instrument which regulates the systemic conditions through which disinformation techniques can be countered. DSA requires very large online platforms and very large search engines to identify, assess and mitigate risks of how their services could affect civic discourse, electoral processes or public health, supporting platform transparency. Article 28 sets specific provisions to protect minors online, by setting obligations for platforms to ensure high levels of privacy, safety and security, while also prohibiting advertising based on profiling, when there is a reasonable certainty that the user is minor. The regulation is highly important as it transformed in legal obligations what before was only covered by voluntary codes (self-regulation of digital platforms), such as the 2018 Code of Practice on Disinformation.

The [AI Act \(AIA\)](#) was adopted in 2024 and is expected to be fully in force by the end of 2026 or 2027. Together with the DSA, this is one of the most relevant EU regulations in the field of new technologies. It creates an obligation for providers and deployers of AI systems (including general-purpose/generative AI tools and chatbots) to properly label AI generated content such as synthetic audio, video or images (e.g. deepfakes). The regulation increases transparency and traceability of materials generated with AI tools, without banning them. Moreover, AIA specifically prohibits AI systems that “deploy subliminal techniques beyond a person’s consciousness or purposefully manipulative or deceptive techniques”, this can be interpreted closely with the capabilities of AI systems not just to generate false content but to actually be used to manipulate individuals. Of particular relevance for youth organisations is the fact that the Act also includes AI-literacy obligations for providers and deployers, thereby extending responsibility beyond technology companies to professional users of AI systems.

Taken together, these EU measures illustrate a changing policy landscape in which responses range from coordination and educational support to legally binding obligations imposed on platforms and AI providers. For the youth field, this means that supporting critical thinking can no longer be framed solely as an educational task; it must also be understood in relation to rights, governance, transparency, and accountability. These are just a few of the initiatives related to democratic resilience and the so-called digital acquis, since many other legal tools

---

<sup>25</sup> European Commission (2025). Joint Communication “European Democracy Shield: Empowering Strong and Resilient Democracies “. [https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/2539eb53-9485-4199-bfdc-97166893ff45\\_en?filename=JUST\\_template\\_comingsoon\\_standard\\_1.pdf](https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/2539eb53-9485-4199-bfdc-97166893ff45_en?filename=JUST_template_comingsoon_standard_1.pdf)

have been adopted aiming to cover the wide spectrum of challenges but also to foster a rights-based society where responsible digital innovation can still be embraced.

### 3.3. Council of Europe

The **Council of Europe**, as the leading human rights organisation on the European continent, has engaged in major efforts that support the work of Member States as well as civil society stakeholders. Specific efforts can also be noticed in the youth sector, due to its unique [co-management structure](#) which gives voice to both young people and representatives of public institutions.

Among the most relevant initiatives is the 2025 [New Democratic Pact for Europe](#), which aims to reinforce democratic resilience through a collective and inclusive process. One of its three pillars, Learning and Practising Democracy, emphasises the need to equip young people with the skills, attitudes, and critical-thinking capacities necessary for active citizenship. It explicitly identifies the spread of disinformation, AI-generated content, and platform algorithms as key challenges affecting democratic life.

The 2024 [Framework Convention on Artificial Intelligence and Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law](#) is also particularly relevant. As an international legally binding instrument, it establishes common standards to ensure that AI systems uphold human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. It introduces a risk-based approach across the lifecycle of AI systems and addresses concerns related to democratic institutions, participation in public debate, and the freedom to form opinions. It also includes provisions relevant to transparency, AI-generated content, and support for digital skills and literacy.

The 2023 [Reykjavík Declaration](#) represents another important milestone, reflecting the commitment of heads of state and government to address new democratic challenges comprehensively, including through support for young people and literacy initiatives responding to disinformation, emerging technologies, and external threats.

Finally, the 2025 **Roadmap on Artificial Intelligence, Youth Policy and Youth Work**, developed through a bottom-up process centred on young people's concerns and proposals, is directly relevant to this seminar. It builds on prior work of the Council of Europe Youth Department, such as the AI literacy training courses (2022 and 2025), [Declaration on Youth Participation in AI Governance](#) (2020) and the conclusions of the two seminars "[Artificial Intelligence – How Can Youth Take Part?](#)" (2020) and "[Artificial Intelligence and its Impact on Young People](#)" (2019).

Similar to the work carried out by the European Union, these initiatives form part of a broader and rapidly evolving policy landscape. Their overall significance for the seminar lies in the fact that they move the discussion beyond individual skills alone and toward a more systemic understanding of democratic resilience, one that contextualises youth work practice as a means to strengthening young people's critical thinking and their active understanding and engagement with institutional safeguards, digital governance, and rights-based approaches.

Below there is a brief annex with additional resources developed in the framework of both core institutions.

European Union	Council of Europe
<p><a href="#">Tools</a> to detect and counter Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), including disinformation.</p>	<p>Tools developed by the Media and Information Society Committee to address <a href="#">Information Disorder</a> and <a href="#">Strengthening Societal Resilience to Disinformation in Europe</a>.</p>
<p><a href="#">DigComp 3.0</a>, the fifth edition of the European Digital Competence Framework for Citizens which includes an updated systematic and transversal integration of AI across the framework.</p>	<p>Digital citizenship education (DCE) resources: <a href="#">DCE Trainers' Pack</a>; <a href="#">Educating for a video game culture</a> (with a special focus on developing critical thinking among learners); <a href="#">The DCE Planner</a> – 320 learning outcomes for different age groups; <a href="#">Self-learning courses</a> for educators.</p>
<p><a href="#">AI Literacy framework</a> for Primary and Secondary Education is a joint initiative of the European Commission (EC) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)</p>	<p><a href="#">Toolkit for human rights speech</a> - practical tool to counter and alternative narratives to promote human rights and democratic principles that push back against hate speech and discriminatory narratives.</p>
<p>2019 <a href="#">EU Conclusions on Digital Youth Work</a> and 2017 <a href="#">EU Council conclusions on smart youth work</a> are the first EU policies which recognise the role of digital transformation in your work, including through the development of critical digital literacy and agility.</p>	<p><a href="#">Anti-Rumours strategy</a> is composed of a number of elements, including collecting objective data and also emotional arguments to dismantle false rumours; creating an anti-rumour network of local actors from civil society etc.</p>

Considering the input above, take some time to reflect on the following questions:

- Which of these initiatives sparked your interest?
- Have you considered the role of youth participation in AI & digital governance (e.g. related to how digital platforms work/how technologies are adopted in society)? What kind of spaces would be needed for young people to participate meaningfully?
- Is your organisation involved in shaping or monitoring any of the initiatives mentioned above (at any level)? If yes, what are the factors that make it easy or difficult?
- In general, do you consider youth (work) organisations ready to participate in the processes related to democratic resilience? Which aspects or topics seem more natural, which seem more inaccessible?

- Does your organisation have a strategy that considers contributions to policy initiatives (e.g. priorities in our workplan are aligned to x policy/recommendation/legislation)?

## Conclusions

Supporting young people's critical thinking in the new digital age is an ongoing effort. Concerns related to the functioning of digital platforms and their negative impact on young people, and children, are shaping the public agenda. While it is important to identify beneficial uses for technology that can support quality life, emerging challenges need quick responses both from an educational as well as a policy perspective. The long term impact on young people's wellbeing but also on the resilience of our societies makes them a high priority for all stakeholders.

Youth work sector good practices already showcase the creativity and resolution of different types of organisations to contribute to these emerging issues. Yet, they need to be sufficiently recognised and supported both through financial resources and institutional support for sustainable impact. Initiatives based on cross-sectoral cooperation are especially important in such circumstances, considering the needs of young people in all spaces where they spend their time.

Policy initiatives adopted within the European Union and Council of Europe seem to recognise ongoing struggles and set important frameworks for cooperation but also strong legal safeguards through hard regulations.

Finally, as the world of digital technologies and policies is advancing at a quick speed, the youth work sector has an important role in further defining its place in building resilient democracies. This paper identifies key issues and potential pathways to be explored. The seminar will further this effort and create a collaborative space where youth workers, youth organisation representatives and educators can bring their contributions to this discussion and frame future initiatives.