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MEDIA LITERACY IN UKRAINE UNDER HYBRID WARFARE: LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

МЕДІАГРАМОТНІСТЬ В УКРАЇНІ В УМОВАХ ГІБРИДНОЇ ВІЙНИ: ПРАВОВІ ЗАСАДИ ТА ОСВІТНЯ ПРАКТИКА

This article examines the legal and educational dimensions of media literacy in Ukraine in the context of rapid digitalization and hybrid information warfare. The study analyses the national regulatory framework governing media literacy, focusing on its integration into education policy, information governance, media regulation, and national security strategies.

It is noted that media literacy in Ukraine is governed by a number of regulatory and legal acts which establish the legal framework for information security, access to information, the functioning of the media sector, and the development of educational activities aimed at fostering critical thinking and countering disinformation. The study further identifies legislative



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gaps and inconsistencies that limit the effectiveness of state policy in countering contemporary disinformation threats.

Alongside the legal analysis, the article presents empirical findings on media literacy competencies among Ukrainian university students. The research is based on a quantitative survey conducted between September and December 2024 among students from leading Ukrainian higher education institutions. A total of 424 responses were collected, with 350 valid responses included in the final analysis. The study evaluates media consumption patterns, verification behaviours, trust in digital platforms, and attitudes toward misinformation and propaganda.

The findings indicate moderate levels of media literacy and verification competence, alongside high dependence on messenger-based platforms such as Telegram. No statistically significant relationship was identified between educational level and verification competence, suggesting that higher education alone does not automatically foster critical media skills. The article argues that strengthening societal resilience to disinformation requires a comprehensive approach combining coherent legal regulation, institutional support, and practice-oriented media literacy education.

Keywords: Media literacy; Disinformation; Media education; Legal regulation; Information resilience; Digital media; Ukraine.

У статті досліджуються правові та освітні аспекти медіаграмотності в Україні в умовах стрімкої цифровізації та гібридної інформаційної війни. У дослідженні проаналізовано національну нормативно-правову базу, що регулює сферу медіаграмотності, зосереджуючи увагу на її інтеграції в освітню політику, інформаційне управління, медіарегулювання та стратегії національної безпеки.

Зазначено, що питання медіаграмотності в Україні регулюється низкою нормативно-правових актів, які визначають правові засади інформаційної безпеки, доступу до інформації, функціонування медіасфери та розвитку освітньої діяльності у сфері формування критичного мислення й протидії дезінформації. У статті також виявлено законодавчі прогалини та неузгодженості, які знижують ефективність державної політики в протидії сучасним дезінформаційним загрозам.

Поряд із правовим аналізом у статті презентуються емпіричні результати дослідження компетентностей медіаграмотності серед українських здобувачів закладів вищої освіти. Дослідження ґрунтується на кількісному опитуванні, проведеному в період із вересня по грудень 2024 року серед студентів провідних українських університетів. Загалом було зібрано 424 анкети, з яких 350 валідних відповідей були внесені до фінального аналізу. У дослідженні оцінювалися моделі споживання медіаконтенту, практики верифікації інформації, рівень довіри до цифрових платформ, а також ставлення до дезінформації та пропаганди.

Результати свідчать про помірний рівень медіаграмотності й навичок верифікації інформації, а також про високу залежність від месенджер-платформ, зокрема Telegram. Статистично значущого зв'язку між рівнем освіти та компетентністю у сфері верифікації інформації виявлено не було, що свідчить про те, що вища освіта сама собою не гарантує формування критичних медіанавичок. У статті обґрунтовується,

що зміцнення суспільної стійкості до дезінформації потребує комплексного підходу, який поєднує узгоджене правове регулювання, інституційну підтримку та практико-орієнтовану медіаосвіту.

Ключові слова: *медіаграмотність, дезінформація, медіаосвіта, правове регулювання, інформаційна стійкість, цифрові медіа, Україна.*

Introduction. The contemporary information environment is undergoing rapid and continuous transformation. The volume of data circulating through digital networks expands not only daily but instantaneously, exposing individuals to vast quantities of media content. In such conditions, the capacity to critically evaluate information, distinguish credible sources, and filter manipulative narratives has become an essential societal competence.

For Ukrainian society, these competencies acquired heightened urgency following Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022. The conflict has demonstrated that contemporary warfare extends beyond physical territory into the informational domain. Citizens must therefore develop the ability to recognize and resist disinformation, fabricated content, and manipulative messaging designed to influence public perception and destabilize democratic processes. As Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) argue in their conceptualization of «information disorder», misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation operate systematically within digitally networked environments, amplifying social vulnerability.

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Information warfare represents a form of conflict that relies not on conventional weaponry but on psychological, communicative, and cognitive influence. Its objective is not the physical elimination of opponents but the erosion of societal cohesion, trust, and institutional stability. Social media platforms have consequently become strategic arenas where verified facts coexist with fabricated narratives, and where public opinion can be shaped through coordinated campaigns. In this context, the ability to detect and counter disinformation becomes a defining factor in societal resilience. The side capable of maintaining critical awareness and strengthening media literacy competencies gains a strategic advantage in the contemporary information battlefield.

In this context, media literacy becomes not only a pedagogical concern but also a strategic component of national security policy, requiring coherent legal regulation. However, an analysis of current legislation reveals that media literacy is primarily addressed through fragmented provisions within the educational sector. These are implemented via state educational standards, media education development concepts, and strategic information security documents. However, these norms remain disjointed and lack a systematically coordinated legal framework.

Consequently, the absence of a unified regulatory act or a comprehensive legal mechanism constitutes a significant challenge. Such a framework is essential to define the conceptual apparatus, principles, stakeholders, and tools necessary for fostering media literacy in Ukraine. Currently, existing approaches are largely confined to educational policy and isolated initiatives by state bodies and the public sector, leading to insufficient coordination and diminished impact.

Legal Framework of Media Literacy in Ukraine. Media literacy in Ukraine is regulated through a fragmented set of legislative acts across multiple domains, including education, information policy, media regulation, and national security. The fundamental principles of media literacy are indirectly established in the Laws of Ukraine «On Education» and «On Complete General Secondary Education», which provide for the development of key competencies, specifically information, digital, and civic literacy [5; 6]. Furthermore, the Law of Ukraine «On Higher Education» plays a significant role by fostering critical thinking and analytical skills [7].

Additional legal foundations are provided by the Law of Ukraine «On Media» that further regulates these aspects by defining the legal framework for the media sector, establishing content requirements, and providing mechanisms for information space protection [8]. In the broader context of security, the Laws «On Information», «On Access to Public Information», and «On the Basic Principles of Ensuring Cybersecurity» form the general legal basis for information relations and promote the development of information literacy [9; 10; 11].

Beyond primary legislation, subordinate and strategic documents – most notably the Information Security Strategy of Ukraine – alongside various state programs and recommendations, play a crucial role in developing critical thinking among the population [12]. Given these factors, establishing a comprehensive and harmonized regulatory framework remains a vital necessity for the coherence of Ukraine's national policy.

Nevertheless, the existing regulatory framework remains fragmented and lacks a unified legal mechanism. The absence of a comprehensive legal act defining media literacy, its implementation instruments, and the roles of responsible institutions significantly limits the effectiveness and coherence of state policy in this field.

The empirical findings presented in this study provide further evidence of the practical limitations of the current regulatory approach. Despite the existence of multiple legal provisions, the results indicate that students demonstrate only moderate levels of verification competence, suggesting that existing measures are largely declarative and insufficiently translated into effective educational practice.

Literature review. Recent research increasingly foregrounds media literacy education as a key mechanism for enhancing youth resilience to misinformation and disinformation in digitally mediated environments. Scholars highlight that while young people are intense consumers of digital media, they do not necessarily possess the analytical competencies needed to evaluate content credibility. This gap has become more pronounced with the rise of sophisticated forms of manipulation such as deepfakes, algorithmic steering, and coordinated disinformation campaigns.

Within European and global media literacy research, Wardle and Derakhshan's *information disorder* framework remains influential, framing media literacy as a response to the systemic fluidity of digital misinformation. Building on this, recent studies extend the application of this framework to educational settings, particularly for adolescents and young adults [1].

Emerging empirical evidence demonstrates positive effects of structured media literacy education on youth critical competencies. For instance, recent work by *Soßdorf et al.* shows that integrating critical media literacy with data literacy significantly improves youths' ability to assess algorithmically amplified content, suggesting that pedagogical frameworks must encompass both analytical and computational literacies [2].

Similarly, *Sarmiento et al.* provide empirical evidence that digital media literacy interventions enhance accuracy in distinguishing truth from falsehood, particularly in online contexts where visual and multimodal information is dominant [3]. Their experimental work with youth samples shows measurable improvements in discrimination performance following targeted curricula that include source verification, cross-checking techniques, and bias recognition exercises.

Within the Ukrainian context, research on media literacy education has become especially pertinent in the wake of the 2022 Russian invasion. *Murrock* and later extensions of this work emphasize how programs such as *Learn to Discern* have improved analytical skills among youth [4]. More recent Ukrainian-focused studies indicate that formal media literacy courses within higher education remain limited in scope, highlighting a need for integrated curriculums that extend beyond ad-hoc workshops.

Research on platform-specific challenges further underscores this need. Studies such as *Tkach and Shvets* (published in *Digital Education Review*) demonstrate that Ukrainian youths' trust in messenger-based platforms like Telegram correlates with lower critical evaluation behaviours absent formal literacy training. Their findings suggest that youth media education must engage with platform affordances and algorithmic influences directly, not only with content analysis.

Recent systematic reviews also reinforce the importance of youth-centered literacy initiatives. *Boler et al.*, in a scoping review of misinformation education programs, recommend multifaceted pedagogical approaches that combine cognitive critique, emotional resilience, and civic participation for younger cohorts. They argue that media literacy is most effective when embedded within broader democratic education frameworks, rather than treated as an isolated skill set.

Collectively, these studies demonstrate that contemporary media literacy education for youth is not only about content evaluation but also about understanding platform dynamics, data flows, and the socio-technical mechanisms that enable disinformation. This recent scholarship underscores the urgency of curricular integration, sustained pedagogical frameworks, and targeted interventions that equip young people with robust literacies for navigating complex digital information environments - particularly in conflict settings such as Ukraine.

Materials and methods. This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional research design to assess media literacy competencies, verification behaviours, and platform trust among Ukrainian university students. The research was conducted using an online survey (Qualtrics) distributed across higher education institutions in Ukraine between September and December 2024.

The target audience included law students (both bachelor's and master's levels) from Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv (Institute of Law) and State Tax University (Institute of Law, Irpin). Thus, the sample is targeted; however, it enables the assessment of media literacy levels among future legal professionals at both local and national levels. Although the findings cannot be generalized to the entire student population in Ukraine, they are representative within the defined target group. Both institutions are among the key educational centres in Ukraine, training specialists who operate within the legal and public information space.

Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. Students of 1st–4th years at the bachelor's level and 1st–2nd years at the master's level took part. The survey was distributed via institutional communication channels, including email and official university social media pages.

A total of 424 responses were collected. After excluding incomplete submissions (responses not marked as «Finished» or below 100 % completion), the final analytical sample consisted of N = 350 valid responses.

Instrument. Data were collected through a structured online questionnaire consisting of 14 questions designed to assess media literacy as a multidimensional construct, including media consumption patterns, verification practices, and attitudes toward information and disinformation.

To examine media consumption behaviour, respondents were asked questions such as: «How often do you read and watch the news?» and «How often do you use platforms such as Telegram, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, or TV?». These items aimed to identify the intensity of news consumption and dominant platforms shaping students' information environment. Additional questions explored interaction with news content, including: «How often do you share positive or negative news content?» and «How often do you talk to others about news?», capturing active engagement with information.

Trust in media sources was measured using the question: «Please indicate the extent to which you trust the news sources listed below», allowing the assessment of perceived credibility across platforms.

Verification behaviour and practical media literacy skills were evaluated through questions such as: «When you read a news story, how likely are you to cross-check information, statistics, images, or videos?» and «How confident are you in verifying information from national and international sources?». These items were complemented by questions assessing social aspects of verification, such as: «Do you ever help others verify the news they are consuming?».

Attitudes toward media and disinformation were captured through agreement-based statements, including: «Information can be used to make false statements in news», «The government influences news», and «Most news can generally be trusted». Respondents also evaluated their own behaviour using statements such as: «I check further information by looking for links within an article» and «I try to see different points of view».

To assess susceptibility to disinformation, participants were asked to evaluate real or typical narratives (e.g., «Please indicate whether you believed the following news stories when they broke»).

The questionnaire also included items related to media literacy education, such as: «Have you received any formal lessons about media literacy?», «Have you had training related to misinformation or fact-checking?», and «Which media literacy initiatives have you heard about?». The survey concluded with an evaluation question: «Please rate how important you think media literacy is».

Demographic questions included gender, age, university, and year of study.

Data Analysis. The design combined descriptive and inferential statistical methods to examine patterns of media use, perceived literacy skills, and relationships between educational level, media exposure, and verification competence.

Descriptive statistics included frequencies and percentages (platform usage and trust levels), as well as means (M) and standard deviations (SD) for literacy and verification indicators.

Inferential analysis included Pearson correlation to examine the relationship between educational level and verification competence, and an independent samples Welch's t-test comparing high-frequency and low-frequency media users. Effect size was calculated using Cohen's d. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

All data were analysed in aggregated form to ensure confidentiality, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Results. The present study examined media literacy competencies, verification behaviours, and platform trust among Ukrainian university students in the context of an intensified information environment shaped by war and digital transformation. Several key findings emerge that contribute to both theoretical and practical debates on media literacy education in conflict settings.

Platform centrality and information exposure

The dominance of Telegram as the primary news platform confirms its structural role within Ukraine's wartime communication ecosystem. Nearly half of respondents reported using Telegram more than five times per day, reinforcing findings from recent platform studies that position Telegram as a hybrid space combining official updates, independent journalism, and user-generated content. From a resilience perspective, high exposure to a single platform creates both opportunities and vulnerabilities. On one hand, concentrated information flows may facilitate rapid dissemination of verified content. On the other hand, reliance on messenger-based platforms increases exposure to unmoderated or anonymous sources. This reinforces arguments that media literacy education must include platform-specific competencies, not only general critical thinking skills.

Trust, scepticism and selective credibility. The results reveal a nuanced relationship between trust and scepticism. Telegram demonstrates relatively high trust ($M = 2.35$), whereas Twitter shows greater scepticism ($M = 3.29$). Simultaneously, a large proportion of respondents acknowledge that information can be manipulated. This combination of selective trust and generalized awareness aligns with contemporary research suggesting that young audiences often exhibit «platform trust» rather than «source trust». Such patterns highlight the importance of strengthening source-verification practices within media literacy curricula, particularly in conflict-driven information environments.

Media literacy and verification skills

The mean scores for media literacy ($M = 2.34$) and verification skills ($M = 2.23$) indicate moderate levels of self-reported competence. However, the slightly lower verification index suggests that students may feel more confident in general media understanding than in applied fact-checking behaviours. This finding supports recent empirical literature emphasizing that information literacy and verification training are stronger predictors of misinformation detection than general awareness alone. In the Ukrainian context, where manipulated visuals, narrative framing, and strategic messaging are common, strengthening practical verification skills should be prioritized within higher education curricula.

Education level and media competence

Contrary to expectations, no statistically significant relationship was found between education level and verification competence. This suggests that progression through university education alone does not automatically enhance critical media skills. The absence of correlation may reflect uneven integration of media literacy across disciplines. If media literacy training is not systematically embedded within curricula, academic advancement may not translate into improved analytical competence. This finding reinforces calls for institutionalized, cross-disciplinary media education rather than optional or ad hoc workshops.

Media exposure and competence

Although high-frequency Telegram users demonstrated somewhat stronger verification skills, the difference did not reach statistical significance ($p = .068$). Nevertheless, the moderate effect size (Cohen's $d = 0.65$) suggests a practically meaningful difference. This may indicate that frequent engagement with information environments encourages experiential learning, increasing awareness of misinformation patterns. However, high exposure without structured training may also increase vulnerability. Therefore, exposure alone cannot substitute for systematic educational intervention.

Implications for media literacy in wartime Ukraine

Taken together, the findings support the conceptualization of media literacy as a component of national resilience within hybrid warfare conditions. In Ukraine's information landscape, where cognitive influence strategies operate alongside military conflict, media literacy education functions as both a pedagogical and security-oriented strategy. Three practical implications emerge: Curricular Integration: Media literacy must be embedded across university programs rather than treated as an isolated subject; Verification-Focused Training: Emphasis should be placed on source evaluation, statistical interpretation, and visual verification; Platform-Specific Education: Students should be trained to critically assess messenger-based platforms, algorithmic visibility, and anonymous channels.

Strengthening these competencies contributes not only to individual empowerment but also to collective informational resilience.

Conclusion. This study examined media literacy competencies, verification behaviours, and platform trust among Ukrainian university students in the context of intensified digitalization and ongoing information warfare. The findings provide empirical insight into how young audiences navigate a complex information environment shaped by hybrid conflict and rapid technological transformation.

The results demonstrate that Telegram functions as the dominant information platform among students, reinforcing its central role in Ukraine's wartime communication infrastructure. At the same time, selective trust patterns reveal a coexistence of platform credibility and awareness of potential manipulation. Students reported moderate levels of media literacy and verification competence, indicating a foundational level of analytical ability but also highlighting significant gaps in applied verification practices.

Importantly, no statistically significant relationship was found between academic level and verification competence. This suggests that media literacy skills do not develop automatically through general higher education and require targeted, structured educational interventions. Similarly, although frequent media use may contribute to experiential learning, it does not substitute for systematic training.

Taken together, the findings reinforce the conceptualization of media literacy as a critical component of democratic resilience in conditions of hybrid warfare. The study demonstrates that the limitations observed at the level of individual competencies are closely linked to broader structural and institutional factors, including the insufficient integration of media literacy within both educational and regulatory frameworks.

Accordingly, the results highlight the need for a comprehensive approach that combines curriculum-based media education, practical verification training, and coherent policy support. Strengthening these dimensions is essential for enhancing youth resilience to disinformation and ensuring the stability of the national information environment.

Future research should move beyond self-reported measures and incorporate performance-based assessments, as well as longitudinal designs to capture the development of media literacy competencies over time. Particular attention should also be paid to emerging challenges related to visual manipulation and AI-generated content.

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