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WORK PACKAGE N° 23

Conferences on the impact of fake news on the European Democracies

ITALY

Delivered By YouNet APS

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Author(s)	Fanni Orbàn

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EVENT DESCRIPTION			
Event number:	WP23		
Event name:	Media Masters Conferences – The Impact of Fake News on the European Democracies		
Type:	conference		
In situ/online:	*[*in-situ*]*		
Location:	Bologna and Reggio Emilia, Italy		
Date(s):	9 April 2025 (Bologna) 10 April 2025 (Reggio Emilia)		
Website(s) (if any):	https://www.you-net.eu/media-masters.html		
Participants			
Female:	61		
Male:	33		
Non-binary:	1		
From country 1 [Italy]:	85		
From country 2 [Spain]:	5		
From country 3 [Georgia]:	3		
From country 4 [Romania]:	1		
From country 5 [Ukraine]:	1		
Total number of participants:	95	**From total number of countries:**	5
Description *Provide a short description of the event and its activities.*			
This report documents the Media Masters Conferences held in Bologna and Reggio Emilia, Italy on April 9th and 10th, 2025. These events are part of the broader Media Masters project, aimed at enhancing media literacy and civic engagement across Europe.			

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Bologna Conference – 9 April 2025

Held at Auditorium Biagi, Biblioteca Salaborsa, a central venue in Bologna, this public conference followed a TEDx-style format. It brought together students, educators, journalists, and citizens to reflect on the impact of disinformation on European democracies.

The talks were preceded by the initial welcoming and icebreaking session of the host of the event, the project coordinator of YouNet APS. She gave an introduction to the participants about the organization of YouNet APS, highlighting the following points:

- Field: what is youth work and non-formal education and how YouNet represents and includes them in its daily work?
- Objectives of the organization: promotion of solidarity, European citizenship, active and civic participation, inclusion, volunteering; and how these areas match the Media Masters project.
- Main activities and fields of interest: local activities, volunteering projects and European projects in which YouNet participates as partner, coordinator or main organizer of activities.
- Media Masters CERV project: showcasing the foreseen activities the programme offers for the participants in each countries, such as conferences, workshops in schools, trainings for educators.

Once arrived to the connection between YouNet and Media Masters, the host summarized information about the project, as follows:

- Context: partners, participating countries, funds and support from the European Union
- Objectives of the project: mentioning especially that Media Masters aims to:
  - enhance young people's media literacy and critical thinking;
  - raise awareness about the impact of fake news;
  - develop the ability to recognize and distinguish fake news.
- Summary of the developed Media Masters board game and application, and their objectives, such as: recognizing the fake news; enhancing critical thinking; strengthening the resistance to disinformation
- Activities: highlighting the foreseen activities YouNet will be delivering in the close future, during the project's lifetime, such as the current conferences, workshops at schools in the topics of "Playing the educational game" and "How to distinguish the right and the fake", with the participation of students, volunteers and the general public

In the following part, the host presented an icebreaker using the tool Mentimeter, in order to warm the audience up and set the appropriate atmosphere for the following

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talks and interactions with the speakers. Also, for the sake of checking the initial knowledge of participants, the topics were presented in the form of different-style questions, such as:

- What's the first word that comes to your mind when you hear "fake news"? (word cloud)
- Relation to fake news… (scales)
  - How good do you think you are at spotting fake news?
  - How much do you trust the information you find on social media?
  - In your opinion, do fake news have a real impact on democracies?
- Which of the following do you think contributes the most to the spread of fake news? (ranking)
  - Social media algorithms
  - Influencers and public figures
  - Cognitive biases
  - Lack of media literacy
  - Speed of online information
- Which of these should be the top priority in tackling disinformation? (ranking)
  - More regulation for social media
  - Digital education
  - Faster fact-checking
  - Harsher penalties for spreading fake news
  - More transparency in sources
- Have you ever shared a news story without checking its source? If so, why? (open-ended)

The icebreaker was an optimal activity to kick-off the event, as a lot of related topics emerged and the first audience interactions happened here. Thanks to the involvement of the three speakers as well, the exchanging of ideas was mutual and pleasant.

In the next phase of the event, the host left the floor to the three guests, experienced in journalism, trainings, fake news, media and science communication. She welcomed the first speaker with a TEDx format-like introduction:

"30 years old, professionally curious. He holds a PhD in Economic Sociology and Labor Studies from the University of Milan. In his dissertation, he explores how various cognitive and social mechanisms influence our ability to distinguish real news from fake news. He is currently a research fellow at the University of Trento, where he studies echo chamber theory in the relationship between media consumption and political ideologies. In the past, he has worked on institutional trust, anti-elitism, social norms, and agenda setting."

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The audience was led through the universe of fake news, in human mechanisms, structures and biases in the talk: ***Media, Journalism & Politics: Why Do People Believe in Fake News?***

The researcher guided everybody through the exploration of the following areas:

- What is fake news? Defining information disorder (misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation).
- How media and political narratives influence public perception.
- Why do people believe in misinformation? (Cognitive biases, emotional triggers, social reinforcement).
- Strategies to combat fake news (media literacy, fact-checking, regulatory measures).

By the end of his speech, the audience could get more clarity on the following questions:

- How do we distinguish between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation?
- What role does confirmation bias play in spreading fake news?
- How do social media algorithms amplify misinformation?
- Can fact-checking organizations effectively stop fake news?
- What are some real-world examples where fake news influenced political decisions?

The first speech was followed by a short Q&A session, during which participants could get even more involved in the topic. They asked questions, such as:

"What do you think is the main psychological motivation that leads people to believe in fake news?"

"Social media are often seen as the main vehicle for fake news, but are there also positive aspects to their role in information dissemination?"

After the speaker replied as for his best knowledge, we moved on with the introduction of the second speaker:

"A Boomer with integrated AI.

She lives and breathes science communication in digital media, navigating between ethics, innovation, education, and public outreach. After years in the corporate world, she pivoted to academia: she now coordinates a Master's program in science communication at the University of Trento and teaches research communication.

Recently, she founded SciComm Trainers to support researchers in developing more effective and engaging communication, because science—if it's to be truly useful—must engage in dialogue with society.

A former social media editor for Public Understanding of Science and a two-time TEDx speaker, she blends corporate vision with academic mindset in her work."

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She gave a highly engaging speech after which the audience could have the impression of being part of the big picture, of being connected with science (rather than considering it as something puzzling and completely external to us). She brought the main topic of ***"The Power of Conspiracy Theories & Pseudoscience"***, and focused on the following subtopics:

- What are conspiracy theories? Why do they spread so easily?
- The psychology behind why people believe in them (pattern recognition, distrust of authorities, social identity).
- Pseudoscience vs. real science: The dangers of misinformation in health, politics, and history.
- Strategies for debunking conspiracy theories and promoting critical thinking.

She shared with us her great passion and experience in the field, seasoning it with her unique sense of humour, and not only! She explained science in an easily understandable way, on a human scale, including some interesting aspects of pseudoscience and media:

- What psychological factors make people susceptible to conspiracy theories?
- How do conspiracy theories evolve over time? (From JFK assassination to 5G paranoia).
- What are some examples of pseudoscience that have influenced public policy?
- How can we persuade someone who deeply believes in a conspiracy theory?
- What role do social media platforms play in amplifying conspiracy theories?

Once again, the speech was followed by a Q&A section, moderated by the host.

The final speech of the day was delivered by a journalist who is a member of the Pool of Trainers of the Italian National Agency as well:

"44 years old – Traveler, Versatile, Activist.

Vice-President of TDM 2000 ODV, a volunteer organization based in Cagliari, active in the fields of non-formal education, personal and professional development of young people, international mobility, and volunteering.

A freelance journalist with collaborations for Corriere dello Sport, La Repubblica, Il Giornale di Sardegna, Sardegnagol, and other media outlets.

He is an international trainer in the pool of trainers for the European Solidarity Corps of the Italian National Agency and for the Youth Department of the Council of Europe, specializing in human rights education, media literacy, sport as an educational tool, and volunteering."

With his precious contribution in the topic of ***"Internet Safety & The Digital Risks for Young People",*** the participants could experience how we have responsibility in making

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the internet a safer place – as with the first step of self-consciuosness. The speaker revealed some crucial areas in the topic:

- Online privacy risks: Identity theft, phishing, deepfakes.
- Dangers for young people: Cyberbullying, online predators, radicalization.
- The role of digital literacy in preventing online harm.
- Solutions: Best practices for online security & responsible social media use.

His speech was rich in providing his immense experience and passion for education as well. In fact, he focused on basing his speech on the following columns:

- What are the biggest digital risks teenagers face today?
- How do scammers and cybercriminals exploit social media?
- What are deepfakes, and how can they be used to manipulate people?
- How can we educate young people to be more digitally resilient?
- What privacy measures should everyone take to protect their data?

After the intervention, he remained available for other emerging questions of the public, such as:

"How to protect our identity online?"

"How can we find the balance between free self-expression online and personal safety?"

After the three speeches, the host presented the EU-survey to the participants and asked them to fill it in. It was followed by a coffee break where speakers and participants could have further interactions on the topic, exchanging ideas and networking.

In the second part of the conference, the host introduced the Media Masters board game and application, and after the downloading of the application, she explained the basic rules of the game.

As the original packages of the game were not yet present for logistic reasons, the organizers decided to print the game themselves. This led to a limited number of boards and cards. The facilitator asked participants to split in teams and a playing session started, supported by the speakers and volunteers of YouNet.

In the end of the event, those who engaged in the game, received an email with the evaluation of the board game.

Later, YouNet held a discussion table meeting with the speakers, in order to build networks, and elaborate further the topics and the results of the program.

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Reggio Emilia Conference – 10 April 2025

The Reggio Emilia Conference, held at the Sala Chiostri di San Pietro on April 10th, 2025, was designed for the high school students. Unlike the TEDx-style Bologna conference, this event featured a more interactive panel format, allowing students to engage directly with the speakers. The panel was moderated by the event host, the project coordinator of YouNet, and included moments of guided reflection and live interaction via polls and questions.

The opening part of the conference followed a similar outline to the one in Bologna the day before. The participants were welcomed by the host and the organizers, and then were introduced to YouNet organization, the Media Masters project and the purpose of the conference.

As a starter, the icebreaker used Mentimeter to prompt student engagement. The session explored participants' views on fake news, asking them about personal perceptions, emotional reactions, their ability in recognizing fake news, their opinions about how social media platforms play a key role in shaping beliefs, and if they know tools or ways to counteract disinformation.

These questions set the tone for a lively exchange during the panel. The two main panelists shared complementary expertise. Their intervention was preceded by their introduction to the audience:

The first panelist was a communication strategist with extensive experience in digital campaigns, media literacy, and election consultancy offered a critical reflection on how modern internet culture influences public opinion. His expertise spans corporate and civic campaigns, digital fundraising, and influencer dynamics.

He also gave an introduction tailored to the target audience; straightforward, modern and energetic:

“36 years old, vegetarian, animal rights advocate.

Director of Communications at EKIS – The Coaching Company. With 17 years of experience, he specializes in digital strategies and managing complex communication teams.

He has led numerous crowdfunding and fundraising campaigns (many for Enpa and Arcigay), as well as 23 election campaigns, with 19 victories.

He has worked for CGIL, Snaitech, and in China, and is a nationally accredited trainer in the digital field. So far, he has written just one book.”

He mostly contributed to the conference in the topics of ***“Internet and Modern Influences”,*** including several other key topics in the matter:

- How internet trends & influencers shape misinformation.

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- Conspiracy theories & propaganda: How they are used to manipulate opinions.
- The role of media & journalism in spreading or combating fake news.
- Online risks for young people: Cyberbullying, echo chambers, digital manipulation.

His intervention was highly popular with the audience, not surprisingly, they also engaged in live discussions afterwards, exploring topics around the following questions:

- How do influencers unknowingly (or knowingly) spread fake news?
- What's the link between conspiracy theories and political movements?
- How does clickbait journalism contribute to misinformation?
- What are some dangerous internet trends that teenagers should be aware of?
- How can we teach young people to recognize propaganda?

The second speaker brought a unique lens connecting media ethics and youth safety. With his background in journalism and human rights education, he linked the world of sports to issues of digital misinformation and personal data risks.

Thanks to his wide experience in non-formal education, journalism and media literacy, he got invitation to both of the conferences, and to our greatest pleasure, he accepted both of them. In the Bologna Conference, he was the third speaker.

For the occasion in Reggio Emilia, he prepared another material in the main topics of ***"Sport, Media, and Digital Safety";*** also considering the needs, interests and level of engagement of the target audience. Thanks to his authentic contribution as sport journalist, dedicated football fan and educator of digital citizenship, participants got engaged in the following topics:

- The relationship between sports, media, and political narratives.
- How fake news impacts sports journalism (e.g., doping scandals, transfer rumors).
- The risks young people face online and strategies to stay safe.
- The role of media literacy education in reducing digital misinformation.

Students also interacted, and proved their ability in critical thinking, by brainstorming about actualities, such as:

- How do fake news and misinformation impact sports journalism?
- What are the most common online threats for young people today?
- How does political misinformation infiltrate mainstream media?
- What strategies can young people use to verify news sources?
- How should schools and parents teach online safety?

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Following the panel, students participated in the Media Masters board game activity. The host and volunteers guided them through downloading the app, forming teams, and scanning QR codes to answer media literacy questions. Despite technical limitations with the application, the session ran smoothly. Speakers and facilitators circulated to assist and encourage participants.

The event concluded with asking the students to fill in the EU-survey. The host also sent a follow-up email to the accompanying teachers, containing the evaluation questionnaire about the game development.

As for the final reflection at the end of the conference, students expressed enthusiasm about the game-based learning, highlighting it as both educational and enjoyable.

After the conclusion of the event, the speakers and the organizers gathered for a roundtable meeting to share professional views on the day, and to connect on a personal level as well.

Both of the conferences were documented by photos, videos and reels. Some examples can be found by clicking on these links:

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DKMdf_5qP64/

https://www.instagram.com/reel/DJ1N5hvBt4J/

Media Masters Conferences – Promotional Campaign

Preceding the events, YouNet organized promotional campaigns in order to attract potential participants from public spheres, universities, high schools, NGOs and other organizations. A list of the promotional links can be found below, targeting social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Potential participants were informed about the events through online communities such as Whatsapp and Telegram; and also by the reposting activities of the guest speakers.

https://www.bolognatoday.it/eventi/l-impatto-delle-fake-news-sulle-democrazie-europee-conferenza-interattiva-federico-gaviano-cristina-rigutto-fabio-torreggiani-12419083.html

https://www.linkedin.com/posts/younet-ngo-663bbba5_mediamasters-fakenews-medialiteracy-activity-7313858020290048000-oG80?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAABZs3OsBmOFP4cs8iel1jYDzAMGKASsZJDw

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https://www.facebook.com/groups/395153638897029/permalink/996423485436705/

https://www.facebook.com/younetit/posts/pfbid0XqEK7zsjUpJt28opu8Eupb9uNekwZq24cC7FDkU52TYbvxopxMeJ4pdKEH7ps1y4l

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https://www.facebook.com/groups/3097583377130130/permalink/3906399699581823/

Media Masters Conference – The Impact of the Fake News on the European Democracies – Dates, locations and participation:

First Conference – Bologna

The first Media Masters Conference – The Impact of Fake News on European Democracies took place on 9 April 2025 at the Auditorium Biagi, located within the Biblioteca Salaborsa in Bologna. The event brought together a total of 56 participants, consisting of 19 male and 36 female attendees, and 1 person preferred not to specify gender identities.

The nationalities represented included: 47 from Italy, 4 from Spain, 3 from Georgia, 1 from Romania and 1 from Ukraine.

Second Conference – Reggio Emilia

The second conference, also titled The Impact of Fake News on European Democracies, was held on 10 April 2025 at the Sala Chiostri di San Pietro in Reggio Emilia. Structured more like an interactive classroom session, this edition engaged 39 participants, comprising 14 males and 25 females, with no other gender identities specified.

Participants came from the following countries: 38 from Italy, and 1 from Spain.

The present report on the WP23 was uploaded on the website of YouNet APS on the 16th June: https://www.you-net.eu/media-masters.html

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HISTORY OF CHANGES		
VERSION	PUBLICATION DATE	CHANGE
1.0		Initial version

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