Empowering Youth, Building Resilience: A New Era for Media Education

Insights from the Understanding Europe Network

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Introduction

In today's digital world, where information flows instantly and online platforms shape the way we see the world, media literacy has become a vital competence for young people's active participation in democratic life.

This publication looks at the growing significance of youth-led critical media education as a transformative force within Europe. At the core is the belief that media resilience is not merely about avoiding risks or consuming media passively. Instead, it is about empowering young people to actively engage with, shape, and transform the media landscape. As Kansu Ekin Tanca argues in her piece, a rights-based approach to critical media education, one that emphasizes self-reflection, community engagement, and critical resistance, enables youth to navigate and reshape the digital environment. By positioning media education as a platform for youth to exercise their rights and responsibilities, Tanca underscores how youth can actively participate in shaping the digital world, moving beyond a "protectionist" view that merely seeks to shield them from digital risks.

In this context, the principle of peer-led education, as explored by Marine Abrahamyan in her analysis of "Understanding Europe's" methods, becomes a crucial tool for building resilience and critical thinking among young people. Abrahamyan highlights how the peer-to-peer model, where young people educate other young people, creates learning environments where trust, relatability, and shared experiences drive deeper understanding and engagement. Through her work with the "Understanding Europe" network, Abrahamyan demonstrates how youth can play a central role in media education, building not just technical media skills, but also civic competences like critical reflection, empathy, and the ability to engage in democratic discourse.

While the emphasis on youth agency is central, we must also acknowledge that media literacy must be inclusive and accessible to all. Inclusive media education, as addressed in the piece by Lukas Burnar, demonstrates how accessibility and inclusion are not secondary concerns but foundational principles for creating resilient media systems. This approach to inclusive journalism highlights how accessibility can elevate the quality of media content for everyone, not just for people with disabilities. As Burnar points out, true inclusion in media requires systemic change, from the representation of marginalized communities to the design of media content that can be understood by all. This philosophy resonates deeply with the educational practices discussed by both Tanca and Abrahamyan, who advocate for media education systems that are inclusive of all youth, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities.

Together, these contributions reflect the urgent need to create a new generation of media-literate youth, equipped with both the critical thinking skills and the democratic competences necessary to thrive in today's complex digital world. In this publication we want to explore how youth-led critical media education, grounded in principles of rights, inclusion, and active participation, can foster resilience, deepen critical thinking, and empower young people to shape the digital world. From digital rights to media resilience, these pages explore why it is essential for young people to not just survive, but thrive, in a world where they can critically engage, participate, and transform the media they consume and create.

Peer-Led Educational Practices for Media Literacy

By Marine Abrahamyan

In today's rapidly shifting information landscape, media literacy has become a foundational competence for young people's civic engagement. Media literacy, the ability to critically access, analyse, evaluate, and create media messages, has therefore become a central competence for democratic participation.

As digital platforms increasingly shape how individuals learn, communicate, and participate in public life, the ability to critically navigate media environments is essential for democratic resilience. Media literacy, in this sense, goes far beyond technical proficiency; it equips young people with the skills to question narratives, understand power structures in communication, and participate meaningfully in societal debates. In this context, peer education offers a particularly powerful approach. Defined broadly, peer education refers to learning processes facilitated by individuals who share similar age, status, or lived experience with participants. It creates relationships of trust, relatability, and shared understanding that can significantly deepen learning (Mihailidis, 2018).

"Understanding Europe" (UE), a peer-led educational network active across Europe, has long recognized this need. Founded on the principle that education should be accessible, inclusive, and shaped by young people themselves, UE promotes a participatory learning culture that centres youth agency. Through workshops delivered "at eye level", "peers" (young volunteer educators) create learning environments that strengthen critical thinking, dialogue, and cross-cultural understanding. Media literacy is a core thematic thread across UE's educational formats, approached not merely as a skill set but as a means of empowering young people to engage confidently with the world around them.

This article reflects on how peer-led educational practices within Understanding Europe contribute to media literacy. Through an analysis of core pedagogical principles, workshop methods, and a real case example from the 2025 "Transnational Training for Trainers" (TT4T) in Vienna, it explores how peer learning fosters critical thinking, resilience, and democratic competences in the digital age.

Core Principles of "Understanding Europe's" Educational Approach

"Understanding Europe's" pedagogical approach aligns closely with broader European and global frameworks for democratic and participatory learning. The European Commission's *Key Competences for Lifelong Learning* (2018) identifies critical thinking, digital literacy, cultural awareness, and citizenship as essential competences for the 21st century. These competences are interwoven throughout "Understanding Europe's" curricula and facilitation practices. The first principle is the commitment to participatory teaching and learning. "Understanding Europe" avoids top-down transmission models and instead creates dialogical spaces where learners and facilitators co-construct knowledge. Workshops encourage learners to articulate their own experiences, question dominant narratives, and connect personal insights to wider social structures. In this sense, media literacy is not treated as a purely technical skill but as a social and civic practice.

A second principle concerns diversity-oriented and inclusive educational design. The network operates across more than a dozen European countries and intentionally brings together educators with varied backgrounds, languages, and perspectives. Materials are adapted to local contexts; workshops are designed to be accessible regardless of learners' prior knowledge; and facilitators are trained to navigate sensitive discussions with care and mutual respect. This inclusive design not only reflects democratic values but also equips young people to recognize how media and information flows are shaped by identity, power, and inequality.

At the heart of the approach is the "by and for young people" methodology. Peer trainers act as role models, mediators, and facilitators who bring authenticity to the learning space. Their proximity in age and experience enables them to understand the digital habits, pressures, and questions that participants bring with them – whether about algorithmic influence, online hate speech, or navigating misinformation. Buckingham (2003) argues that media education must begin from the actual media cultures of youth; peer-led workshops naturally achieve this by embedding learning within the realities of everyday digital life.

Finally, the Schwarzkopf Foundation Young Europe serves as a coordinator and learning partner, providing strategic direction, quality standards, and pedagogical support. The Foundation ensures continuity across national teams, provides training and learning materials, and cultivates a culture of peer reflection and collective improvement. This structure allows young educators to take ownership while also benefiting from professional guidance and institutional infrastructure.

Peer-Led Practices That Foster Media Literacy

"Understanding Europe's" educational formats incorporates a broad range of media-literacy-focused activities and thematic modules, all embedded within a participatory and dialogue-oriented framework. Across workshops, Peers introduce content that responds to challenges young people face in contemporary digital spaces. One central practice is the creation of peer-led dialogue spaces. These spaces allow participants to openly discuss their digital experiences, ranging from the pressures of social media curation to exposure to misleading political content. Such discussions validate the emotional and social dimensions of digital life, an aspect often overlooked in traditional media literacy programs. Facilitators encourage participants to share stories, compare interpretations, and question how media messages shape their views of themselves and others. Another key element is the use of modules focused on fake news, journalism, algorithms, discriminatory language, and narrative construction. These modules draw from contemporary examples and invite participants to analyze real-world media content.

Learners examine how false or misleading information circulates online and why it can spread more quickly than verified news. Through guided discussions and collaborative exercises, participants reflect on emotional triggers, cognitive biases, and the mechanisms that make misinformation persuasive. Rather than offering prescriptive rules, peers invite young people to practice evaluating sources, questioning motives, and comparing claims: skills essential for informed civic participation. For instance, in the "Media & Journalism Crash Course", participants examine how headlines frame political events, how algorithmic recommendation systems reinforce certain patterns of attention, and how discriminatory language circulates online. Facilitators guide learners to identify bias, understand source credibility, and recognize structural influences on media production.

To develop critical thinking, workshops employ experiential learning techniques such as simulations, role-play exercises, debates, and reflection circles. These methods align with experiential learning theory, which highlights the importance of active engagement, and emotional involvement. For example, a role-play simulation may ask participants to act as journalists in a newsroom responding to breaking news. As they make decisions under time pressure, they become aware of practical constraints and the processes through which information becomes simplified or biased.
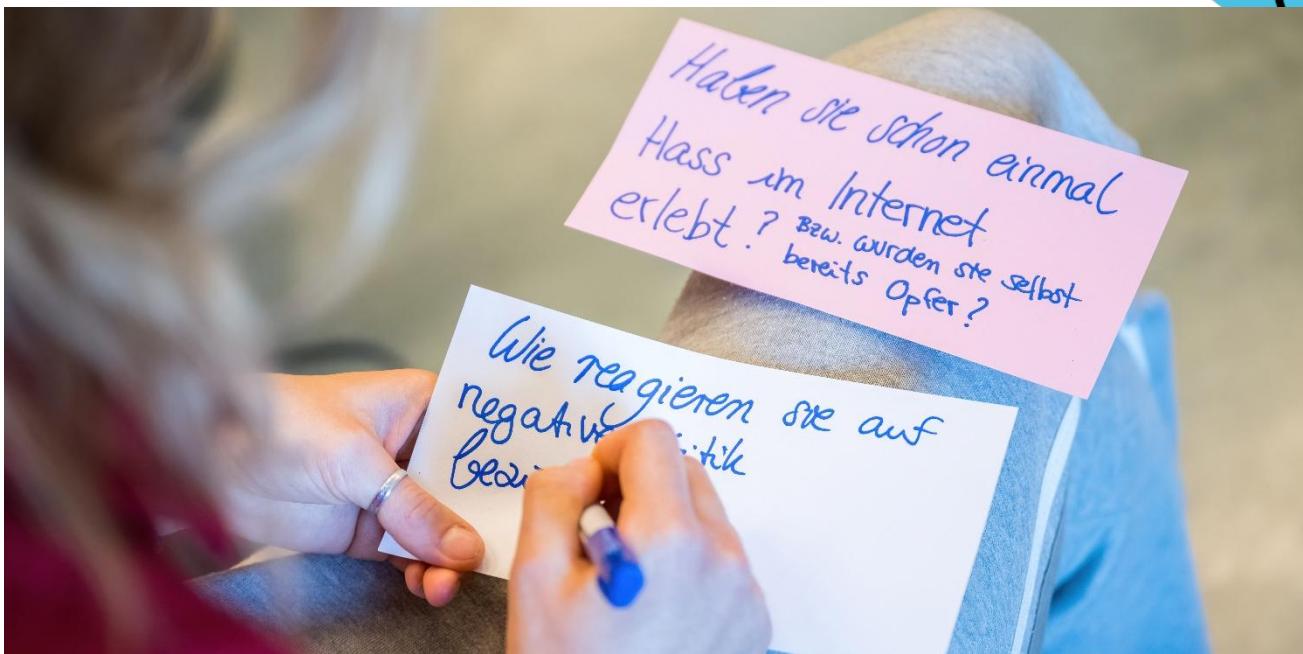
One key element of the module is identifying discriminatory narratives and harmful language. Participants work collaboratively to analyze media narratives that reproduce stereotypes or discriminatory patterns. Through facilitated dialogue, young people learn to recognize how harmful language circulates, how marginalized groups are represented, and what inclusive alternatives might look like. This strengthens not only media competence but also social and ethical awareness. Throughout these activities, peer educators maintain an open, non-hierarchical atmosphere. Their position as peers rather than authority figures enables them to connect with the participants' lived experiences and encourage experimentation and critical questioning.

The 2025 Transnational Training in Vienna

In Spring 2025, "Understanding Europe" held a "Transnational Training for Trainers" in Vienna, which gathered young educators from across the network for professional development. It offered a vivid example of how peer-led practices can deepen media literacy and digital resilience. The next text will offer a more detailed overview of the training and its outcomes in more detail. It demonstrated the power of combining peer education with experiential media literacy tools. Participants did not simply learn *about* media; they learned *through* media practices, within a community of peers, and in a context that empowered them to become multipliers in their own regions.

The impact of peer-led media literacy practices lies in their capacity to enhance participation, foster trust, and strengthen the democratic competences of young people. Peer education increases accessibility because learners feel understood by facilitators who share similar experiences. Trust and relatability reduce barriers to participation, creating environments where young people are willing to challenge assumptions, ask critical questions, and articulate uncertainties. As Mihailidis (2018) notes, civic media literacies must build on participatory forms of engagement that recognize learners as active agents rather than passive consumers.

Sharing lived experience also strengthens learning outcomes. When peer trainers speak about their own encounters with misinformation, online discrimination, or digital wellbeing challenges, they model vulnerability and critical reflection. This helps participants recognize that navigating digital media is a shared struggle rather than an individual failing. Such recognition supports the development of resilience, understood here as the capacity to manage digital risks, maintain psychological wellbeing, and make autonomous choices in complex information environments. Peer-led formats additionally promote autonomy in media consumption. By encouraging learners to question sources, analyze narratives, and reflect on their own digital practices, workshops support the development of digital agency. Young people become empowered to evaluate media rather than merely absorb it, which is essential for building an informed, pluralistic, and democratic Europe.

Finally, the broader societal role of these practices is significant. In times of polarization, disinformation, and democratic backsliding, media literacy is not only an individual competence but a collective democratic necessity. Youth-led approaches play a crucial role in fostering a culture of critical inquiry, intercultural dialogue, and mutual understanding across borders.

Conclusion

Peer-led media literacy practices within "Understanding Europe" offer a compelling model for democratic, participatory, and resilient youth education. By combining inclusive pedagogical principles with experiential learning methods and real-life digital challenges, the network equips young Europeans with the competences needed to critically navigate contemporary media landscapes. The example of the 2025 Vienna training shows how transnational collaboration and peer facilitation can strengthen both skills and democratic dispositions.

Looking forward, further cross-border exchanges, the integration of more digital learning tools, and the deeper involvement of young people in co-creating curricula will be key. As Europe continues to battle with rapid technological change and contested information environments, empowering youth through peer-led media literacy remains essential for strengthening democratic culture and ensuring that young people can shape the future with critical awareness and confidence.

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About the author

Marine Abrahamyan has been an active member of the "Understanding Europe" Armenia network since 2022. Through sustained engagement in peer education, she has developed extensive practical expertise in youth-led learning. Over the past years, she has delivered dozens of Crash Courses across Armenia and facilitated multiple Trainings for Trainers at both national and European levels, working with diverse groups of young people. Her work is grounded in creating inclusive, dialogue-based learning spaces that empower youth to critically engage with media, strengthen democratic competences, and build resilience in digital environments.

The TT4T Vienna: Connecting, Learning and Empowerment

By Leonor Costa

On April 11-13, 2025, the "Understanding Europe" (UE) network came together for the 7th Transnational Training for Trainers (TT4T) in Vienna, Austria. The event gathered young people from all around the network for three impactful and insightful days of dynamic, hands-on learning on "Strengthening Media Competence and Resilience".

The TT4T kicked off with high energy, focusing on connection and culture. We broke the ice with fun teambuilding games, then explored the heart of Vienna's identity with a city tour and a visit to the Wien Museum's "Mixed. Diverse stories" exhibition, which focused on the influences that make up the diverse tissue of the city. We also had the chance to visit the ground-floor exhibition, focusing on historical narratives and diverse perspectives and highlighting the power of the words and images we choose to tell different stories. One of the core modules focused on detecting and analyzing fake news. Facilitators first introduced conceptual distinctions between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Participants then engaged in practical fact-checking exercises. Working in small groups, they cross-checked claims from viral posts using multiple reliable sources, evaluated the credibility of digital content, and performed reverse image searches on manipulated photographs.

Another highlight was the media simulation lab, a complex role game designed to expose how media narratives are constructed. Participants were divided into editorial teams, each assigned different priorities: Profit, political influence, or public interest. They were given a fictional scenario involving a major protest in a European capital. As they selected sources, framed headlines, chose images, and negotiated with editors, they became acutely aware of how bias emerges not only through intention but also through structural pressures, time constraints, and selective attention. The training also included a session on resilience-building in digital environments, which addressed the emotional and cognitive strains of information overload. Participants discussed coping strategies such as intentional media breaks, mindfulness practices, content verification habits, and the creation of healthy digital boundaries. The session emphasized that media literacy is not only analytical but also relational and emotional: young people need tools to navigate frustration, uncertainty, and the constant acceleration of online communication. By sharing personal experiences and strategies, participants built a collective sense of agency and support.

For the second day, we were privileged to receive an input from our partner, *redaktion Andererseits*, a pioneer in inclusive journalism centring disability accessibility and the vital role of inclusion in media, which was a key takeaway for the day. The Peer Educators in charge of the program, Kansu Ekin Tanca and Marine Abrahamyan, tackled fake news and misinformation with interactive modules, giving participants the chance to debunk digital myths, reflect on the role of AI in spreading misinformation, and identify indicators of fake news. The Media Simulation Lab was a highlight of the event, giving the participants the chance to take on the roles of journalist, influencer, fact-checker, policymaker and citizen to report and react to a news story, bringing the complexities of the media space to life!

The program closed with a focus on empowerment. The participants got to explore their rights and responsibilities in the digital space, reflected on how to navigate the risks of the online environment such as hate speech and discrimination, and created a "Personal self-care map" and an "Empowerment wall" to help manage digital overwhelm. Finally, the participants got to design their own utopic online platforms and explored the best ways to integrate the learnings of the event into the UE educational materials, ensuring the impact of the 7th TT4T would travel home with them to eventually reach schools all over Europe!

Impact of the event: Key Takeaways & Feedback

The feedback is overwhelmingly clear: This event was more than just a space for passive learning; it empowered the participants to engage with the digital environment consciously. The results show a pattern of confidence and readiness to take on the challenges and pressures of the digital environment. 94.1% of participants rated themselves at the top of the scale for being likely to engage more critically with media content after the event. They also recognize in themselves an increased ability to identify fake news and disinformation and report a higher awareness of media influence on public opinion. The training prepared them with tools to understand the meaning of responsible digital citizenship and most participants walked away feeling more capable of recognizing discrimination and hate speech in digital media and responding appropriately. The participants recognize media resilience as a key skill to have, especially in a polarized society, equipping them with means to "adapt to modern changes". They also feel prepared to step up and "contribute to a more respectful, inclusive, and equitable online environment", showing a commitment to their role as multipliers of democratic values. This is a real sign of the TT4T's success in turning awareness into actional positive change!

But the real magic of the TT4T Vienna was in the exchange of diverse, personal experiences. The structure of the training itself and the modules designed by our Peer Educators provided a space for knowledge sharing and exchange of personal insights. The event succeeded in creating a collaborative atmosphere, where learning happened informally. The international exchange solidified that learning, underlining the importance of coming together as a network to discuss the topics that matter. The TT4T empowered the Trainers of "Understanding Europe" so they could return home feeling enthusiastic, confident and prepared to work together for a more mindful online future!

Towards a Youth-Led Critical Media Education in Europe

By Kansu Ekin Tanca

Critical media education has sustained its relevance for youth in Europe through decades and arguably even more so today, marked with developments in the digital environment in recent years. Although a recognition of media education has existed for youth for long, human rights have rarely been at the core. Yet media education lies at the heart of civic education (Mihailidis & Thevenin, 2013) and is ideally a youth-led one.

In literature, there are mainly two dominant approaches that consider the role of media education for youth. These two approaches, namely the protectionist and rights-based approaches, seek to explain why media education matters for youth. By doing so, they also implicitly imagine a somewhat fixed profile of youth that comes with a narrative about their assumed abilities and needs, told by others. The so-called protectionist approach to media education and media literacy works with a certain assumption around what youth are capable and incapable of in a mediatised environment. From this angle, youth are often seen as susceptible to challenges, as being easily affected by media manipulation, and their experiences are often associated with unhealthy consumption of what is regarded as 'bad' media.

This perception of youth as "more at risk of the assumed dangers of media and use" brings artificial borders that try to set the limits to where youth are allowed to enter or participate and a certain picture of what is considered safe, acceptable, or overall 'okay' for them (Higdon et al., 2024; Livingstone, 2017). This risk narrative results in favouring protection measures over participation. Through this limited consideration, media literacy is instrumentalised as a protection strategy in itself: Youth are taught to 'fight' challenges, identify risks, avoid potential problems, and learn how to be cautious with the use of technological devices or digital platforms. This approach is heavily criticised by scholars on the other side of the spectrum, since it puts emphasis only on the "symptoms rather than causes" and fails to see the essence of media education (Buckingham, 2020).

Literature also tells us that media education is not only a spell, or rather a counterspell, with which youth can 'protect' themselves when the time arises for them to act, or rather to react to what faces them. But it is the knowledge of herbs (metaphorically) and literacy around it, the creative attitude in finding, mixing and creating, the critical resistance to what has already been regarded as the 'usual accepted way'. It is the exploration and creation of media of any sort, understanding of the self and community, practice of empathy, reflection and exercise of rights and responsibilities and the freedom and hope to act when it is desired and how. It is not merely a tool to keep in a side pocket as a fallback in a wild dark forest, it is the very self on foot, with an agency of its own. Media education, when rights-based, is having, seeing and creating a clear sky. It is a framework that guides not only how we perceive the world around us, but engage with it, change or transform it for the better (Gennaro et al., 2024; Kellner & Share 2019).

Bridging Youth Work and Youth Research

At this exact point I have the privilege to stand on a bridge connecting youth work and youth research, critical media education reveals itself not just for youth, but rather as youth-led. When I joined the "Understanding Europe" program as a "Digital Fellow" in 2021, I had the passion to develop a new educational material for the Network focusing on "Digital Citizenship: Our Rights and Responsibilities Online" (Tanca, 2021) The aim was, and still is, to enhance an understanding and exploration of what rights children and youth have in the digital environment, and more importantly opening up space to reflect on their responsibilities as well as accountabilities of companies and governments in safeguarding these human rights, following the General Comment No.25 on Children's Rights in the Digital World by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, which was proposed on the same year, in 2021 (OHCHR, 2021).

Later on in 2025 I had the intention to revisit the material, and through that, the conceptualisation of digital citizenship for youth in Europe. It also coincided with an increased interest from civil society, probably supported by the declaration of 2025 as the "European Year of Digital Citizenship Education" by the Council of Europe (CoE, 2024). The network brought youth volunteers from around Europe in two "Transnational Training for Trainers" this year, one with a focus on media resilience and another one on human rights. Only this time, I was also experiencing it as a researcher and a doctoral fellow and both of these topics happened to be the two ends I was eager to bind.

The point of departure was more or less the same as when I was a fellow a couple of years back. Yet it was not until this accumulated enriching experience as peer-educator in the network that showed me another way really is already possible: It was the recognition of youth as peers in this field and them leading it. Because it is only when we listen to youth themselves about how they navigate the digital environment, how they experience human rights issues, and how they reflect on notions of inclusion/exclusion and decide on participation/non-participation that we truly can understand why media education matters for youth.

Over time these loose but consistent thoughts I had in mind found its way to my dissertation project I am currently pursuing at the University of Vienna, deeply inspired by the youth work I have been involved in.

Digital Citizenship, "Peer-to-Peer"

Revisiting digital citizenship as youth-led triggers alternative ways of thinking about it. Following a concept analysis, Choi (2016) provides a comprehensive conceptualisation of digital citizenship in four pillars. The first pillar is "Ethics," which encompasses elements like responsible behaviour, awareness of self and the issues in the digital environment, understanding and exercise of rights and responsibilities, and reflection of self and the community. Rights in the digital environment are situated in the "Ethics" pillar, although I would argue that human rights is a guiding principle, on which all the rest is built. The second pillar is "Media and Information Literacy", which includes access to digital technologies (and through that also understanding of digital inequalities and divide), skills, knowledge, and competences to identify, assess, evaluate, engage with and create media. These skills are recognised in connection with competences like social-justice-oriented communication.

"Participation/engagement", as the third pillar, is characterised by political, economic, cultural and personalised engagement and participation. Here civic engagement appears as an element for digital citizenship as well as one's own role in contributing to the creation of inclusive, participatory spaces.

Last but not least, "Critical Resistance" builds on the critical reflection of the existing power structures as well as ability to respond, resist and transform them. It is reminiscent of the definition of critical media literacy as "engag[ing] with media through critically examining representations, systems, structures, ideologies, and power dynamics that shape and reproduce culture and society" (Share, 2022). This also suggests that these four pillars are indeed "multifaceted" and "interrelated." (Choi, 2016).
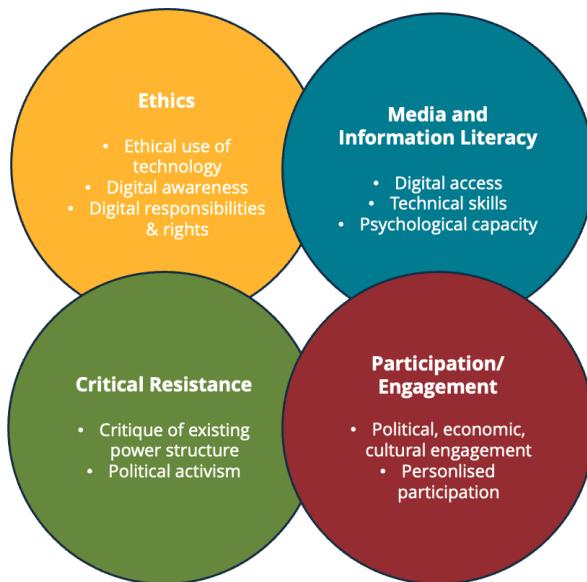
Figure 1, Four Categories of Digital Citizenship, Choi (2016)

Figure from Choi (2016, p.584), *adapted design for this publication*

Using the same framework, my invitation would be to look at things through the peer approach and recognise youth's role as peers in enhancing it. Rather than associating peers only with pressure or bullying, this approach opens up a space for youth to guide their peers in developing a more inclusive and democratic digital environment. Using the central question: How can youth thrive in a rights-based narrative nourished by themselves?

The guiding questions I came up with were open, yet serving its purpose:

- Ethics: How can youth contribute to their peers' awareness, exercise and advancement of rights and responsibilities in the digital environment?

- Media and Information literacy: How can youth facilitate their peers' access to the digital environment, including supporting relevant literacies, skills, knowledge and attitudes?

- Participation/Engagement: How can youth mobilise their peers' meaningful political and civic engagement and agency in the digital environment?

- Critical resistance: How can youth drive a change with their peers by critically analysing, resisting and responding to the dominant power structures?

And although these are all questions, I am rather tempted to take them as answers to meaningful youth work in Europe.

I would like to bring the metaphorical tone back while closing the article.

"Maybe the trees in the forests that were once left dark can freely grow now to reach their branches and hold hands. A forest, some chirping, a youtopia."

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About the author

Kansu Ekin Tanca is currently working as a Researcher Predoc at the University of Vienna, Media Education Unit, where she also pursues her doctoral studies, a participatory youth research on human rights-based approach to critical media literacy. Previously, she led educational initiatives around critical media and digital literacies in Türkiye's leading independent fact-checking organisation and worked for UNICEF, under the youth portfolio for the region. She joined "Understanding Europe" network as a Digital Europe Fellow, and after her fellowship, got involved in the founding team of "Understanding Europe" Türkiye, who brought the project to Türkiye in collaboration with European Youth Parliament (EYP) Türkiye in 2021. She has since supported the Network as a peer-educator. She is also providing editorial assistance to the Journal of Media Literacy Education (JMLE) since 2021.

Why Resilient Media Requires Radical Inclusion

By Lukas Burnar

Resilience has become a hot topic in recent years. We talk about resilient supply chains, resilient economies, and resilient democracies. But when we talk about the resilience of our media landscape, a key factor in enabling healthy democracies, we overlook a fundamental structural flaw. We are trying to build a resilient society while systematically excluding fifteen percent of its population.

Approximately 15 to 20 percent of people live with a disability. If we understand disability not as a medical deficit but, following the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, as the result of societal barriers, we must admit that our media infrastructure is currently designed to disable a significant portion of its audience. This is not just a question of fairness. It is a question of democratic stability. A society that leaves fifteen percent of its people in the dark, or worse, misrepresents them, is fragile.

Currently, reporting on the intersection of disability and society is often lacking and seldom independent. On one side, we have the "exclusive" mainstream. These are traditional media organisations that uphold journalistic standards such as independence, contextualization, and rigorous fact-checking, but largely ignore the perspectives of people with disabilities and who employ few journalists with disabilities. This includes most mainstream outlets and even public broadcasters, especially when compared to industry leaders like the BBC. In these newsrooms, disability is a niche topic, often covered only when it concerns tragedy or charity. The multifaceted, daily reality of persons with disabilities remains invisible and there are very few, if any, reporters who live with disabilities.

On the other side, we find several publications and voices that do engage on the topic of disability but fail to meet journalistic standards. Very often, they are creators without independent financing or processes for quality assurance. Or they are publications made by organisations which themselves form part of the institutionalised system, for example charities operating sheltered workshops. While they provide visibility, they lack true independence. This leaves us with a fatal gap: There is almost no independent, critical journalism that treats disability as a cross-cutting issue relevant to all sections of society, from politics to culture to economics.

Closing the Gap: *andererseits and* Journalism for Everyone

We founded *andererseits* to close this gap. We are a non-profit media organization where journalists with and without disabilities work together on equal footing. Our mission is simple but radical: "Journalism for everyone." This means we do not view inclusion as a charitable act, but as a quality standard for modern media. Six of our twelve team members live with disabilities.

Our work is grounded in a specific method that ensures we do not fall into the traps of the existing landscape. We operate with mixed teams, mostly tandems of editors with and without disabilities. This ensures that the perspective is never externalized. We pay fair wages, countering the widespread practice of employing people with disabilities in precarious or unpaid "occupational therapy" settings. Most importantly, we apply rigorous journalistic standards to

topics that are usually left to PR departments. We do not write *about* the "poor disabled person"; we investigate the political failures that create breakdowns in the system.

Accessibility in Journalism: Precision and Clarity

During a recent "Understanding Europe" *Train the Trainers* event in Vienna, we shared how this approach translates into practice. It is often assumed that accessibility oversimplifies complex topics. Our experience shows the exact opposite: Accessibility forces precision. This requirement changes how we produce content. It forces our editors to be very clear and explicit about what is shown in an image or what is important information when dealing with complex subjects. When you translate a convoluted sentence into Easy Language ("Leichte Sprache" in German) or describe a complex chart for a blind user, you quickly realize where your own understanding is fuzzy. Accessibility acts as a control on vanity statements. It strips away the jargon and inflated language that often hides a lack of substance in political reporting. The result is journalism that is better not just for people with disabilities, but for everyone.

Another way in which our content is strengthened by accessibility as a standard is the "Two Senses Principle" as a core editorial guideline. This dictates that every piece of essential information must be conveyed through at least two senses. A video is not finished until it has subtitles (visual) and audio description (auditory). A text is not finished until it is available in a format that screen readers can process clearly. True inclusion also requires a certain degree of security which, in turn, necessitates a sustainable and resilient business model. This is a particularly pressing issue in the DACH region (Germany, Austria and Switzerland), where many media organisations are facing enormous challenges. Many publishers were late to recognise the change in user needs, distribution models and reliable revenue streams. When they could no longer ignore these changes, many found themselves in an ever

deepening reliance on their aging existing audience, US tech giants and shortsighted government subsidies. This has led to clickbait, increasing media capture and a loss of the most important asset a media organisation can have: The trust of readers.

This is a vicious circle: Dependence on public advertising reduces the media's ability to check power, which decreases trust in media. Our business model has therefore put our readers at the centre from the very beginning. To report on structural abuse and policy failures, we need to be accountable first and foremost to our readers, not to charity, nor to government, nor to advertisers. This is why we focus heavily on subscriptions and reader revenue.

Innovation Through Economic Pressure

Government and philanthropy can, however, also form part of the solution. We regularly work with foundations and bodies like the Vienna Business Agency on a project basis. They provide us with the necessary capital to develop new products, allowing us to reach new audiences. However, we always view these grants as investments that need to return not only impactful journalism, but also to strengthen our core business model, further reinforcing our independence. A strong subscriber based main revenue stream allows us to further diversify our revenue, for example through advertising, without sacrificing our independence.

This economic pressure is also our greatest driver for innovation. When you treat accessibility as a charity project, "good enough" is often accepted. When you treat it as a core product feature for paying customers, it is one of the main divers of value and therefore something to focus on and invest in. It drives us to build better digital products, ultimately creating a more robust and user-friendly experience for every single subscriber, regardless whether they live with disabilities or not.

Empowering a New Generation of Journalists

Ultimately, inclusive journalism is a resilience strategy for the media industry itself. It opens the newsroom to young people who have previously been told that journalism is not a place for them. We see this every day in our team: When structural barriers are removed, young talent thrives. We have colleagues who were previously underestimated by the education system who are now winning journalism awards. This should not be surprising; it is the logical result of removing artificial ceilings. By ensuring our newsroom is accessible, we empower a new generation of journalists to tell stories that have never been told before.

This effect can and should be replicated by other media outlets. Inclusion does not just require accessible content, but also an engagement with your own working practices. We have the power to remove a lot of barriers, whether by working on the accessibility of our offices, by increasing flexibility, or simply by creating a culture of clear communication. If we want a resilient society, we need media that reflects the full reality of that society. Inclusion is not a "nice-to-have" add-on for the end of the year; it is the prerequisite for a complete, truthful, and resilient public discourse.

About the author

Lukas Burnar is the co-founder and executive director of andererseits, an inclusive magazine focusing on disability and society, www.andererseits.org. He is a former member of the European Youth Parliament and is based in Vienna, Austria. At andererseits, journalists with and without disabilities work together—on equal terms, critically, and fairly compensated. Lukas is particularly passionate about the intersections between innovation management, new work, and social transformation.
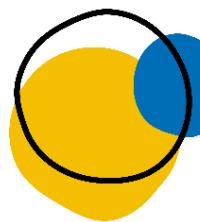
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