World Forum for Democracy in collboration with
The Division of Freedom of Expression and CDMSI presents

WHO SAID BORING?

COUNTERING DISINFORMATION THROUGH JOURNALISM, ART AND GAMES

THE PROBLEM
Disinformation thrives where algorithms reward engagement over accuracy. Polarization and deception sell better than depth or quality.

Cesare PITEA, Legal Adviser, Council of Europe

THE CHALLENGE
Regulation and critical thinking remain essential, but they are not enough.

THE HOPE
We'll explore how creativity, play, and empathy can complement logic in the fight against disinformation. Our three brilliant experts will show us new ways forward.

MEET THE EXPERTS

MARIJANA GRBEŠA ZENZEROVIĆ
Full Professor at the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Political Science, Croatia

MICHAËL OPGENHAFFEN
Associate Professor Digital Media and Journalism, KU Leuven, Researcher at factcheck.vlaanderen, Member of BENEDMO, Flemish-Dutch collaboration against disinformation, Belgium

NGINA KIRORI
Senior crimes & investigative reporter, Nation Media Group, Kenya, and 2025 fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, United Kingdom

# WHO ARE THE NEWS AUTHORITIES TODAY?

THE SHIFT TO SOCIAL MEDIA

Young audiences have been drifting away from traditional media and institutional sources. Social media has taken over from television as the primary news source for youth.

WHERE YOUNG PEOPLE GET THEIR NEWS

The majority of young Europeans get news from visual social media — primarily Instagram, TikTok and YouTube. And their news comes from internet personalities and celebrities, not journalists!

Chart labels: Direct, Social Media, Search, Agrgatrs, Mobil Alerts, Email

Marijana GRBEŠA ZENZEROVIĆ
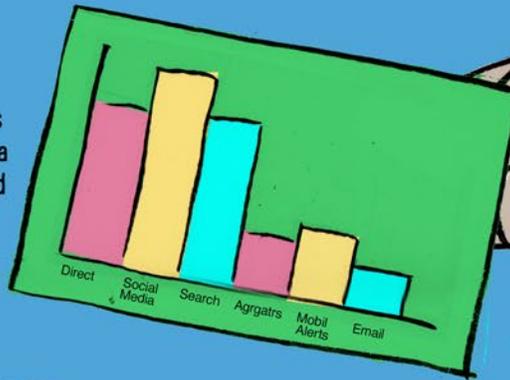
THE SUSCEPTIBILITY PROBLEM

Young audiences prefer informal, entertaining, and visual media. They have a different conception of what 'news' even means. And here's the problem: they're less trustful of all information, but MORE susceptible to disinformation.

THE PROBLEM FACING TRADITIONAL NEWS ORGANIZATIONS:

Attracting and engaging young audiences.

WE NEED TO ACKNOWLEDGE NEWS INFLUENCERS AS RELEVANT NEWS AGENTS.

Traditional media must learn from them about personalization, relatability, and authenticity. The future isn't either/or, it's cooperation between traditional and new information agents in our digital ecosystem.

WHAT ARE NEWS INFLUENCERS?

News influencers (also known as 'newsfluencers') are individuals — not institutions — who produce news content. They invest in personal authentic relationships with their audiences.
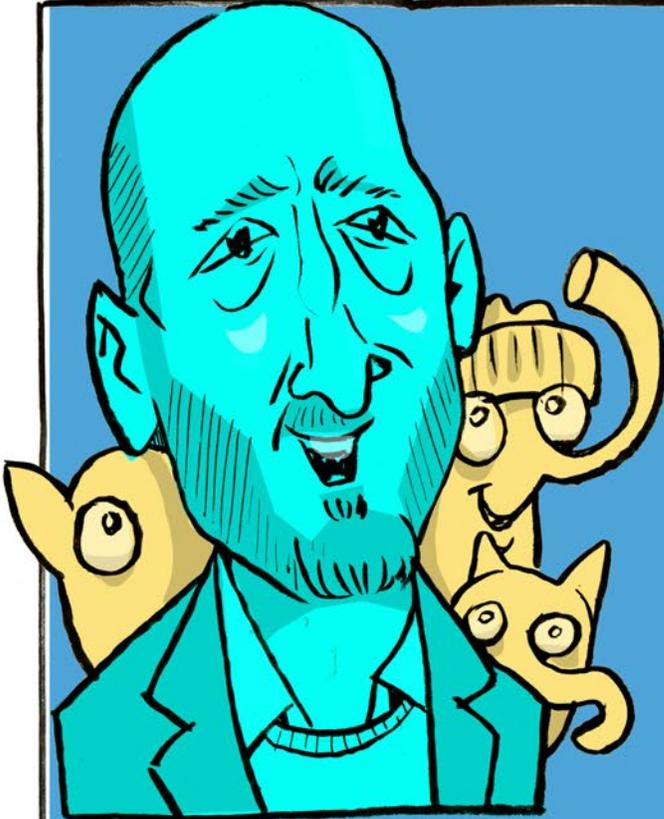
As researcher Edward Hurcombe notes, they're building fandoms like celebrities do, creating parasocial relationships through relational journalism.

THEY FEATURE:

Platformatised creators
Selfbranding
Personal audience relationship
Fandom-centric
Parasocial relations
Relational Journalism

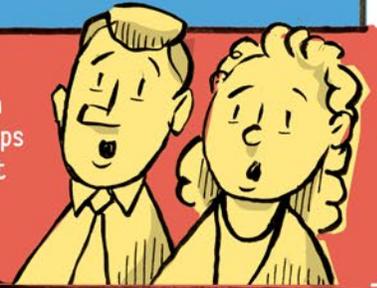# FACT CHECKING MUST PLAY ALONG WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

THE PUBLICATION PROBLEM

Fact-checkers are using social media claims as their starting point, but they're still only publishing their final fact-checks on websites. We need to inject fact-checks directly into social media where young people actually are.
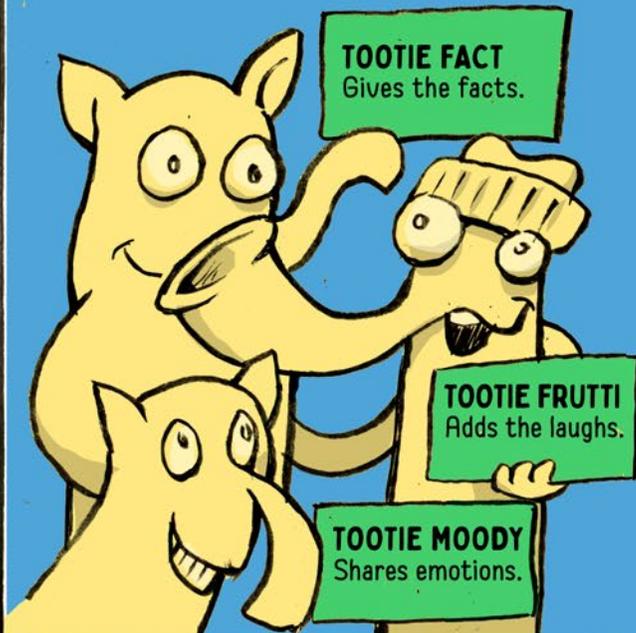
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Michaël OPGENHAFFEN

FALSE CLAIMS

EAT 15 BANANAS A DAY to have better skin

False claims spread in closed Facebook groups and TikTok feeds that parents never see.

THE TOOTIES

TOOTIE FACT
Gives the facts.

TOOTIE FRUTTI
Adds the laughs.

TOOTIE MOODY
Shares emotions.

WHAT WE DID:

We created Tootie Facts, Tootie Frutti & Tootie Moody — friendly cartoon figures who inject fact-checks into social media discussions.

WHY IT WORKS:

You can't argue with friendly cartoon figures! When mainstream media fact-checks appear, people argue about bias. But cartoon characters? They're seen as neutral. People don't want to look foolish debating a cartoon.

CHILDREN: THE HEROES WHO WERE NEVER GIVEN THEIR TOOLS

Ngina Kirori

THE POWER OF YOUTH

Children learn from the news and become change-makers.

In 2024, young Kenyans organized massive protests over the Finance Bill - a democratic movement built on social media platforms we once laughed off.

Ellyanne Wanjiku Chlystun. At age 10, she became a climate activist because she learned from news articles about Nobel Prize winner Wangari Maathai.

THE NKOSANA COMIC BOOK

Children in South Africa created 'Nkosana' - a comic book made BY children FOR children about spotting disinformation. They teach each other how to tell if a photo is real or AI-generated. They're not passive audience members - they're actively collecting information about disinformation and how it affects their world
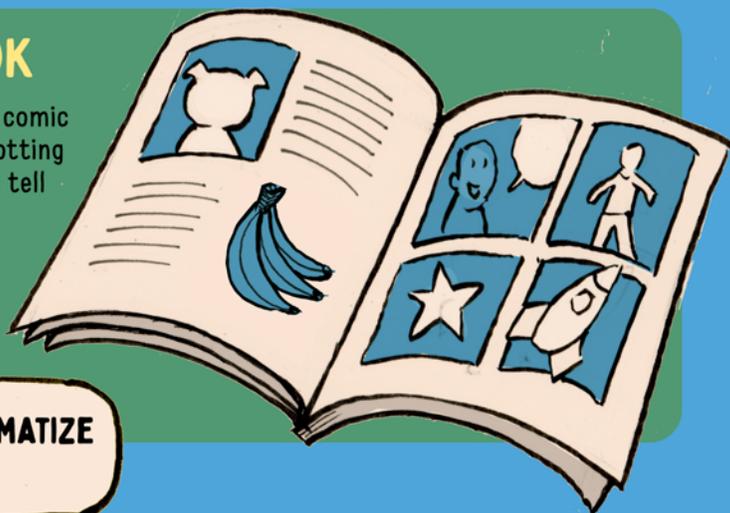
PEOPLE ASK, 'WHY TRAUMATIZE CHILDREN WITH NEWS?'

WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT, CHILDREN ARE LISTENING TO EVERYTHING THAT'S GOING ON AROUND THEM.

CHILDREN ARE NOT JUST PASSIVE AUDIENCE MEMBERS, THEY'RE COLLECTING A LOT OF INFORMATION (AND DISINFORMATION).

STUDIES HAVE FOUND THAT CONSTRUCTIVE JOURNALISM CAN, AND SHOULD, HELP THEM DISARM CONFLICT.

THIS COMMUNITY IS CALLING ON NEWS ORGANIZATIONS TO CURATE MORE INFORMATION THAT IS COMPLEX, BUT THAT ALSO TALKS ABOUT THE REALITIES AROUND US — WITHOUT BEING CONDESCENDING TO CHILDREN.

THESE DAYS, CHILDREN KNOW THE DIFFERENCE OF WHEN YOU'RE TALKING DOWN TO THEM.

NON-BORING CONCLUSIONS

TRADITIONAL MEDIA MUST COOPERATE WITH NEW VOICES

Disinformation thrives where algorithms reward engagement over accuracy. Polarization and deception sell better than depth or quality.

MEET YOUNG PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE, IN THE FORMATS THAT WORK FOR THEM.

Young people are used to discussing things in a more conversational way, a more bottom up way.
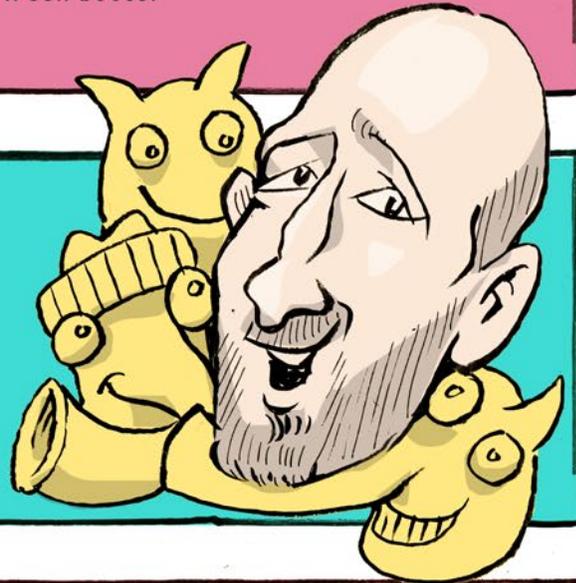
WE MUST START EARLY - GIVING CHILDREN THE TOOLS TO BE INFORMED, ACTIVE CITIZENS.

Whether we're talking about democracy, media, technology, or governance - children are the root of everything. History will judge us by how we equip them with truthful information and the skills to navigate their world.

CREATIVITY, PLAY, EMPATHY, AND EVEN CARTOON CHARACTERS CAN BE POWERFUL WEAPONS AGAINST DISINFORMATION.

Trustworthy and quality digital content can indeed be engaging. Winning over young audiences with creative contents and formats is a priority.

DEMOCRACY INNOVATION AWARD INITIATIVES

The Council of Europe's Democracy Innovation Award is given by the Secretary General each year to the World Forum for Democracy's most popular initiative, which was presented in the labs and voted upon by the Forum participants. The following initiatives were presented on 6 November, 2025:

FACTS MATTER (NIGERIA)

Facts Matter uses Pidgin English — spoken by 120 million across West Africa — to make fact-checking and civic engagement accessible beyond the educated elite. Creating short videos for TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook (often with influencers), they translate complex civic content into familiar language. When "this is why you should be worried" becomes "see why your mind shakes," it creates "linguistic intimacy." Starting with a goal of 30 pieces, they've produced over 70, with dramatically higher engagement in Pidgin. As Hannah warns: "Democracy can be lost when the language of engagement doesn't reflect people's cultural nuances."

Hannah Ajakaiye

ESCAPE FAKE 2.0 (AUSTRIA)

Escape Fake 2.0 is an augmented reality escape game that teaches media literacy through play. Using phones or tablets, players help Hannah, a "quantum reality hacker" from a dystopian future, fact-check stories in 3D environments — from museums falsifying history to tracking wrongfully accused refugees. Beyond the game, they've created teacher toolkits, courses, exhibitions, and newspaper partnerships. With 130,000 downloads across seven languages, research confirms young people learn from these playful tools. The initiative embraces "computational empowerment" — helping youth not just understand technology, but actively shape it.
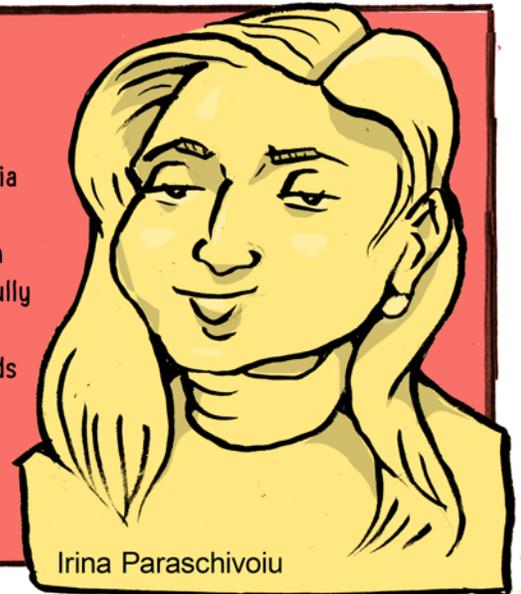
Irina Paraschivoiu

BUILDING BRIDGES, DEFENDING ARTISTIC FREEDOM (NORWAY)

Freemuse's Building Bridges project creates global networks to defend artistic freedom as a prerequisite for democracy. Partners from Indonesia to Zimbabwe share knowledge and document violations through a shared platform. The project addresses threats like blasphemy laws, terrorism legislation misuse, and especially self-censorship — the hardest to measure. As filmmaker Sverre notes: "Self-censorship is nothing artists are proud of. We keep it to ourselves." By bringing artists directly into the work, Building Bridges strengthens the fight against both visible and hidden threats to creative freedom.

Sverre Pedersen