

AN INNOVATIVE EPISTEMOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY TO COMBAT DISINFORMATION TARGETING COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES IN THE EURO- MED REGION

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Inspiring **Knowledge** Driving **Action** Uniting **Cultures**

Executive Summary

This research paper investigates the relationship between misinformation and the rise of hate speech, with a specific focus on Mediterranean countries. Innovative policies, significant practices, and enabling factors, can strengthen governmental capacities to mitigate the growing threat of disinformation, a major global threat in 2024. The increasing complex multiplicity of information sources, the weakened regulatory capacity of institutions, and the dilemma between combating disinformation and preserving freedom of expression, explains the need for a new framework in combating disinformation, combining **Enrico Molinaro's "Westphalian-Glocalist" identity analysis**¹ with **Gregory Bateson's epistemological theory**.

¹ See Molinaro, E. (2025). Trump, Netanyahu, Vico, Ferrari Bravo and the Westphalian-Glocalist cycles. *Geopolitical Agenda. Articles and studies on new international scenarios (Agenda Geopolitica Articoli e studi sui nuovi scenari internazionali)*, Ducci Foundation, volume 42.

<https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:EU:307bcca2-9284-43e2-98cf-e4e25db1fc77>. See also this author's "Collective identity models' Mind Map": Molinaro, E. (2018). The Euro-Mediterranean dialogue starts from collective identities: The innovative role of the Anna Lindh Foundation's Italian network. In H. Kato, & L. Lomiento (Eds.), *The Mediterranean as a plaza. Japanese and Italian insights on the Great Sea*. Cisalpino. Istituto Editoriale Universitario. www.monduzzieditoriale.it/collane/cisalpino-epheso/. Enrico Molinaro is currently National Coordinator, Anna Lindh Foundation, Italian Network.

Introduction



Disinformation is one of the most prominent challenges facing societies in the digital age, directly impacting the enjoyment of fundamental human rights, whose concerning outcome is the proliferation of hate speech, particularly through social media.

Misinformation, including both unintentionally shared inaccurate content and deliberately misleading information, has become a global issue. Hate speech—defined as any communication that belittles a person or group based on race, religion, ethnicity, disability, gender, or sexual orientation —has dramatically increased, often fuelled by false narratives that exploit existing societal tensions. Disinformation targeting collective identities poses a serious threat to cultural dialogue, peace, and social cohesion in the Euro-Mediterranean region, an area encompassing a complex geography of countries rich in cultural, religious, ethnic, and historical heritage.

Throughout history, this diversity has fostered both civilizational exchange and political-ideological conflicts. In today's digital era, such diversity is increasingly fragile due to rising misinformation and disinformation risks.

Disinformation disseminated through social and digital platforms threatens not only individual perception, but also the construction of **collective identity**, which shapes how individuals engage with society and interpret meaning. Especially around such sensitive issues as migration, religious denomination, women's rights, and ethnic belonging, disinformation intensifies societal polarization, and erodes mutual trust. Molinaro's conceptualization of the **Westphalian and Glocalist collective identity models** provides a compelling framework for analysing these conflicts.

While the **Westphalian model** envisions a centralised, homogeneous, and exclusive community structure, limited by the State borders, in contrast the **Glocalist model** emphasises local and transnational communities, whose limits are within or outside State borders. These **collective identity** models alternate during historical cycles, with disinformation functioning as a catalyst for such shifts in periodical crises. **Gregory Bateson's** argues that knowledge cannot be separated from its social and epistemological context.² Reality is constructed not merely through content, but through the systems in which that content is produced and received. Disinformation disrupts these systems, trapping individuals in "double binds"³ — confronted with two contradictory yet authoritative narratives, so that the individual experiences epistemological breakdown. Drawing on Bateson's theory of epistemological ecology and Molinaro's identity framework, the spread of disinformation is understood as a disruption in shared meaning systems, threatening intercultural dialogue and **collective identity**. Grounded in cognitive resilience and shared meaning-making, this multidisciplinary approach aligns with the **Anna Lindh Foundation's** vision of promoting mutual understanding and common values across the Mediterranean.

² Bateson, G. (1972). Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology. Jason Aronson Inc. (Chandler publications for health sciences).

³ Bateson, G. Idem.

Conceptual Definitions & Theoretical Framework

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative analytical approach, relying on a review of recent policy documents, academic literature, and media reports from the Euro-Mediterranean region. Case examples were selected based on their relevance to the spread of disinformation and the observed rise in hate speech. The selection emphasizes geographic diversity and varying levels of institutional response. No primary data was collected; all sources are publicly available and cited accordingly.

Access to news, data, and information in today's digital age has become easier than ever before. This development has facilitated the widespread dissemination of science, knowledge, and news across regions, enhancing learning and intercultural communication among youth. However, this digital expansion has been accompanied by an alarming rise in false and misleading information, influencing public opinion, destabilising societies, deepening divisions, and affecting political and economic decision-making. One of the most concerning outcomes is the proliferation of hate speech, particularly through social media.

Misinformation—referring to inaccurate information shared without intent to deceive, but involving factual content manipulated to cause harm by presenting it out of context, whereas disinformation denotes false information shared deliberately to mislead - has become a global issue. **Hate speech**—defined as any communication that belittles, attacking or using discriminatory language, a person or group based on racist, religious, or ethnic collective identity, disability, gender, or sexual orientation—has increased dramatically, often fuelled by false narratives that exploit existing societal tensions. In the digital realm, this speech often spreads rapidly, with serious offline consequences.

Regional Impact Assessment

Misinformation can distort how individuals perceive others, reinforcing biases and undermining social cohesion. Attempts to regulate information flows on digital platforms often clash with the right to free expression, creating a normative dilemma. This tension is evident in the context of rising refugee populations and growing hate speech directed at marginalised communities across the region.

Case Examples

France: Disinformation has fuelled xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment during electoral periods.

Tunisia: Manipulated news stories have incited public distrust in democratic institutions.

Turkey: Refugees have frequently been targets of digitally circulated false claims, leading to real-world discrimination.

The Case of Türkiye: A Crossroad of Identity Tensions

Türkiye plays a central role in the Euro-Mediterranean region both geopolitically and historically. Its collective identity reflects a dynamic interplay between East and West, Islam and secularism, and nation-state structures and multiculturalism—making it a prime target for disinformation campaigns.

In recent years, Türkiye has faced rising levels of both domestic and foreign disinformation, particularly surrounding political polarisation, ethnic-sectarian tensions, and anti-immigrant narratives. Public institutions, notably the Presidency's Directorate of Communications and its Disinformation Combat Centre (CİMER), have launched structured responses through weekly bulletins that expose false information, providing a platform for citizen inquiries and grievances, further institutionalising public information flow.

These efforts are largely top-down and state-led, paralleling Molinaro's Westphalian model of centralised identity control. While such structures offer swift responses during crises, their limited engagement with civil society, academia, and independent media may reduce their long-term credibility and public trust.

Nonetheless, Türkiye's democratic potential, its dynamic youth population, and the presence of diverse local actors provide fertile ground for practices aligned with the Glocalist model. Women's organisations, migrant support initiatives, local media, and youth platforms contribute meaningfully to reducing the impact of fake news and developing alternative narratives. In this context, the **Anna Lindh Foundation (ALF) Türkiye Network** can serve as a vital bridge.

Policy Responses & the Digital Services Act (DSA)

At the EU level, the Digital Services Act (DSA) represents a significant regulatory step to curb illegal content and disinformation. It mandates platform transparency and accountability in content moderation. Reports suggest the DSA has increased transparency, and reduced the spread of false information, particularly during elections.

While such legislative frameworks offer a foundation for action, enforcement and alignment across member states remain critical challenges, therefore this paper considers the following policy implications and recommendations.

Promoting Media and Information Literacy:

- Launch regional training programs fostering critical thinking and source evaluation.
- Integrate media literacy into school and university curricula.

Enhancing Government Transparency:

- Improve communication strategies through verified channels.
- Establish official platforms to counter rumours and clarify misinformation.

Regulating Social Media Content:

- Cooperate with tech companies to monitor and flag misinformation.
- Impose penalties on platforms facilitating harmful disinformation.

Updating Media Legislation:

- Draft laws criminalizing malicious misinformation without undermining freedom of expression.
- Empower independent regulatory bodies to uphold media integrity.

Digital Citizenship in the Age of Disinformation

Digital citizenship encompasses responsible and ethical online behaviour, evaluation and truth-oriented engagement. Key pillars include:

- Responsible Sharing
- Critical Thinking
- Digital Security
- Ethical Behaviour
- Accountability
- Fact-Checking Tools and Techniques

Digital Tools:

- Google Reverse Image Search
- Google Advanced Search
- Snopes
- PolitiFact
- FactCheck.org
- Full Fact

Verification Techniques:

- Compare information across multiple reputable sources.
- Prioritise official and scientific sources for sensitive topics.
- Evaluate author credibility and website reliability.
- Check dates to avoid miscontextualised reposts.

While this paper provides a regional overview, it does not offer an exhaustive country-by-country analysis. Due to the rapid evolution of online platforms and regulatory landscapes, some policy responses may have changed since the time of writing. Moreover, the paper does not incorporate field interviews or survey data, which could enhance future research.

Further empirical research is needed to measure the causal link between exposure to disinformation and engagement in hate speech. Longitudinal studies examining shifts in public opinion following major disinformation campaigns would provide valuable insights. Additionally, comparative studies between Euro-Med countries with differing levels of media freedom and digital literacy could offer deeper understanding of policy effectiveness.

In this context, further scientific research on the cyclical interplay between Westphalian and Glocalist collective identity models, as well as on Bateson's concept

of “Schismogenesis”⁴—an anthropological term describing the formation of social divisions and differentiation, and the encounter between different cultures—may help to better understand the source of potential identity conflicts, raising awareness among policymakers and the public about the **need for an innovative epistemological methodology to combat disinformation targeting collective identities in the Euro-Med region.**

This paper aims to raise awareness among citizens and policymakers about the dangers of disinformation and its influence on public perception and social behaviour. It proposes insights for policy improvements and future research, emphasizing the importance of recognising and identifying misleading content. In the Euro-Mediterranean region, the interplay between misinformation and hate speech can exacerbate unrest and even incite violence.

The Anna Lindh Foundation, with its mandate to foster intercultural dialogue and understanding, considers the fight against disinformation central to its mission, and with its vast networks, youth engagement, and commitment to cultural dialogue between collective identities, is ideally positioned to lead this challenge.

A new generation of Euro-Med citizens must be equipped not only to fact-check, but to pattern-check— to see beyond the surface and reclaim agency in meaning-making. **Disinformation in the Euro-Mediterranean is not just a digital threat—it is an epistemic assault on the pluralistic fabric of regional collective identities. While State-led responses are necessary, they are not sufficient. Long-term resilience requires rebuilding shared stories, understanding, and trust.**

Conclusion & Further Recommendations

Embed Digital and Epistemic Literacy in Civil Society Education

- Equip youth and educators with narrative literacy to analyse the structure and context of disinformation, beyond just fact-checking.
- Develop a False Narrative Typology addressing such themes as religious and gender identities, migration, and historical collective memory.
- Establish a digital ALF Library and Academy to serve the wider Euro-Med region.

Democratize Disinformation Monitoring in Türkiye and the Region

- Create multi-stakeholder observatories involving government bodies, media professionals, academics, and civil society.
- Empower ALF National Networks to act as grassroots’ Civil Verification Centres.

Establish a Euro-Med Rapid Response Coalition

- Enable real-time alerts and narrative trend sharing among ALF, UNESCO, OSCE, and Mediterranean research hubs.
- Include diaspora and minority communities in the production and distribution of counter-narratives

⁴ Bateson, G. Idem.

Shift from Correcting Falsehoods to Rebuilding Meaning

- Adopt Gregory Bateson's systemic learning framework: combat disinformation not only with facts, but by reconstructing patterns of meaning.
- Launch ALF-led campaigns promoting shared narratives of Mediterranean coexistence between collective identities with mutual respect.

Governments:

- Enact and enforce laws targeting disinformation and hate speech
- Fund independent fact-checking institutions
- Enhance cybersecurity defences

Civil Society:

- Form coalitions with academic and tech partners
- Facilitate community-based reporting and awareness mechanisms

Technology Companies:

- Develop AI tools to detect disinformation
- Commit to transparent content policies and timely removal protocols

This paper underscores the urgent need for multidisciplinary research on disinformation's social, political, and epistemological dimensions. The Euro-Mediterranean region must adopt a coordinated, human rights-based approach to protect democratic discourse and cultural understanding between collective identities. In an era of deepening polarisation, the Mediterranean must once again become what it historically was: a space for exchange, not division; for coexistence, not confrontation.

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