
Case Studies: Information Matters Project in Bulgaria, Austria, and Romania

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Introduction

The Information Matters project of the Erasmus+ Programme is a significant initiative aimed at enhancing digital and media literacy among elderly people across Europe. In response to the growing infodemic, misinformation, and fake news with the increasing digitalisation and the rise of AI, the project targets vulnerable populations, particularly those over the age of 55, to equip them with the skills needed to navigate within the complexities of the digital world. Through interactive learning materials covering several digital and media literacy topics and targeted training programmes for both elderly citizens and adult educators, the project aims to close the gap of the generational digital divide and foster informed communities and digital citizens in Bulgaria, Austria, and Romania.

This report will highlight the experiences and outcomes of the training programs conducted in Bulgaria, Austria, and Romania by bringing several case studies together. These case studies do not only showcase the project's achievements but also offer insights into the personal growth of the learners, the innovative approaches taken by the trainers, the broader community impact, and ways to improve recommendations for further implementation. Through the voices of both trainers and learners, we gain a vivid picture of how the project has so far influenced the learners' digital competencies to navigate in the digital environment in a meaningful way, as well as their critical thinking skills in developing resilience against fake news and misinformation online. The stories provided below illustrate the power of media literacy education and its grave relevance in today's society.

Case Study: Bulgaria

In Bulgaria, the Information Matters training sessions took place in several regions. After 89 librarians had passed the Information Matters Online Training Programme, 15 Bulgarian trainers successfully delivered courses to more than 185 elderly citizens, most of whom were women, by conducting at least 5 meetings in the respective regions. These sessions were held in libraries and community centres in order to ensure accessibility for participants in both urban and rural areas, as well as being specifically designed to facilitate the needs of the elderly, many of whom had little or no prior experience with digital tools apart from basic smartphone usage.

One of the key highlights from Bulgaria was the personalised approach embraced by the trainers, such as Lubomira Parijkova, who documented her experiences with learners aged between 55 and 85 in Novi Iskar. Lubomira emphasised that many of her learners initially struggled with basic concepts such as social media and online security. However, through the adoption of carefully crafted activities designed according to the learners' different backgrounds, she assisted them in overcoming the fundamental anxieties that at first kept them from taking information. "After learning about online banking and double authentication, one participant shared how she was no longer afraid of using her bank's online services," Lubomira recalled. This transformation was also echoed by other trainers, who emphasised the gradual increase in the learners' confidence in using digital platforms after they were introduced to some of the basic concepts and why they actually matter.

In time, the impact extended beyond just technical skills. For example, in Gara Bov, trainer Nikolina Ivanova shared some observations on how the discussion about misinformation united participants around a local issue—potential mining activities near their town, which meaningfully triggered a sense of community and explicitly increased their interest in media education, along with emphasising the importance of media literacy in tackling dis/misinformation. Similarly, the session on fact-checking sparked a community-wide conversation about the importance of verifying news, which simultaneously led to an increased level of interest in civic engagement. As one learner put it, after these training sessions, in which they were presented to detect 10 types of disinformation, the group felt more informed about how to spot fake news in order to protect themselves and their community.

On the other hand, particular challenges that arose during the sessions, such as overcoming technical jargon and the learners' unfamiliarity with foreign terms, were also addressed by simplifying the language, resorting to the usage of figurative narration techniques of metaphors, and providing hands-on exercises directly from the daily lives of the learners. Moreover, the trainers explored that developing role-playing scenarios, facilitating group discussions, and inventing games like "Digital Detective" significantly helped the learning processes in an engaging way. The progress was also evident in the significant improvement in exit test scores, with some participants demonstrating a 27-point increase compared to their initial assessments at the beginning of their training.

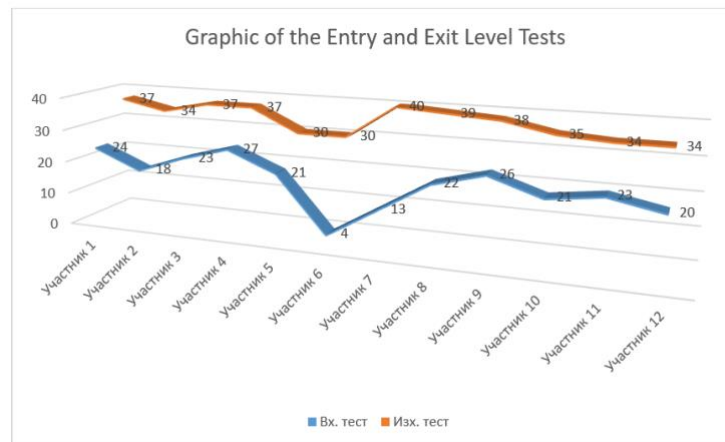


Fig. 1. Comparison of entrance and exit tests of the twelve participants

Case Study: Austria

In Austria, the training sessions were equally transformative despite being held on a smaller scale compared to Bulgaria. Trainers delivered their courses to and engaged closely with senior citizens in Vienna by focusing on the aim of increasing the learners' digital and media literacy skills to engage with the digital environment safely and confidently. One of the trainers noted that her learners were particularly intrigued by discussions around the information session about password security, cybercrime, and the ethical use of digital media.

The learners found the content both challenging and rewarding since it provided them with a space for individual reflection and common discussion on certain topics, such as digital safety, as well as informing them about essential skills and methods in this regard. A notable moment involved Hubert, a 58-year-old participant, who revealed his method of storing passwords in a Google Drive document under the file name "allpasswords." This sparked a lively debate among participants regarding the security of such practices. While some did not perceive an issue, others raised concerns about the risks involved.

The trainer used this opportunity to discuss safer password storage methods in order for the participants to reflect on how to create secure passwords and safely store them. Alternative suggestions emerged, such as using password managers, creating inconspicuous file names, or storing passwords in non-digital formats. One participant proposed renaming files to something less conspicuous, like "lemon tart recipe," while others recommended handwritten storage in unexpected places at home. Moreover, apart from demonstrating the importance of digital literacy through practical examples and interactive discussions, the training session in an open dialogue format facilitated the sharing of diverse experiences and fostered a collaborative learning environment. Therefore, the participants, including Hubert, gained a better understanding of secure digital practices. This hands-on approach, which is coupled with practical exercises, solidified the lessons learned by leading to enhanced digital confidence and competence.

Case Study: Romania

In Romania, the training sessions of the Information Matters project took on a unique character since trainers tailored the program according to the specific challenges faced by elderly citizens both in urban and rural areas. These weekly two-hour meetings attracted an initial group of participants that grew significantly over time by eventually turning into a close-knit community of learners. Each session introduced new topics, including but not limited to setting up email accounts, managing documents, and navigating online privacy settings, as well as allowing learners to practice on their own devices under the trainers' guidance.

A standout moment involved Mihai, a 74-year-old participant, who brought an old, unused laptop to one session. With the help of the trainer and his peers, Mihai learned how to configure it, and soon, he started to assist newcomers with no experience with basic tasks. Similarly, Ana, a 68-year-old participant, learned to use Facebook to reconnect with her grandchildren living abroad. Over time, Ana became more confident and even led a short “tips & tricks” session for her fellow learners by sharing her new knowledge about social media.

The learners were also hesitant to engage with online banking and e-commerce at first as they expressed concerns about fraud and confusion. However, by the end of the training, several participants expressed the willingness they had developed to explore these platforms. “At first, I was afraid to even touch my laptop,” one participant shared, “but now I can pay my bills, read the news, and even help my neighbours with their digital tasks. It’s empowering.”

These sessions empowered participants by enhancing their understanding of digital applications, along with fostering digital autonomy and inclusion and boosting confidence in navigating the digital world. These sessions did not only equipped seniors with essential digital skills but also created a sense of community and connection. As a learner, Maria noted, “This course didn’t just teach me how to use the internet; it connected me with new people [...] It’s not just about technology, it’s about us.”

Conclusion

Considering the increasingly complex digital environment, the business models of big tech and social platforms that prioritise capturing users' attention over their well-being, and the potential dangers posed by the widespread use of artificial intelligence, the growing threat to European societies and democracies has become more apparent than ever. Therefore, the need for and the importance of media literacy on a collective level for the overall well-being of all EU citizens and societies has once again come into light, especially for those vulnerable groups often targets of dis/misinformation. It is initially for these reasons that more projects, policies, and regulations on the EU level are needed.

As seen from the case studies and feedback received from several trainers and learners, the Information Matters project has successfully fulfilled its meaningful role in tackling the growing infodemic, misinformation, and fake news by conducting training sessions in national contexts and creating online learning materials for the trainers, which should be sustained and added upon with various methods to ensure broader access and impact, just as one learner from Bulgaria suggested that an online course and learning materials should also be produced directly for the learners.

The project has demonstrated the significant impact digital and media literacy training can have on the elderly population in Bulgaria, Austria, and Romania since the training sessions equipped participants with practical skills and fostered a sense of empowerment and community engagement. Through dedicated trainers' efforts and participants' enthusiasm, the project has shown grave advancements in bridging the digital divide among its participants. The stories shared by the learners and trainers illustrate education's transformative power in navigating the digital world. Moving forward, the Information Matters project should continue to expand by reaching even more senior citizens across Europe and providing them with the tools they need to thrive in an increasingly digital environment.