

Policy Paper

Rural Youth Media Literacy, Use and Representation

RURAL YOUTH EUROPE

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Introduction

Rural communities across Europe are undergoing social and technological transformations that are reshaping how young people access information, participate in society, and perceive their role within it. Digital media has become a central space for communication, learning, and civic engagement. However, for many young people from rural areas, this transition can be marked by inequalities, limited access to resources, and insufficient representation in media narratives.

While digitalisation offers new opportunities to overcome geographic isolation, it also introduces significant risks. Unequal access to infrastructure, fragmented media literacy education, and the growing influence of online platforms have created an environment in which disinformation can spread easily[1], trust in institutions can erode, and young people may struggle to navigate complex information ecosystems. At the same time, rural youth voices remain underrepresented in media outlets, often reduced to simplified or negative portrayals that fail to reflect the diversity and realities of rural life.

These portrayals may be influenced by the urban concentration of media organisations and professionals. As reporting often relies on urban-based sources and perspectives, rural experiences may receive less direct representation or context, potentially reinforcing existing biases and stereotypes. This can happen also unintentionally as a result of how media production is structured.

These challenges are interconnected. Limited digital access constrains educational opportunities; weak media literacy increases vulnerability to harmful content; and a lack of representation undermines civic engagement and trust. Addressing them therefore requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach that spans education, infrastructure, regulation, and democratic participation.

The recommendations and perspectives presented in this paper are based on the contributions of participants in the Rural Youth Europe Study Session 2026, which took place at the European Youth Centre in Budapest, Hungary, from 8 to 14 March 2026. The session gathered 25 young people from 10 European countries, who shared their lived experiences, challenges, and proposals. This policy paper was created by the Rural Youth Europe secretariat with support from the RYE Board to highlight key challenges related to media literacy, digital use, and representation in rural areas. It proposes targeted actions at local, national, and European levels aimed at strengthening digital inclusion, improving critical media skills, ensuring safer online environments, and empowering rural youth as active participants in democratic life.

1 EUropean Commission, Vision for Agriculture and Food Shaping together an attractive farming and agri-food sector for future generations, 19 February 2025.

1. Digital Wellbeing, Online Safety and Platform Accountability

Rural youth are increasingly exposed to complex digital environments without the necessary skills or protections to navigate them safely. Gaps in digital and media literacy make it difficult to identify misinformation, understand online risks, or engage critically with content. At the same time, social media platforms facilitate easy access to harmful material, including extremist content, self-harm narratives, and manipulative information, often without sufficient accountability. Reporting mechanisms are frequently ineffective or inaccessible, leaving young users vulnerable.

These risks are further intensified by cyberbullying, which has significant consequences for mental health, particularly in rural contexts where social isolation can be more pronounced. Excessive screen time and platform design features also negatively affect wellbeing, while structured prevention and support systems remain limited.

Recommendations:

- Strengthen platform accountability, including misinformation labelling and legal responsibility mechanisms **[National, European]**
- Integrate media literacy as a cross-curricular competence across formal education and non-formal youth work, ensuring that schools, youth organisations and youth workers have the capacity to deliver high-quality learning opportunities. **[National, Local]**
- Promote screen-time awareness initiatives in educational and community settings **[Local, National]**
- Introduce or strengthen independent age verification and parental control systems **[European, National]**
- Require platforms to implement clear, accessible reporting tools **[European]**
- Ensure access to mental health support in schools and rural communities **[Local, National]**

2. Digital Infrastructure and Access

Rural communities continue to face inequalities in access to digital infrastructure. Limited broadband connectivity, outdated equipment, and insufficient technological resources in schools restrict both teaching and learning opportunities. This lack of access reduces exposure to diverse and reliable information sources and limits the ability of young people to develop essential digital competencies.

The digital divide also constrains participation, innovation, and access to services, reinforcing broader territorial inequalities. Without adequate infrastructure, policies aimed at improving media literacy and civic engagement cannot be effectively implemented.

Digital connectivity should also expand access to employment opportunities. Remote and digital forms of work can reduce geographic barriers and enable young people to build careers without being forced to leave their communities. However, this requires employers to recognise rural areas as a valuable source of talent and to adapt recruitment and working practices accordingly.

Recommendations:

- Invest in rural broadband infrastructure and modern digital equipment **[National, European]**
- Establish dedicated EU funding streams for rural digital development **[European]**
- Develop rural digital innovation hubs providing shared resources and training **[European, National, Local]**
- Support remote learning systems and digital access to education **[National, Local]**
- Encourage companies to expand remote and digital employment opportunities accessible to rural youth through supportive labour and digital policies. **[European, National]**
- Support and incentivise employers to organise talent scouting, recruitment events, and partnerships with schools and youth organisations in rural communities to identify and develop local talent. **[National, Local]**

3. Media Literacy Education and Systems Coordination

Media literacy education remains unevenly integrated across education systems. While its importance is increasingly recognised, teachers and youth workers may lack the training, resources, and institutional support needed to effectively develop young people's digital and media literacy skills.

Although online courses and learning resources are available, including initiatives such as Very Verified, the Council of Europe's HEY courses and the UN media and information literacy Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), these opportunities do not necessarily reach a wide audience. When participation offers limited formal recognition, such as educational credits or qualifications that support employability, young people may have fewer incentives to engage.

These challenges can be particularly relevant in rural areas, where schools may have limited access to digital equipment and connectivity, while youth organisations often lack the infrastructure needed to provide digital training opportunities. At the same time, greater cooperation between key stakeholders e.g. education systems, youth organisations, civil society, media organisations, and digital platforms is needed to ensure coherent and sustainable media literacy efforts. Better collaboration could help align existing initiatives with the realities of rural communities and reach more young people, maximise available resources, and make learning opportunities more accessible through both formal and non-formal education[2].

Recommendations:

- Integrate media literacy across all levels of education as a core competence **[National, Local]**
- Develop accessible training programmes for both teachers and youth workers on media literacy, critical thinking, disinformation, online safety and digital skills[3]. **[European, National]**
- Improve access to digital equipment, connectivity and suitable learning spaces in rural schools and youth centres, ensuring that digital learning platforms and resources are available in multiple languages. **[European, National, Local]**
- Promote existing media literacy courses and develop incentives for participation, including certificates, recognition of learning outcomes and, where feasible, links to formal education or professional development. **[European, National]**
- Provide free, accessible learning materials and digital resources tailored to rural contexts and suitable for both formal and non-formal education. **[European, National, Local]**

2 Good Practice – Project: My View: https://EU-cap-network.ec.EUropa.EU/good-practice/my-view-young-people-producing-film-documentaries_en#tab_id=description

3 e.g. EUropean School Education Platform, Toolkit for teachers - How to spot and fight disinformation.

- Encourage technology companies to support media literacy education through training, equipment and educational resources. **[European, National]**
- Foster partnerships between schools, youth organisations, NGOs, media, and platforms to co-develop initiatives that reflect rural realities and foster media literacy skills. **[National, Local]**
- Establish regional multi-stakeholder coordination platforms to coordinate activities and share resources. **[National, Local]**
- Recognise youth work as a key contributor to media literacy by providing sustainable funding for rural youth organisations and supporting the integration of media literacy and digital citizenship into non-formal education programmes. **[European, National]**

4. Youth Participation, Representation and Civic Engagement

Rural youth often experience limited representation in media narratives and decision-making processes. Public discourse frequently portrays rural areas through narrow or negative perspectives, while the voices of young people remain underrepresented. This contributes to weaken trust in institutions and media.

Opportunities for civic engagement are also more limited in rural areas, reducing young people's confidence and motivation to participate in democratic life. At the same time, reliance on social media as a primary source of information increases exposure to polarised and misleading narratives, shaping political engagement in ways that can deepen distrust and disengagement.

The decline of local media further limits access to diverse and reliable information, allowing external or misleading narratives to dominate and reinforcing polarisation within communities.

Recommendations:

- Financially support youth-led media and civic engagement initiatives **[European, National, Local]**
- Integrate media literacy with civic education programmes **[National]**
- Provide long-term funding for youth organisations, youth clubs and community centres to organise debates, workshops and non-formal learning activities on media literacy, democratic participation and responsible digital engagement. **[Local, National]**
- Introduce quotas or structured mechanisms for rural youth participation in policymaking **[National, Local]**
- Create platforms for continuous public consultation with rural communities **[Local, National, European]**
- Support the development of local and independent rural media **[European, National]**
- Provide funding schemes for youth-led content creation (e.g. podcasts, local media) **[European, National, Local]**

- Establish youth councils or parliaments with rural representation **[Local, National]**
- Develop workshops and campaigns on online safety, including privacy protection, secure passwords, scam avoidance, and responsible content consumption. **[European, National]**
- Collaborate with media organisations and fact-checking initiatives to produce youth-friendly content explaining how misinformation spreads. **[European]**
- Introduce incentives for national media to increase the representation of rural communities and young people in their reporting, ensuring more diverse, balanced, and inclusive media narratives.

5. Trust, Information Ecosystems and Local Media

Trust in political institutions and media in rural communities is shaped by fragmented and often fragile information ecosystems. The decline of professional local media outlets has created significant gaps in rural media coverage, often filled by social media and informal networks where misinformation spreads easily and without verification. This can give rise to what some call 'news deserts'[4] – places where people have little or no access to reliable local sources of information, which makes increasingly difficult for individuals to assess the credibility of information and contributes to declining trust.

Local actors such as community leaders, educators, youth organisations, civil society organisations and local media, play an important role in shaping how information is shared and understood. Strengthening their capacity through adequate resources, training and institutional support can enhance their ability to promote media literacy, counter misinformation and foster informed dialogue. Rebuilding trust therefore requires both strengthening reliable information sources and empowering local actors as trusted intermediaries.[5]

Recommendations:

- Invest in sustainable local and independent media in rural areas **[National, European]**
- Support community-based media literacy programmes and workshops **[Local, National]**
- Promote transparent communication from public institutions **[European, National, Local]**
- Develop partnerships with digital platforms for targeted fact-checking in rural contexts **[European, National]**
- Fund community media initiatives (e.g. local radio, newsletters, podcasts) **[Local, National, European]**
- Support trusted local actors in disseminating verified information and encouraging participation **[Local, National]**

4 https://www.journalismfund.EU/what-are-news-deserts-EUrope

5 EU CAP Network, Policy Insight: Media literacy in rural areas: building confidence and clarity in a digital age

Conclusion

The challenges facing rural youth in the digital and media landscape reflect broader structural inequalities, including limited access to infrastructure, fragmented media literacy education, weak platform accountability, and insufficient representation. Together, these factors restrict young people's ability to fully participate as informed and active citizens.

Addressing these issues requires a coordinated approach across local, national, and EU levels, combining investment in infrastructure, stronger education systems, and clearer regulatory frameworks.
Strengthening media literacy, improving access, supporting quality youth work and amplifying rural youth voices is not only a matter of inclusion, but essential for building more resilient communities and a stronger democratic society.









Disclaimer: The content of this paper is based on the lived experiences and perspectives shared by participants during the RYE Study Session 2026. The challenges and recommendations presented reflect their views and should not be considered representative of all rural youth or rural communities in Europe. The issues described have not been independently validated through surveys or other research.

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