



Raising awareness and fighting disinformation in the Roma community

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Introduction :

The Roma community, which has been historically marginalised and faces widespread discrimination across Europe¹, faces multiple challenges, which are exacerbated by the widespread spread of disinformation and fake news². This detailed report delves deep into the complex web of disinformation

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<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/topics/bg/article/20200918S TO87401/diskriminatsiata-na-romite-kakvi-merki-vzema-es>

² <https://amalipe.bg/falshivi-novini/>

³ <https://osis.bg/?p=4105>

affecting the Roma community, meticulously exploring the key themes of false narratives, the diverse channels through which disinformation is spread, and the innovative strategies needed to combat disinformation, while advocating for the dissemination of truthful information. At the intersection of systemic inequality and deep-rooted prejudice, the Roma community struggles with enduring social, economic and political marginalisation. In this environment, the spread of disinformation serves as a powerful force that perpetuates harmful stereotypes, exacerbates existing vulnerabilities and impedes progress towards social inclusion and equality. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided fertile ground for disinformation to flourish in the Roma community, with false narratives ranging from conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus to unsubstantiated claims about the safety and efficacy of vaccines³. Furthermore, proposed legislative initiatives such as the 2019-2030 Child Strategy⁴ and the Social Services Act have become breeding grounds for disinformation campaigns targeting the Roma community, sowing panic and distrust among Roma parents. Furthermore, disinformation related to international treaties such as the Istanbul Convention⁵ and technological advances such as 5G-internet have further complicated efforts to combat disinformation and promote accurate information in the Roma community. Particular attention must be focused on the potential development of fake news related to global conflicts such as Ukraine and Palestine, which can exacerbate existing tensions and reinforce harmful narratives within the Roma community. In addition, continuous monitoring and analysis are essential to identify emerging themes of disinformation and actively address them. In the face of these challenges, proactive strategies are essential to combat the spread

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<https://www.strategy.bg/publicconsultations/View.aspx?id=4012>

⁵ [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/BG/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22023A0602\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/BG/TXT/?uri=CELEX:22023A0602(01))

of false narratives and promote accurate information in the Roma community. Education and awareness-raising campaigns, community engagement initiatives and digital literacy programmes play a crucial role in empowering Roma to critically evaluate information and identify credible sources. By fostering partnerships and collaborations and leveraging trusted voices in the community, we can work to build a more resilient and informed Roma community capable of navigating the digital landscape.

1. What is disinformation and how to recognize it?

This report will give you specific information about disinformation among the Roma community, but before providing this information it is necessary to look at "disinformation" as a term, what it is and how it is identified, and what the difference is between disinformation and false information.



Figure 1

Definition of disinformation

Disinformation is intentionally created and disseminated false or misleading information with the intent to harm, manipulate public opinion or achieve specific objectives.⁶ It is aimed at disorienting the audience and may include partially true facts, exaggerations, outright lies or deliberate distortions of reality. It is important to note that misinformation is

not an accidental error or miscommunication, but a deliberate and systematic process.

What is the difference between disinformation and spreading fake news?

While disinformation is deliberate and with a specific purpose, the spread of false news can be both intentional and unintentional. The difference lies in the intent:

Disinformation: This is a deliberate act. The intent is to deceive, manipulate or harm by presenting false information as truth. Examples may include political propaganda campaigns, economic fraud or campaigns aimed at stirring up social conflict.

Fake news: This may be the result of incompetence, lack of fact-checking or unintentional dissemination of false information. Although they can have similar effects to disinformation, the intention behind them is not always malicious. Examples are misquoting, poor journalistic practice or spreading rumours.

How we can identify "disinformation"

Identifying disinformation requires critical thinking and careful analysis of the sources and content of the information. Here are some steps that can help:

Check sources: always check who the source of the information is. Credible sources usually have established reputations and follow journalistic standards. If the source is unknown or has a questionable reputation, be careful.

Content analysis: Pay attention to the tone and language of the information. Disinformation often uses emotionally charged language to elicit strong reactions. Also, fact-check and compare with other reliable sources.

Fact-checking: Use fact-checking services to confirm the credibility of information. Sites such as FactCheck.org, Snopes and the like provide analysis

⁶ https://commission.europa.eu/topics/strategic-communication-and-tackling-disinformation_bg

and verification of questionable claims. Be aware of techniques such as cherry-picking, misleading graphs and statistics, false quotes, and other forms of manipulation.

Education and awareness: Maintaining a good level of media literacy and education about misinformation is key. Knowledge of how disinformation works and what its targets are can significantly reduce its impact. Understanding and combating disinformation requires constant vigilance and a commitment to the truth. A careful and critical attitude to the information received is the best remedy against manipulation and lies.

2. Types of disinformation among the Roma community:

People who spread disinformation usually don't do it with bad intentions. They simply believe what they read without applying critical thinking - a problem that affects Bulgarians as well. Lack of critical thinking makes people more vulnerable to fake news and manipulation. Also, the rapid spread of false information among Roma is linked to the particularities of their closed community. Closed communities are more susceptible to disinformation. Inside, information spreads very quickly, while access to information from outside is limited. The closed community provides favourable conditions for the spread of rumours and false information. Many Roma get their information from closed groups on Facebook, where manipulation is easier. These closed online environments contribute to the rapid spread of disinformation, as users often do not check the sources of information. In such groups, fake news spreads quickly and covers a large part of the community. In recent years, there has been a tendency for the same sources of disinformation to turn Roma communities against different initiatives and events. First it was the Istanbul Convention, then the Child Strategy, and now their opinion is being formed about the war in Ukraine. This sequence of misinformation

shows how easily entire communities can be manipulated through closed online platforms.

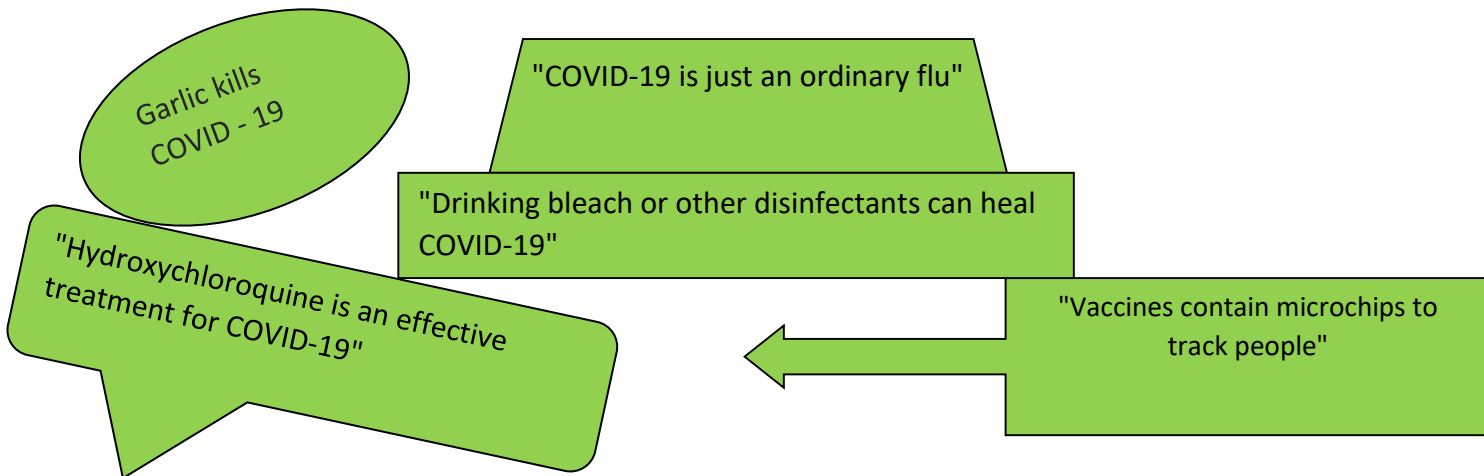


Figure 2

Disinformation related to healthcare

Health-related disinformation permeates various aspects of the experience of the Roma community in Bulgaria, influencing perceptions and behaviours beyond the scope of COVID-19.

COVID-19 myths: Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Roma community in Bulgaria has been disproportionately affected by the flow of disinformation related to the origin of the virus, its transmission, symptoms and prevention measures. The disinformation disseminated through various channels such as social media platforms, messaging apps and interpersonal communication has contributed to widespread confusion and fear in the community. False claims suggesting that the virus is a deliberate hoax or conspiracy orchestrated by state bodies or other shadowy entities undermine public trust in health authorities and scientific expertise, leading to scepticism about public health measures such as wearing a mask, social distancing and vaccination.



"We've all seen these false theses or other false claims online or on social media. There has been a growing number of 'fake news' stories about the coronavirus epidemic circulating mostly online."

Ursula von der Leyen
European Commission President



Reluctance to vaccinate: Rumours and misinformation about the safety and efficacy of vaccines have led to considerable hesitation about vaccines in the Roma community. Disinformation about COVID-19 vaccines, including unsubstantiated claims that they contain microchips, alter DNA, or cause infertility, has fueled skepticism and reluctance to vaccinate. These false claims pose a serious threat to public health efforts and exacerbate disparities in vaccine uptake, leaving communities vulnerable to the spread of preventable diseases.



Figure 3
Myths about vaccinating children: Disinformation and misconceptions about childhood vaccinations are

widespread in the Roma community, leading to hesitancy about vaccination and low rates of immunization. Misconceptions about the safety and necessity of vaccines, fuelled by rumours and cultural taboos, can lead to parents refusing to vaccinate their children, putting them at risk of vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles, mumps and rubella. This disinformation perpetuates the myth that vaccines cause harm or are unnecessary, despite overwhelming scientific evidence supporting their effectiveness and safety. The Roma ethnic group and those with primary or lower education have the highest number of parents, who say they do not have enough information on the topic of mandatory vaccines for children aged 0-4.⁷

Myths about alternative medicine: The Roma community in Bulgaria, like many other marginalised groups, can be susceptible to disinformation that promotes alternative medicine and traditional treatments as superior to conventional ones. False claims about the efficacy of herbal supplements, traditional healing practices, or unproven therapies for various health conditions can lead people to delay or abandon evidence-based medical care, resulting in worsening health conditions and increased reliance on unregulated or unsafe treatments. Older people among the Roma community are most susceptible to this type of disinformation. Their experience and trust in traditional treatment methods often makes them more likely to accept unverified information as truth.

For example, during fieldwork in one of the municipalities, Amalipe was contacted by a social services officer who asked to visit a Roma family together. During the visit, it was found that the mother and her five-month-old baby had just been discharged from hospital. The reason for the hospitalization was that the child's grandmother gave him fresh milk, which caused an allergic reaction. The baby was in critical condition and there was a real danger to his life. Such cases show how harmful alternative or

substitute products can be and how they can lead to serious health problems or even the worst.

It is therefore extremely important to raise awareness of the risks associated with alternative medicine and to promote the use of evidence-based medical care. Information campaigns and educational initiatives targeting adults in the Roma community can help reduce the impact of disinformation and improve the health status of the community.

Mental health stigma: Disinformation and stigma associated with mental health issues persist in the Roma community, hindering access to appropriate care and support services. Negative stereotypes and misconceptions about mental illness, such as the belief that it is a sign of weakness or moral failure, can prevent people from seeking help or disclosing their experiences. This reluctance to openly address mental health issues and seek professional help perpetuates cycles of suffering and isolation in the community. Overcoming health-related disinformation in the Roma community requires a multifaceted approach that emphasizes culturally sensitive communication, community engagement, and access to accurate information and health services.

Social and welfare disinformation

The dissemination of social and disinformation information in the Roma community in Bulgaria exacerbates existing vulnerabilities and reinforces harmful stereotypes, leading to widespread fear, mistrust and marginalisation. One of the persistent and harmful rumours spread in the Roma community is the belief that social services systematically target Roma families and unfairly remove children from their homes without good reason. This myth, fuelled by mistrust and historical experiences of discrimination, has instilled widespread fear and suspicion of social workers and child protection authorities. As a result, many Roma families are hesitant to contact social services or seek the necessary help for fear of having their children taken

⁷ <https://www.unicef.org/bulgaria/media/17646/file>

away. This reluctance to access support services not only exacerbates social and economic challenges in the community, but also perpetuates the cycle of neglect and disadvantage.

Example: in 2019, there were reports of two schools in the city of Sliven and one in the nearby village of Topolchane, attended mostly by Roma children, which were suddenly emptied as parents rushed to pick up their children amid rumours of impending child removal by social workers. Similar incidents have occurred in other cities in Bulgaria, highlighting the widespread impact of this harmful rumour on Roma communities.⁸

Disinformation about the war in Ukraine: The conflict in Ukraine has provided fertile ground for the spread of false narratives among the Roma community, which has further exacerbated existing prejudice and discrimination. The disinformation disseminated by certain actors portrays Ukraine as the aggressor and Russia as the protector of the Roma community, thus reinforcing stereotypes and strengthening anti-Ukrainian sentiment. Furthermore, the false narratives portray the Ukrainian people in a negative light, presenting them as inherently hostile or prejudiced against Roma.

Example: disinformation campaigns spread through social media and propaganda channels promote the false narrative that Ukraine is a repressive regime targeting minority communities, including the Roma population. These narratives not only distort the complexity of the conflict, but also denigrate the Ukrainian people by fuelling mistrust and hostility between communities. In addition, false rumours are being spread that Roma in Ukraine are being systematically persecuted by the Ukrainian authorities, leading to increased fear and anxiety in the Roma community in Bulgaria.

3. Channels of spreading disinformation among the Roma community

Social media platforms

Facebook: as one of the most widely used social media platforms globally, Facebook serves as a major channel for spreading fake news in the Roma community in Bulgaria. The platform's features, such as news feeds and groups, facilitate the rapid spread of fake articles, misleading posts and sensational headlines. Algorithms that prioritize engagement can increase the spread of misinformation by amplifying content that resonates with users' pre-existing beliefs and biases.

Instagram: Increasingly popular among younger members of the Roma community, Instagram's visually oriented format provides a platform for sharing misleading images, memes and infographics. The platform's emphasis on visual content makes it conducive to the spread of false narratives, often accompanied by deceptive captions or narratives.

TikTok: While less common among older generations, TikTok is gaining popularity among younger Roma as a venue for short video content. Despite its entertainment nature, TikTok is susceptible to the spread of fake news, with users exposed to misleading or deceptive content masquerading as entertainment.

YouTube: As a leading video sharing platform, YouTube plays an important role in the spread of fake news and conspiracy theories in the Roma community. Pseudoscience videos, conspiracy documentaries and sensational content can garner millions of views, reinforce fake narratives and undermine the credibility of authoritative sources of information.

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<http://amalipe.com/index.php?nav=news&id=3598&lang=1&f>

<https://www.facebook.com/roma.community.bulgaria/>
<https://www.instagram.com/roma.community.bulgaria/>
<https://www.tiktok.com/@roma.community.bulgaria>
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6HX-32SncfscV0>

Applications for sending messages

WhatsApp: Encrypted messaging apps like WhatsApp have become popular channels for spreading rumours and false information among the Roma community. The platform's private group chats and broadcast lists facilitate the rapid spread of misleading content, which often originates from trusted contacts or community leaders.

Spreading disinformation by word of mouth

In addition to digital platforms, "word of mouth" plays a key role in spreading disinformation among the Roma community in Bulgaria. Face-to-face communication at community gatherings, religious meetings and in family settings serves as a powerful channel for spreading false information shaping collective perceptions and behaviours.

Community meetings

Community gatherings, ranging from social events to cultural celebrations, serve as rich breeding grounds for rumors and disinformation. In close-knit Roma communities, where interpersonal relationships are of primary importance, word of mouth can significantly influence people's beliefs and actions.

Religious meetings

Religious gatherings, including church services and spiritual ceremonies, are another way of spreading false information in the Roma community. Religious leaders and community elders, who are revered figures in the community, may inadvertently spread unverified claims that resonate widely among believers.

Example 1: Disinformation through preaching

During a sermon at a Roma church in Varna, a respected religious leader expressed skepticism about the safety and efficacy of modern medicine, repeating rumors circulating in the community about the

dangers of vaccines. Although scientific evidence is lacking, his words are accepted wholeheartedly by the faithful, demonstrating the influence of authority figures on the formation of beliefs.

Spreading disinformation.

The spread of disinformation in the Roma community can vary in speed, influenced by factors such as the credibility of the sources, the emotional resonance of the stories, and the level of community engagement. From month to month, the spread of disinformation can fluctuate, with some rumours quickly gaining popularity before disappearing, while others persist and evolve over time.

Traditional media channels

Although digital platforms dominate the spread of disinformation among the Roma community in Bulgaria, traditional media, including local newspapers and radio stations, also play a role in spreading false claims.

Local newspapers and radio: Local newspapers and radio stations, especially those with limited resources and oversight, can inadvertently contribute to the spread of disinformation. Despite efforts to uphold journalistic standards, budget constraints and editorial pressures can lead to the publication or broadcast of unverified stories.

Example 1: Sensational reporting "90% of crimes are committed by Roma," a deputy portraying himself as a nationalist tells a TV studio. "Yes, but the other 10% is committed by Bulgarians," the presenter retorts in an attempt to counter ethnicise the conversation about unpunished crime. Where is the problem? There simply is no such statistic. The audience, however, has no way of knowing this and accepts TV as a source of verified information.⁹

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<https://www.dw.com/bg/%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BC%D1%8A%D1%82-%D0%BE%D1%82->

<https://www.dw.com/bg/%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B0/a-18373028>

Example 2: Radio broadcasts During a talk show on a local radio station, the host deploys conspiracy theories about government surveillance and control, thereby reinforcing unfounded fears among listeners. Although credible evidence is lacking, the unchecked dissemination of such narratives through traditional media channels can contribute to a reduction in trust in authoritative sources of information.

COVID-19 Myths: Various myths about COVID-19 have circulated in the Roma community, ranging from beliefs that the virus is a government invention for population control to unsubstantiated claims that vaccines are harmful or contain tracking devices. These myths, reinforced by social media and exacerbated by distrust of mainstream institutions, have contributed to lower vaccination rates among the Roma population. Efforts to counter misinformation through public health campaigns and community engagement have met resistance, highlighting the challenges of overcoming deeply held beliefs and suspicions.

Combating the spread of disinformation

Combating widespread disinformation among the Roma community in Bulgaria requires a multifaceted approach that includes education, media literacy, community engagement and stakeholder collaboration. Several strategies to combat the spread of misinformation are presented here, along with examples of successful cases:

Media literacy programs: Implement media literacy programs tailored to the needs of the Roma community that equip people with the skills to critically evaluate information, distinguish credible sources from disinformation, and identify common tactics used to manipulate narratives. For example, in partnership with local NGOs and educational institutions, the Ministry of Education and Science launched a media literacy campaign targeting Roma youth in rural areas. The programme included workshops, interactive modules and community

events aimed at building digital literacy skills and promoting critical thinking.

Community Empowerment: Empowering community leaders, educators, and grassroots organizations in the Roma community to serve as advocates for accurate information and sources of support. Promote open dialogue and collaboration to address community issues and debunk false narratives. In Veliko Tarnovo region, Amalipe Center with the assistance of educational mediators, organized 27 meetings in three locations with representatives of different ethnic groups to discuss topics related to misinformation, health and social welfare. By interacting directly with community members and providing accurate information, the initiative helped build trust and foster a sense of empowerment among Roma residents.

Digital literacy training: Offering digital literacy training programs that teach people how to safely navigate online platforms, identify fake information and verify sources. Provide resources and support to help community members develop digital literacy skills and become proficient consumers of online content. In Plovdiv, a youth-led initiative has launched a series of digital literacy workshops aimed at Roma secondary school students. The workshops covered topics such as online safety, fact-checking techniques and identifying misleading content. As a result, participants reported feeling more confident in their ability to identify truthful information and counter the influence of misinformation.

Fact-checking initiatives: Support fact-checking initiatives and independent media that prioritise accuracy and accountability. Encourage journalists and media professionals to adhere to ethical standards and fact-checking protocols when reporting on Roma issues.

Partnerships with social media platforms: Refine algorithms to prioritise credible sources and limit the reach of false information. Promote digital culture practices among users to reduce the spread of misinformation.

Civic education and participation: Promote civic education and participation in the Roma community by empowering people to critically engage with political processes, advocate for their rights and hold elected officials and institutions accountable. Encourage active participation in democratic processes as a means to counter disinformation and promote transparency and accountability.

To effectively combat disinformation in the Roma community, a series of podcasts can serve as an engaging and informative platform. This series will consist of five episodes, each focusing on different aspects of fake news and featuring influential figures from the Roma community who can provide credible information and insights.

Guest suggestions for a series of podcast episodes.

Podcast series: “The Truth in the Roma Community”

Episode 1: Understanding Fake News

Topic: introduction to the concept of fake news, its impact on the Roma community and the importance of media literacy.

Guest: A Roma journalist or media expert who can explain how fake news is spread and offer tips on identifying credible sources. It could be Ognyan Isaev, Hristo Nikolov or Biser Petkov.

Content highlights: Definition and examples of fake news. Tools and strategies for verifying information.

Episode 2: Disinformation about health and its consequences

Topic: Dealing with health-related disinformation.

Guest: A health professional from Roma background who is actively fighting health disinformation. It could be Ivaylo Tarnev or a health mediator!

Content highlights are following: Common health myths and their origins. Consequences of health disinformation in real life. The importance of

vaccination and how to find reliable health information.

Episode 3: Child protection and social services

Topic: debunking myths about social service practices.

Guest: Social Worker or Advocate who works with families and children.

Content Highlights: Explanation of the legal framework for child welfare services. Real stories of how disinformation has impacted Roma families. How to seek help and verify information from social services?

Episode 4: Political disinformation and its impact

Topic: Exploring political disinformation, including rumours of election interference and Roma community involvement in political events.

Guest: Leader of the Roma community or political activist - Stefan Stefanov

Highlights: Analysis of common political myths and their sources. The role of political disinformation in the marginalization of the Roma community. Promoting civic participation and political literacy.

Episode 5: Cultural stereotypes and misinformation

Theme: Tackling cultural and ethnic stereotypes perpetuated by disinformation.

Guest: Roma cultural expert or historian - could be Natalia Tsekova or Valeri Lekov or both.

Content highlights: Historical context of stereotypes against the Roma community. How disinformation reinforces these stereotypes. Efforts to promote cultural understanding and accurate representation.

4. Conclusion

Combating disinformation in the Roma community requires a comprehensive and multifaceted approach. It includes education, community engagement, digital

literacy and strengthening the credibility of voices. By implementing these strategies, we can build resilience against misinformation, promote social justice, and help build a more informed and empowered Roma community.

Education and Awareness:

Education is a cornerstone in the fight against disinformation. It is crucial to develop tailored education programmes that teach media literacy skills to the Roma community. These programmes should focus on identifying reliable sources, understanding the nature of fake news and critically analysing information. Schools, community centres and local NGOs can play a key role in implementing these educational initiatives. For example, workshops and seminars that include interactive sessions can help community members better understand how disinformation works and how to avoid becoming its victims. Community engagement: Engaging the community in open dialogue about disinformation is essential. Community leaders, including religious figures, local politicians, and respected elders, can be helpful in these efforts. By participating in and organizing community forums, these leaders can directly address misinformation, dispel myths, and provide accurate information. For example, holding regular town hall meetings where experts discuss current issues and debunk false claims can significantly reduce the spread of disinformation. Furthermore, involving the Roma community in the creation and dissemination of content ensures that information is culturally relevant and trustworthy. Digital literacy: Improving digital literacy is crucial in an era where disinformation is spread primarily online. This includes teaching community members how to navigate social media responsibly, recognize bots and trolls, and understand the algorithms that can distort the information they receive. Digital literacy programs should also cover basic cybersecurity measures to protect personal information from misuse. Hands-on sessions on using fact-checking websites and browser extensions that flag suspicious

content can empower people to verify information before sharing it. In addition, partnerships with technology companies to provide accessible digital literacy resources can strengthen these efforts.

Increase trust in voices:

Identifying and amplifying trusted voices in the Roma community can significantly counter the impact of disinformation. These can be individuals who are already respected for their integrity and knowledge, such as teachers, doctors or community activists. Supporting these individuals with platforms to share accurate information and counter false narratives can have a powerful impact. For example, regular appearances on local radio stations, contributions to community newsletters, and active participation on social media can help establish these trusted voices as sources of reliable information. In addition, creating a network of these influencers to share best practices and coordinate their efforts can strengthen their reach and effectiveness.

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