Media Education in the Activity of the National Audiovisual Council (2021–2025): From Strategic Objective to Local Educational Intervention

Elena Enache[1], Sorin Enache[2], Cristian Morozan[3]

Abstract: In the context of the accelerated transformations of the digital information ecosystem and the growing impact of disinformation, media education represents an important component of European and national public policies. In recent years, media education has become one of the strategic directions assumed by the National Audiovisual Council (CNA), against the backdrop of intensifying phenomena such as disinformation, information manipulation, and public exposure to digital content with significant social impact. The analysis of CNA's activity reports for the 2021–2025 period highlights an evolution from formulating general objectives regarding media literacy to implementing concrete media education programs in local communities. This paper tracks this evolution based on CNA's annual activity reports and synthesizes the quantifiable results reported by the institution, detailing the transition from formulating strategic objectives to concrete educational activities through the active voluntary involvement of three territorial inspectors. We observe a consolidation of the Council's educational dimension, which acts as a complement to its traditional functions of guaranteeing and protecting the public interest, regulation, authorization and licensing, control, and monitoring.

Keywords: media education; media literacy; disinformation; critical thinking; public policies.

[1] Professor, Ph.D., Constantin Brancoveanu University of Pitesti, Romania, Address: 16-18 Rubinelor St., Brăila 810010, Romania, Corresponding author: e_enache2005@yahoo.com.
[2] Lecturer, Ph.D., Danubius University of Galati, Romania, Address: 3 Galati Blvd., Galati 800654, Romania, E-mail: enache_sorin_2005@yahoo.com.
[3] Associate Professor, Ph.D., Constantin Brancoveanu University of Pitesti, Romania, Address: 16-18 Rubinelor St., Braila 810010, Romania, E-mail: cgmro@yahoo.com.

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1. Introduction

The transformations of the contemporary informational environment have driven audiovisual regulatory authorities to expand their role beyond the traditional functions of monitoring and sanctioning.

Within the European context, media education is considered an essential tool for developing critical thinking and strengthening societal resilience in the face of disinformation. Consequently, in February 2024, the Digital Services Act (DSA) was introduced as a regulatory instrument.

In Romania, CNA has competencies in implementing the DSA and has integrated it into the new Regulatory Code for Audiovisual Content (CNA Decision no. 573/2025). Furthermore, it has gradually integrated media education into its institutional strategies, under the premise that effective public protection requires not only regulatory interventions but also developing citizens' skills to critically analyze media information and content.

Digitalization in communication has profoundly altered how citizens access, consume, and distribute information. The growth of social platforms, the multiplication of information sources, and the speed of content circulation have generated unprecedented opportunities for public participation, alongside challenges associated with disinformation, manipulation, and social polarization.

In this context, media education has become an essential tool for developing the skills necessary to critically evaluate information and participate responsibly in democratic life. International bodies such as UNESCO and the European Commission constantly promote the development of media and information literacy skills as a fundamental element of democratic resilience.

CNA's concerns regarding media education became more visible after 2020, amid the pandemic, the intensification of digital consumption, and the emergence of disinformation campaigns with significant social and political impact. Within this framework, CNA began to integrate media education into its institutional activity, moving beyond an exclusively regulatory paradigm. The institution grounds this activity on provisions within the Audiovisual Law and the European Audiovisual Media Services Directive.

We find media education highlighted as a priority in the National Defense Strategy, approved in 2025. The general public must be protected, but also educated to self-protect against disinformation, manipulation, and harmful content.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze how media education between 2021 and 2025 is reflected in CNA's activity and to identify the main trends in the development of this field.

2. Media Literacy – Digital Education

This concept is defined by UNESCO as representing the set of competencies that allow citizens to access, analyze, evaluate, and critically create media messages.

Media and information literacy presuppose:

- Access to information;
- Understanding media production processes;
- Evaluating the credibility of sources;
- Ethical and responsible use of information;
- Active participation in the public space.

The European Commission also considers that media education contributes to:

- Combating disinformation;
- Strengthening democratic resilience;
- Developing digital skills;
- Protecting vulnerable groups, particularly children and youth.

Specialized literature highlights that possessing information does not automatically translate into better-informed citizens. On the contrary, information overload can amplify vulnerability to manipulation in the absence of adequate critical evaluation skills.

Audiovisual regulatory authorities, such as CNA, are encouraged to combine control and sanctioning functions with public education and awareness activities.

Thus, we are beginning to emphasize the development of critical thinking. We are far behind other states. The public's reaction to recent events in our country, and to the "circulating information" in both traditional audiovisual media and new media (the internet), demonstrates that there is an urgent need to engage critical thinking individually or in groups (for example, in the classroom with students).

Studies emphasize that a low level of media literacy and critical thinking increases societal vulnerability to:

- Disinformation;
- Information manipulation;
- Extremist discourse and radicalization;
- Influence campaigns carried out online.

This brings to mind our vulnerability to information regarding war (e.g., claims that Ukraine sent a drone to Galati to drag Romania into the war; that our children's money is going to Ukraine, etc.), elections and political figures (the "president-elect" who will provide fuel at one leu per liter, even though the producer cost exceeds 3 lei; homes for 35,000 euros, promises of salary and pension increases without specifying that they are financed by loans that consistently increase national debt, etc.), the pandemic and vaccination, legionaries, extremism, anti-Semitism, and so forth.

If the public does not think critically, does not seek out diverse sources, and does not question information, they will not escape their echo chambers. They will fail to recognize the information warfare they are in and will become helpless prisoners, leading to significant consequences (affecting voting behavior, physical and even mental health, a predilection for verbal violence and aggression, unchecked language, and a precarious state of the nation).

At CNA's proposal, **the National Defense Strategy 2025–2030** treats disinformation and information manipulation **as national security vulnerabilities and posits that the response must not be exclusively technological or repressive, but also educational, through developing citizens' skills**. Media education appears explicitly, not just as a general concept, but as a component of national resilience. The most important references are:

- *In the chapter regarding societal vulnerabilities*, the Strategy states: "The low level of critical thinking, media literacy, and security culture, alongside persistent gaps in the legislative framework, constitute vulnerabilities that lead to low societal resilience in relation to extremism, radicalization, and information manipulation." This is the first time that media literacy (media education) and critical thinking are expressly nominated in a National Defense Strategy.

- *In the directions of action*, the Strategy provides for developing the skills necessary for citizens to cope with information manipulation and disinformation,

including: developing media and digital skills; strengthening critical thinking; increasing societal resilience in the face of information warfare and manipulation.

3. Methodology and Results

This paper is based on the analysis of CNA's activity reports for the 2021–2025 period. Information was extracted and systematized regarding: institutional objectives for media education; projects and activities carried out; educational partnerships; and reported quantitative indicators (number of workshops, participants, schools involved, and materials distributed).

There are limitations because activities are not uniform, meaning the data reporting methodology is not standardized.

CNA Reports:

- Do not utilize standardized indicators for all activities;
- Do not offer impact evaluations on participants;
- Do not allow for complete annual comparisons;
- For this reason, the figures presented must be interpreted as documented minimum values and not as an exhaustive image of all activities carried out.

The 2021–2022 Period

This period marks the definition of the strategic framework, where media education appears mainly as an institutional objective associated with combating disinformation and increasing digital literacy. At this stage, extensive educational programs or statistical indicators regarding public participation are not reported.

Year 2023: Transition to Implementation

This year is marked by the emergence of the first systematic media education activities reported by CNA in three counties (Vaslui, Brăila, and Gorj). These activities were voluntary, stemming from the initiatives of audiovisual inspectors in the territory, and supported by CNA leadership. The involvement of the three inspectors was not accidental; it was linked to their participation in and graduation from a course organized by Mediawise Society, a Romanian non-governmental organization functioning as a resource and training center dedicated to media and digital education.

Quantifiable data includes:

- Vaslui County: During the summer vacation: 3 workshops, 56 participating students, 3 teachers, and 2 librarians; plus, two workshops within the "Școala altfel" (School Otherwise) program.

- Brăila County: During the summer vacation: 2 workshops, 35 students, 1 teacher, and 1 librarian; 1st semester: 1 additional workshop regarding user relationships with online content, in collaboration with Mediawise.

- Gorj County: During the summer vacation: 4 workshops, 113 students, and 3 teachers; subsequently, activities in 8 school units; distribution of 300 copies of the "Media Education Guide"; 63 participants (students, teachers, and school counselors) within the "Școala altfel" program.

Year 2024: Expansion of Programs and Consolidation of Educational Interventions

- Gorj County: In Târgu Jiu, thematic areas expanded. The "Education for Media – Information and Awareness" program, carried out in collaboration with the county library, involved approximately 280 students; activities took place over 38 distinct days between January and June 2024. Within the "News or Disinformation" project, organized on the occasion of the UNESCO Global Media and Information Literacy Week, a minimum of 4 thematic workshops dedicated to verifying information and identifying manipulative content were reported.

- Brăila and Galați Counties: Activities extended to university students and adults (seniors). Events were held on highly engaging topics, and Brăila appeared in the report as one of the most active centers of the program, showing the greatest diversity of activities (symposiums, competitions, workshops, etc.).

Addressed topics included: World Radio Day; stereotypes, discrimination, and hate speech; internet safety; influencers and their impact on youth; the "Children Have Opinions!" competition; responsible use of technology and the internet; digital citizenship (within the "Școala altfel" program); Artificial Intelligence (AI) – current challenges and opportunities; children and the internet; and educational visits to local media institutions (such as a local television station).

Key highlights include:

- The House of the Teaching Staff and the Brăila County School Inspectorate: An event with over 130 students on the theme "*Algorithms and Fake News: How*

Information is Manipulated in the Digital Age", featuring guest speaker Mircea Toma, CNA member.

- "Paul Dimo" High School Galați: A debate with and for students studying Media Production. Of interest were articles from CNA legislation regulating the mass-media production field, as well as their student podcast on the YouTube channel https://www.youtube.com/@laocafeacufamiliamedia7144. Discussions also touched upon the necessity of notifying online audiovisual activities and the feature film "*Under Flowers grow Rats*", created by the students under the guidance of teacher, director, and screenwriter Alexandra Moza. This film was close to its launch date, and its trailer was screened, yielding ideas for promotion.

- "Danubius" University Galați (Faculty of Communication and International Relations): The event "*Artificial Intelligence (AI) – Current Challenges and Opportunities*", conducted in a hybrid system (in-person and via Zoom) with over 100 students and teachers.

- Vaslui County distinguished itself through the teacher and librarian training component, particularly through the European project TADAM.

Year 2025: The Broadest Development Phase to Date

Media education activities moved past the model of one-off workshops, including recurrent interventions in schools, libraries, universities, and teacher training programs. CNA presents media education as a tool to increase societal resilience against disinformation and information manipulation.

The three counties appear to have become local pilot laboratories for media education:

- Vaslui County: Excelled in training teachers and librarians through a project on the impact of artificial intelligence on media production. CNA organized 7 workshops on "*The Consequences of Utilizing Artificial Intelligence in Media Production and the Role of Media Education*", held in Vaslui and Brăila counties, with 184 participants (teachers, school counselors, and librarians).

- Gorj County: In Târgu Jiu, around 450 students, 100 parents, and 12 teachers analyzed: cyberbullying; hate speech; online safety; digital footprint; propaganda and manipulation; stereotypes and discrimination; verifying information; AI and automatically generated content; and digital citizenship.

- Brăila and Galați Counties: Maintained stable relationships with the Brăila County Center for the Preservation and Promotion of Traditional Culture, grammar

schools, the County Library, and the "Constantin Brâncoveanu" University. New ideas were introduced, such as online safety, influencers, online advertising, and visits to broadcasters.

A special highlight was the conference held at the "Dunărea de Jos" University in Galați: "*MASS MEDIA in the Electoral Campaign – Witness or Actor?*", which gathered 100 students and academic staff. They had the opportunity to listen to authorized viewpoints grounded in extensive professional experience, delivered by two of the most active advocates for media education in our country: Ioana Avădani (President of the Center for Independent Journalism) and Mircea Toma (CNA member).

4. Conclusions and Proposals

The 2021–2025 period reflects the progressive institutionalization of media education within CNA's scope of activity. This evolution can be synthesized into three phases:

- Defining the concept and strategic objectives (2021–2022);
- Implementing pilot programs and reporting the first measurable indicators (2023);
- Expanding and consolidating CNA's role and its initiated educational activities (2024, 2025).

While the educational dimension of this body is growing, a key weakness remains: this work is carried out almost exclusively in only three counties through territorial inspectors and central-level events.

It is highly relevant that activities were concentrated in local communities, indicating a grassroots approach tailored to the educational needs of different groups. Available data indicates increasing engagement among directly quantified participants. However, the lack of uniform monitoring indicators remains a weakness.

We also note a multi-generational focus: spanning from students of all ages to teachers, librarians, parents, and seniors, who all become vectors for disseminating the information they acquire and promoters of critical thinking.

CAN's experience suggests that media education can become an important complementary component of audiovisual regulation, contributing to growing democratic resilience and developing a public capable of critically evaluating information in the contemporary media space.

Interest is split into two types of involvement: either distinct actions like those presented here, or integrating media education and critical thinking into school curricula across subjects (already demonstrated in Romanian language, history, chemistry, biology, etc.).

There is a necessary transition from media literacy to informational resilience because:

- Media education is not just an educational issue, but a matter of national security;
- Critical thinking is considered a key factor in societal resilience;
- We need clear tools to combat information manipulation and fake news, to protect children, and to train media consumers capable of critical thought;
- We must shift the paradigm: prioritizing prevention over sanctioning.

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