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BEYOND FACT-CHECKING
Democratic Literacy Amid Europe's Populist Radical Right

Más allá de la verificación de hechos: alfabetización democrática ante la derecha radical populista europea

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ABSTRACT

The consolidation of Europe's radical-right populism raises an educational problem that extends beyond identifying false political claims. This conceptual article critically integrates European political-communication research, recent evidence on misinformation interventions, and institutional frameworks for democratic citizenship. It distinguishes empirical findings from the author's proposed pedagogical synthesis. The analysis identifies five complementary dimensions of democratic literacy: epistemic verification, contextual interpretation, propaganda recognition, emotional reflexivity, and platform literacy. It argues for non-partisan but normatively grounded instruction that protects political disagreement while scrutinizing evidence and manipulation. A prospective validation strategy is outlined; effectiveness is not claimed without classroom testing.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Derecha radical populista
Alfabetización democrática
Alfabetización mediática
Desinformación
Educación ciudadana

RESUMEN

La consolidación de la derecha radical populista europea plantea un desafío educativo que va más allá de la mera verificación de afirmaciones falsas. Este artículo conceptual integra críticamente estudios de comunicación política, investigaciones recientes sobre intervenciones contra la desinformación y marcos institucionales de la ciudadanía democrática. Se distinguen los hallazgos empíricos de la propuesta pedagógica. El análisis articula cinco dimensiones complementarias: verificación epistémica, interpretación contextual, reconocimiento de la propaganda, reflexividad emocional y alfabetización sobre plataformas. Se defiende una enseñanza no partidista, sustentada en principios democráticos, que preserve el desacuerdo y evalúe las pruebas. Se propone una validación empírica futura sin atribuir eficacia a lo que aún no se ha demostrado.

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1. Introduction

The electoral consolidation, political normalization and communicative adaptation of populist radical-right actors are reshaping European democratic politics. The significance of this transformation is neither exhausted by the number of parliamentary seats won nor is it reducible to instances of verifiably false speech. Political judgments are increasingly made within digital environments where claims, images, personal testimony, selective statistics, affective cues and algorithmically curated attention coexist. In this setting, citizens may successfully recognize an isolated factual error yet remain poorly equipped to assess the framing of a policy controversy, the political identity invoked by a message, or the conditions that make a particular account visible. The educational question therefore concerns the quality of democratic judgment, not merely correcting discrete inaccuracies.

This distinction requires conceptual care. Populism is not synonymous with disinformation, and the populist radical right does not monopolize manipulation or emotionally charged political rhetoric. Mudde (2019) treats the contemporary far right as a differentiated field, while Engesser et al. (2017) show that populist ideology may be communicated through fragmented social-media messages. Gerbaudo (2018) identifies an elective affinity between populism and social platforms rather than a deterministic technological effect. These foundational contributions remain relevant precisely because they discourage explanations in which political ideology, communicative style and platform architecture collapse into a single phenomenon. This article concentrates on Europe's populist radical right as an analytically salient case of contemporary persuasion but argues that the resulting educational competencies should be applicable across the political spectrum.

Recent comparative scholarship strengthens the case for analyzing normalization as a process rather than an exceptional episode. De Jonge & Gaufman (2022) examine how Dutch media practices can contribute to shifting the perceived boundaries of legitimate political discourse. Pytlas (2024) identifies simultaneous strategies of differentiation and normalization across anti-establishment campaigns, thereby demonstrating that claims to outsider status can coexist with efforts to appear conventional and governable. McMahon (2022) , comparing manifestos in several European countries, describes a transnational counternarrative of integration built around sovereign states and national belonging. The cases and methods differ, and none of these findings establishes that all radical-right actors communicate in the same way. Together, however, they reveal why democratic education needs to examine rhetorical positioning, interpretative boundaries and institutional context alongside factual accuracy.

The empirical relevance of the information environment is documented beyond party-specific case studies. The Reuters Institute's *Digital News Report 2025* describes a continued shift towards news accessed through video-based and social platforms, together with widespread public concern about distinguishing accurately from misleading online information (Newman et al., 2025) . In the OECD's analysis of PISA 2022, published in 2024, only 51% of students across OECD countries reported that evaluating the quality of online information was easy, while a further 33% indicated that they could do so with some effort (OECD, 2024) . The more recent PISA 2025 findings, published in September 2026, reinforce concerns about students' preparedness to critically navigate contemporary information environments. Across OECD countries, only 46% of students reported both verifying the credibility of information sources and placing greater trust in scientific evidence than in common sense. Conversely, 37% reported checking information sources while relying primarily on common sense, 11% expressed confidence in scientific evidence without systematically verifying sources, and 5% reported neither practice (OCDE, 2026) . Furthermore, approximately 60% of students reported having engaged in classroom activities involving the evaluation of AI-generated information, compared with approximately 80% who had undertaken activities assessing the quality of online information more generally (OECD, 2026). These findings highlight persistent challenges in developing critical digital literacy and suggest that educational systems must move beyond the instrumental use of digital technologies towards pedagogical approaches that systematically strengthen source evaluation, evidence-based reasoning, epistemic awareness, and resistance to misinformation and

disinformation. These are self-reported capacities, not observed tests of democratic competence; they should not be interpreted as direct measures of susceptibility to radical-right messages. Their significance lies in identifying an educational need for explicit instruction in credibility evaluation, alongside contextual and civic understanding.

The article asks: what form of democratic literacy can respond to platform-mediated political persuasion without becoming an instrument of partisan socialization? Three objectives guide the argument. First, it synthesizes contemporary research on radical-right communication and the educational evidence concerning misinformation. Second, it specifies a five-dimensional pedagogical framework that moves beyond a truth-versus-falsehood binary. Third, it translates that framework into observable learning outcomes and a defensible program for future empirical validation. The contribution is conceptual and methodological, not an estimate of causal effects. Its normative premise is that education should strengthen citizens' autonomy in making political judgments, while upholding the democratic conditions that make informed disagreement possible.

2. Political persuasion, phantomization and democratic education

Political communication in digitally mediated environments operates at several analytically distinct levels. At the level of the claim, information may be accurate, false, unverifiable or dependent on definitions and temporal reference points. At the level of interpretation, a speaker selects what deserves attention, whose experience is represented and which causal connection seems plausible. At the rhetorical level, repetition, moral antagonism, appeals to authority and emotionally vivid examples organize how an audience understands an issue. At the infrastructural level, platform features influence dissemination, visibility and engagement. Treating only the first level as an educational problem leaves the others substantially unexamined. Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) provide an enduring distinction between misinformation, disinformation and malinformation, although the categories alone cannot account for the full range of persuasive framing. Educational approaches therefore need to combine epistemic standards with interpretative and communicative analysis.

The populist radical right provides particularly instructive material for examining how these levels interact, but the evidence is heterogeneous. Analyzing French far-right communication during the 2014 and 2019 European elections, Carral et al. (2023) identify relations among populist positioning, social-media strategy and disinformation in a historically bounded case. In Portugal, Prior (2024) examines André Ventura's communication on *X/Twitter* during the 2022 Portuguese legislative election, demonstrating the relevance of personalized and direct political messaging in contemporary populist communication. Complementing this perspective, Joaquim (2026b) , through a comparative analysis of CHEGA's political communication during the Portuguese legislative elections of 2019, 2022, and 2024, investigates the strategic use of disinformation and propaganda as instruments of radical-right populist political marketing. Drawing on an analysis of the party's official *Facebook* communication and televised political debates, the study highlights the relevance of antagonistic narratives, dichotomous framing, message repetition, and political delegitimization in the construction and dissemination of populist discourse. Together, these studies contribute to understanding how digital political communication facilitates the personalization of political leadership, reinforces ideological polarization, and integrates disinformation into broader strategies of political influence and electoral mobilization.

Albertazzi & Bonansinga (2024) analyze radical-right communication on *TikTok* and complicate accounts that reduce its affective repertoire to anger alone. These studies concern different platforms, countries and electoral periods. They substantiate the importance of rhetorical and technological specificity, not the automatic transfer of a single national interpretation to Europe as a whole.

Kakavand (2024) systematic review of far-right communication across *Facebook*, *X/Twitter*, *Instagram*, *YouTube* and *Telegram* reinforces this caution. The review argues that platform affordances are integral to interpreting communication patterns and documents uneven scholarly

attention to different affordances. Persistence, replicability, scalability, connectivity, searchability and identifiability are not interchangeable properties. Consequently, a highly visible message cannot by itself establish algorithmic preference; the volume of responses cannot be equated with persuasion; and a platform-specific finding cannot establish a uniform model of digital politics. Democratic platform literacy should train students to distinguish demonstrated distribution mechanisms from speculative descriptions of how an algorithm behaves.

A related analytical problem concerns the normalization of political categories. Political labels such as right, radical right, extreme right, populist, authoritarian and anti-establishment identify overlapping but non-identical attributes. Mudde (2019) emphasizes the importance of distinguishing challenges to liberal-democratic principles from overt rejection of democratic procedures. Comparative work on radical-right participation in government likewise indicates that moderation is conditional rather than automatic (Capaul & Ewert, 2021) . If educators treat these distinctions casually, the classroom can become a setting for classificatory shortcuts instead of reasoned debate. A rigorous assignment should require students to specify whether they are making a claim about ideology, rhetoric, organizational behavior, electoral strategy, or democratic norms and to identify the supporting evidence for that claim.

The expansion of competing narratives also complicates the familiar distinction between persuasion and propaganda. Persuasion belongs to ordinary democratic contestation: parties legitimately advocate different priorities, use emotive language and criticize governing institutions. Propaganda becomes an object of critical analysis when rhetorical devices systematically reduce contestability through decontextualization, scapegoating, manufactured unanimity, false dilemmas or the suppression of relevant counterevidence (Joaquim, 2026a) . Yet identifying a technique does not prove the speaker's private intention to deceive. One message may employ repetition without being false; another may present correct data within a misleading causal narrative. For this reason, the proposed framework avoids making presumed intentions its default diagnostic criterion and asks learners to examine message structure, evidence, and alternatives before inferring strategic purpose (Joaquim, 2026a) .

Educational literature offers resources for addressing these problems but also exposes limits in narrow interventions. Kahne & Bowyer (2017) linked democratic education to the challenge of motivated reasoning and politically congenial misinformation. Mihailidis (2018) conceptualized civic media literacy as a social, participatory practice rather than solely a personal skill for recognizing unreliable content. More recent evidence is valuable because it distinguishes educational plausibility from measured effects. In a meta-analysis of 33 independent studies involving 36,256 participants, Lu et al. (2024) found a positive average effect of media-literacy interventions on fake-news credibility assessment, while documenting variation in outcomes. McGrew and Breakstone (2023) developed and assessed cross-curricular civic online reasoning lessons, demonstrating the practicality of integrating source evaluation into subject teaching. McGrew (2024) subsequently reviewed evidence on lateral reading, a strategy in which readers investigate the credibility of an unfamiliar source through independent external information rather than relying on the source's self-description.

Positive intervention effects must not be mistaken for evidence that a single classroom activity can remedy politically motivated interpretation. Roozenbeek et al. (2022) reported improvements in recognition of manipulative misinformation techniques through psychological inoculation, but the scope of a given measure matter. Pennycook et al. (2024) , across five studies, found that inoculation designed around emotional manipulation improved recognition without, on its own, improving the distinction between true and false headlines; combining the intervention with accuracy prompts yielded more favorable results. Hoes et al. (2024) , using experiments in three different societies, found that prominent misinformation interventions reduced belief in false material but also diminished credibility judgments concerning accurate material. These results are not mutually exclusive: they reflect different outcomes, stimuli and designs. Together, they imply that an intervention should be evaluated for accuracy discrimination, unwarranted skepticism, transfer, and unintended consequences, not only for the number of misleading items rejected.

The institutional context places the educational argument within an explicit democratic framework. The Council of the European Union (2023) calls for education that strengthens democratic citizenship, media literacy, inclusion and the capacity for informed participation. The Council of Europe's *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* integrates values, attitudes, skills and knowledge, and provides observable descriptors that can inform assessment (Council of Europe, 2021) . The European Commission's teacher guidelines, originally published in 2022 and updated in 2026, connect critical thinking and practical instruction concerning online disinformation (European Commission, 2022, 2026) . UNESCO's revised media and information literacy curriculum likewise addresses digital citizenship, artificial intelligence, and the communicative settings in which learners encounter information (Grizzle et al., 2021) . These sources support integrated education, although institutional endorsement should not be conflated with experimentally demonstrated efficacy.

Digital competence frameworks further specify what is at stake. *DigComp 2.2* incorporates evaluation of digital information and knowledge of emerging technologies as part of citizens' wider competence profile (Vuorikari et al., 2022). The *European Digital Media Observatory's* guidelines stress well-defined educational objectives, contextual relevance, accessibility, transparency and evaluation (European Digital Media Observatory, 2024) . The latest OECD PISA 2025 findings, published in September 2026, reinforce the importance of critical digital literacy and pedagogically guided engagement with emerging technologies. Across OECD countries, approximately 80% of students reported having undertaken classroom activities involving the evaluation of online information, whereas only 60% had engaged in assessing the quality of AI-generated content (OCDE, 2026) . Moreover, students who frequently used AI to support learning and received opportunities to critically evaluate AI-generated information tended to demonstrate slightly higher academic performance than their peers without comparable educational experiences. Nevertheless, these findings establish associations rather than causal relationships and cannot demonstrate that specific pedagogical interventions directly enhance democratic resilience. Complementing this evidence, *UNESCO's Global Education Monitoring Report* emphasizes that technological innovation should remain subordinate to pedagogical objectives, human interaction, and learners' educational interests (UNESCO, 2023) . Taken together, these findings support the development of educational approaches that integrate digital and AI literacy with critical inquiry, evidence-based reasoning, reflective dialogue, and civic responsibility, positioning technological tools as instruments for strengthening, rather than replacing independent judgement and democratic citizenship.

Democratic citizenship education also has an inequality dimension. Research on students in different educational tracks in Flanders suggests that the relationship between citizenship experiences and political efficacy must be considered considering students' social and educational environments (Matthieu & Junius, 2024). This makes the design of learning opportunities consequential: demanding advanced political knowledge without scaffolding may privilege learners already exposed to political discussion at home. *The Education and Training Monitor 2025* identifies civic knowledge as a measurable concern and emphasizes open classroom climates, cross-curricular integration, and participatory experiences as relevant strategies (European Commission, 2025) . These reports and studies justify attention to equitable access, not a presumption that all classrooms can implement the same intervention in identical conditions.

Finally, non-partisanship requires a stronger account than silence about conflict. Education for democracy cannot coherently demand that teachers withhold judgment about demonstrably inaccurate empirical premises or violations of rights, while at the same time presenting a preferred party program as the correct conclusion of critical thinking. The distinction is between standards governing democratic discussion and choices among legitimate political alternatives. Respect for human dignity, the rule of law and freedom of expression may form the normative ground of classroom practice; debates about taxation, migration policy or institutional design remain open to competing arguments that meet evidential and rights-based standards. This approach is closer to disciplined pluralism than to neutrality understood as the refusal to evaluate reasons. It offers a principled response to the risk that lessons about disinformation become lessons about which political opinions pupils should hold.

3. Objectives and methodological approach

The study employs a critical integrative documentary synthesis and conceptual model-building strategy. Its *corpus* comprises three complementary types of material: peer-reviewed research on European radical-right and populist communication; experimental, quasi-experimental and review-based studies of media-literacy and misinformation interventions; and European or international policy frameworks and comparative monitoring reports on democratic citizenship and digital competences. Publications from 2021 to October 2026 are prioritized for contemporary evidence. A small number of foundational works predating 2021 are retained because their conceptual definitions feature in the originating abstract and remain necessary to explain the analytical distinctions developed here. The approach is purposive and problem-oriented, not a registered systematic review or quantitative meta-analysis.

The selection logic privileges works that directly illuminate at least one of three relationships: the organization of persuasive political communication; the observed or theorized educational capacity to evaluate it; and the normative conditions of non-partisan democratic education. Studies concerning France, the Netherlands, Portugal and transnational European politics are used to introduce comparative variation without presenting them as a representative country sample. Intervention findings are distinguished by outcome: recognition of manipulation, accuracy discrimination, trust calibration, civic efficacy, and classroom feasibility are not treated as interchangeable dependent variables. Institutional texts serve as evidence of recommendations and policy commitments, not as experimental demonstrations that the proposed model works. A source may therefore inform conceptual construction without being used to claim a causal relationship.

The synthesis proceeds through four transparent analytical operations. First, it differentiates factual reliability, contextual framing, rhetorical technique, emotional response, and infrastructural mediation as separate but interacting attributes of political information. Second, it maps these attributes onto relevant educational competencies reported in the research and institutional documents. Third, it formulates observable learning tasks that could make the proposed competencies assessable. Fourth, it identifies foreseeable risks, competing explanations and outcome measures for subsequent validation. This interpretative procedure suits developing a pedagogical proposition. Still, it cannot calculate the prevalence of political techniques, quantify their effect on voters, or prove the instructional impact of the resulting framework.

The originating abstract refers to longitudinal research on populist digital communication between 2019 and 2025. That research constitutes the intellectual starting point of the present argument. Still, the material provided with the abstract contains neither a fully coded dataset nor sufficient methodological documentation for independent verification of its results. Accordingly, this article does not reproduce sample sizes, frequencies, election-period estimates, or statistical associations from that research. It does not claim to have reanalyzed a European-wide longitudinal dataset. The comparison across published studies remains documentary, and the five-dimensional framework is presented as a theoretically reasoned proposal whose internal coherence can be discussed but whose predictive and pedagogical validity must be tested separately.

The methodological limitations are substantive. The literature identified for a critical review is subject to selection bias, publication bias, and differences in operational definitions. Studies of political communication are not directly comparable when platform features, campaign periods, countries and units of analysis vary. Intervention evidence is unevenly distributed across populations, national settings, and behavioral endpoints. Finally, an educational framework derived partly from research on a particular ideological family should not be assumed to function identically with messages from other ideological traditions. These constraints are built into the argument rather than appended as a formal disclaimer: they determine which claims the results can legitimately support.

4. Results: an integrated model of democratic literacy

The conceptual synthesis yields a five-dimensional framework of democratic literacy. Its key proposition is that the critical interpretation of political content involves a sequence of related but analytically independent judgments. An individual can verify a statistic yet fail to notice that a comparison excludes relevant years; identify emotional language yet misunderstands why a message circulates; or recognize a platform's recommendation features without appraising the reliability of the underlying evidence. The five dimensions are therefore designed as complementary perspectives on the same communicative event, not as a hierarchy through which learners must pass or as a single psychometric score already established by data.

Epistemic verification refers to identifying what a claim asserts, which parts are testable, which evidence would be relevant, and how trustworthy and independent the sources appear. It includes lateral reading, distinguishing primary from secondary evidence, checking dates and units, tracing statistics to their origins, and expressing calibrated uncertainty when evidence remains incomplete. Its educational objective is not general distrust but justified confidence: a student should be able to say not only why a proposition lacks sufficient support, but also why a well-supported proposition deserves provisional acceptance. In a democratic context, this dimension provides a common evidential standard applicable to government statements, opposition criticism, media reports and advocacy campaigns alike.

Contextual literacy addresses the interpretative work through which facts become politically meaningful. Learners examine omitted comparisons, selective denominators, chronological compression, categorical ambiguity, and causal claims unsupported by the evidence provided. A factual statement may be accurate and still be framed misleadingly when it is presented as representative of a larger trend without an appropriate baseline. Contextual literacy asks students to reconstruct what a more complete description would require, to distinguish correlation from causation and to identify the strongest plausible alternative interpretation. Rather than teaching a single correct political reading, it requires the public articulation of inferential steps and an examination of their weaknesses.

Propaganda literacy concerns the rhetorical organization of political persuasion. It covers repetition, appeals to authority, antagonistic in-group and out-group construction, scapegoating, moral dichotomies, emotionally charged generalizations, and the strategic invocation of common sense(Joaquim, 2025) . This dimension asks what a technique does to an audience's attention and interpretative options, while avoiding the invalid inference that the mere presence of a technique proves falsehood or malicious intent. An adequate analysis discriminates between forceful but contestable democratic argument, manipulative representation and explicitly false claims. The aim is the capacity to describe how a message seeks to persuade, not the automatic disqualification of a particular political speaker(Joaquim, 2026b) .

Emotional reflexivity involves recognizing affective responses as part of political judgment without construing emotion as the opposite of reason. Fear, resentment, solidarity, indignation and hope can disclose morally important concerns, but they can also intensify selective attention and accelerate unreflective sharing (Joaquim, 2026a). Learners should be able to identify emotional cues in messages, reflect on how their own prior commitments influence interpretation and consider whether an immediate reaction is supported by the evidence. Teaching emotional reflexivity is not therapeutic intervention and should not require the disclosure of personal political allegiances or experiences. It is an exercise in analytical self-awareness, undertaken within conditions of respect and confidentiality.

Platform literacy focuses on the conditions of digital circulation: recommendation systems, engagement signals, automated moderation, content formats, amplification incentives, and source visibility. Students distinguish content that appears because they deliberately searched for it from material surfaced through a feed; examine how metrics can convey social approval without establishing accuracy; and investigate what is known and unknown about a platform's operations. Where algorithmic processes are opaque, the appropriate outcome is a reasoned statement of uncertainty rather than unsupported claims of covert manipulation. This dimension is

increasingly relevant when political content is repackaged as entertainment, distributed by influencers, or encountered through AI-supported interfaces.

The framework is relational. Epistemic verification and contextual literacy constrain unwarranted causal inference; propaganda literacy draws attention to message design; emotional reflexivity concerns the recipient's role in interpretation; and platform literacy situates content in its circulation environment. The same political post can therefore be analyzed by asking five complementary questions: what is demonstrably supported, which context is absent, what rhetorical devices structure the message, what reactions are invited, and how might the distribution environment shape exposure? The analytical payoff lies in combining the answers without collapsing them into a presumption about what a citizen must ultimately believe or vote for.

Table 1. Dimensions and proposed observable indicators

Dimension	Proposed observable indicator	Interpretative risk
Epistemic verification	Identifies a checkable claim, traces its original source and justifies a credibility judgment	Conflating skepticism with critical evaluation.
Contextual literacy	Restores a missing comparator, denominator or causal qualification	Treating any incomplete message as intentional deception.
Propaganda literacy	Explains the function of a rhetorical device using message evidence	Equating persuasive rhetoric with proven falsehood.
Emotional reflexivity	Distinguishes emotional cues and personal reactions from evidential warrants	Pressuring learners to reveal private political beliefs.
Platform literacy	Explains plausible distribution mechanisms and identifies unknowns	Inferring algorithmic causality from engagement alone.

Source(s): Author's conceptual synthesis developed in this article.

The proposed indicators establish a basis for curriculum design but must not be understood as a validated instrument. Their utility depends on whether educators can elicit actual reasoning rather than rehearsed definitions, whether independent assessors can score answers consistently, and whether competence transfers from familiar examples to new topics. A learner who can label a false dilemma may still endorse an unsupported claim when it favors an existing preference; conversely, a learner may reach a defensible conclusion without using the model's specialized vocabulary. Instruction and assessment should reward explicit evidence, openness to correction and the quality of argument rather than ideological agreement with the teacher.

5. Discussion: pedagogical consequences and empirical validation

The five-dimensional model advances the educational argument in two ways. The first is explanatory: the model makes visible forms of influence that survive correction of an isolated false claim. If a message mobilizes a compelling identity narrative, gains repeated social visibility or turns an accurate statistic into an unwarranted causal accusation, a one-sentence fact-check addresses only part of the interpretative mechanism. The second is practical: the model translates interdisciplinary research into tasks that can be assessed without asking students to adopt any institution's preferred electoral position. This claim is a reasoned curricular proposition. It remains distinct from an assertion that five-component instructions have already been shown to outperform alternative pedagogies.

A classroom sequence could begin with two or three publicly accessible messages concerning a single policy question, deliberately selected from contrasting political orientations and accompanied by traceable primary documentation. Students first formulate each message's central empirical proposition. They then compare original datasets, parliamentary texts or authoritative statistical reports, noting the dates, definitions and uncertainty involved. Next, they reconstruct omitted context and competing causal explanations, annotate rhetorical features,

reflect privately on the emotions the content invites, and assess how the mode of distribution might affect apparent credibility. The sequence concludes with a short, evidence-based argument explaining which conclusions are warranted and which remain contestable. The teacher's task is to make the reasoning process visible, not to award higher marks for arriving at a predetermined policy preference.

The choice of examples is an ethical and methodological concern. Restricting all exercises to radical-right messages would weaken the model's commitment to non-partisanship and make learning gains difficult to distinguish from changes in hostility towards a single party family. A more defensible design includes messages from governments, mainstream opposition parties, radical-right actors and other partisan or advocacy sources, while controlling where possible for topic familiarity, claim difficulty and emotional intensity. This symmetry of scrutiny does not entail moral equivalence among political programs. It means that empirical claims are tested according to consistent standards, while statements involving discrimination or violations of fundamental rights are examined with explicit reference to the rights and democratic principles at stake.

Contemporary evidence recommends caution about the nature of expected gains. McGrew and Breakstone (2023) support instruction that involves authentic online sources, modeling, and formative feedback rather than an abstract checklist detached from classroom practice. McGrew's (2024) review indicates that lateral-reading instruction can improve credibility evaluation, although that outcome is narrower than political judgment in contested circumstances. Lu's et al. (2024) meta-analysis suggests a promising average effect of media-literacy interventions on credibility assessment; the distribution of designs and outcomes nonetheless precludes identifying the proposed five-dimensional package as the effective component. Moreover, Roozenbeek et al. (2022) and Pennycook et al. (2024) show that detecting manipulation and discerning veracity are separable competencies. These distinctions justify combining tasks while requiring each educational outcome to be measured independently.

The risk of excessive skepticism is especially consequential. Hoes et al. (2024) demonstrate that interventions designed to combat misinformation may also undermine the perceived credibility of accurate information. An effective democratic literacy program should therefore cultivate calibrated trust rather than a blanket suspicion of parties, journalism, researchers, or public institutions. Assessment should include true, false and context-dependent items, with attention to changes in both false-positive and false-negative judgments. Students who reject every source indiscriminately should not receive the highest score for critical thinking. Trust becomes democratically valuable when grounded in transparency, corroboration, accountability and willingness to revise, not when demanded as an unquestioned civic virtue.

Democratic citizenship literature also advises against treating cognitive skill development as sufficient on its own. The Council of Europe's competence framework regards democratic culture as involving values, attitudes, knowledge and capacities for participation (Council of Europe, 2021) . The Council of the European Union (2023) likewise integrates media literacy with inclusion, human rights and democratic participation. Matthieu and Junius (2024) emphasize that civic learning experiences operate in differentiated educational and family contexts. Consequently, critical source evaluation should relate to respectful deliberation, opportunities for student voice and reflection on the rights of dissenting citizens. Without these components, a program could produce technically adept information evaluators who nonetheless approach political opponents as enemies rather than fellow participants in a shared democratic order.

In practical assessment, rubric should evaluate separately the quality of evidence tracing, completeness of contextual reconstruction, precision in identifying rhetorical strategies, capacity to distinguish affect from inference, and accuracy in describing technological mediation. Open-response tasks would allow participants to provide reasons and indicate uncertainty. Multiple raters, blind to intervention assignments where feasible, could use anchored descriptors to evaluate performance and report inter-rater agreement. Scoring should not depend on whether learners support a particular party or institutional position. The same principles apply to teacher preparation: educators need confidence in sourcing reliable materials, moderating controversial

discussions, recognizing bias in their own examples and responding appropriately when classroom interactions become hostile or exclusionary.

A future empirical validation program should proceed in stages. Initially, an interdisciplinary panel of specialists in political communication, educational measurement, democratic citizenship and digital platforms could examine the proposed items for content validity, conceptual overlap and ideological balance. Cognitive interviews with learners from different educational backgrounds would test comprehension and reveal whether apparently neutral wording carries unintended partisan cues. A small pilot could then establish feasibility, time requirements, item difficulty, and how consistently different teachers apply the protocol. These activities would produce evidence for revising the framework, not for claiming its effectiveness.

A subsequent study could use a pre-registered cluster-randomized design across comparable classes or institutions, contrasting integrated five-dimensional instruction with an active comparison condition focused on conventional source checking. Randomization at the classroom level would reduce contamination, while baseline measures of political interest, prior digital competence, and topic familiarity would help contextualize heterogeneity. Outcomes could include credibility discrimination using balanced true and false items, recognition of unsupported causal inference, contextual reconstruction, transfer to unfamiliar political issues, calibrated trust, and retention after a delayed interval. Analyze self-reported confidence separately from demonstrated competence. Because educational interventions are implemented by teachers within institutions, implementation fidelity and teacher-level variation should be documented.

Cross-national replication would be important but should follow rather than precede satisfactory pilot results. Linguistic and political equivalence cannot be presumed when a message invokes institutions, identities or historical experiences that differ across countries. Translation and adaptation would require scrutiny of item difficulty, familiarity and comparability. Researchers should also test whether the model is equally effective when applied to messages from contrasting ideological families. If outcomes depended primarily on recognizing one party's rhetorical conventions, the framework would not have demonstrated general democratic transfer. Strong validation would require showing that learning improves reasoning across contexts rather than conformity to an interpretative script.

Ethical safeguards are not peripheral. Students must be free to disagree with a teacher's political interpretations and to decline disclosure of voting intentions, family political preferences or sensitive experiences. Where minors are involved, consent and data protection requirements should shape sampling and reporting. Classroom materials containing extremist or dehumanizing content require careful selection, contextualization and opportunities to disengage from distressing exposure. Institutions should avoid public ranking of pupils by political belief. The educational setting can legitimately establish norms against humiliation and threats while preserving rigorous contestation of policies and institutions. These protections make non-partisan democratic instruction credible in practice rather than merely in its stated objectives.

The model also faces an explanatory limit that educational discussions too easily overlook citizens do not encounter political information under conditions of equal time, security, trust, or institutional voice. Economic insecurity, unequal access to high-quality education, experiences of exclusion and dissatisfaction with public institutions may affect both political interpretation and willingness to rely on authoritative sources. Media literacy cannot substitute for accountable governance, pluralistic journalism or institutional responsiveness. UNESCO (2023) cautions that technology-based educational solutions depend on equity, evidence and teacher preparation, while the Reuters Institute documents broader shifts in news consumption and trust (Newman et al., 2025) . The pedagogical contribution must therefore be framed as one component of democratic resilience, not as a comprehensive remedy for the political and social conditions associated with radical-right mobilization.

Further tension concerns how education interprets political emotion. Political indignation may motivate justified democratic action against corruption or injustice, while solidarity and hope can facilitate collective participation. The model does not aim to suppress these responses or idealize affectless decision-making. It asks learners to distinguish an emotion's moral relevance from the evidential status of the narrative that elicits it. A respectful classroom should therefore permit

emotional expression while insisting that empirical generalizations, accusations and causal interpretations remain open to examination. This is especially necessary when a controversial issue touches pupils' identities or lived experiences. The combination of critical reasoning and attentiveness to vulnerability is a pedagogical condition of pluralism, not an inconsistency.

Finally, the framework should not be presented as a new substitute for existing European competence systems. Its purpose is to connect elements already present in media education and citizenship education to the specific analytical demands of persuasive, platform-mediated politics. UNESCO's curriculum (Grizzle et al., 2021) *DigComp 2.2* (Vuorikari et al., 2022) , the *European Commission guidelines* (2026) and the EDMO principles (2024) offer complementary resources. The contribution here is the proposed articulation of five dimensions around a common political communication object and their potential operationalization through comparative tasks. Its novelty is therefore integrative and pedagogical. Claims of superiority, universality or psychometric distinctiveness would be premature before explicit measurement and replication.

6. Conclusions

Democratic literacy should extend beyond the binary identification of true and false political statements. In contemporary European communication environments, citizens also confront selective context, persuasive rhetorical design, affective mobilization and platform-conditioned visibility. Treating these as interconnected but distinguishable phenomena makes educational analysis more precise. The five-dimensional framework proposed here joins epistemic verification, contextual literacy, propaganda literacy, emotional reflexivity and platform literacy within a commitment to intellectual autonomy and democratic pluralism.

The article's contribution is a carefully delimited conceptual synthesis, not a claim of proven intervention effects. Published studies support the educational relevance of particular competencies, and institutional frameworks establish an important normative and policy setting, but the combined model has not yet been tested. Future evaluation must examine transfer, calibrated trust, cross-ideological applicability, equity, and the risk of unwanted outcomes. Democratic education should enable learners to justify judgments, recognize uncertainty and disagree responsibly. Its purpose is neither to insulate institutions from criticism nor to prescribe electoral choices, but to make political persuasion more open to informed, independent and accountable scrutiny.

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