

# **Disinformation trends & media literacy needs in the private sector of Armenia**

**FREEDOM OF INFORMATION CENTER**

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## List of Abbreviations

BOT – Beneficial ownership transparency

CRRC – Caucasus Research Resource Center

CSOs - Civil Society Organizations

CSR - corporate social responsibility

EAEU - Eurasian Economic Union

EU – European Union

FOICA – Freedom of Information Center of Armenia

MIC – Media and Information literacy

PR – Public relations

SME – small and medium enterprises

RA – Republic of Armenia

UAE – United Arab Emirates

US – United States

## Executive Summary

The purpose of the research is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the disinformation trends and media literacy situation in Armenia, especially shedding light on the distinct dynamics of dis/misinformation within the private sector. By examining the specific disinformation trends in Armenia and evaluating the state of media literacy, this research paper aims to contribute to the discourse on countering disinformation and fostering media literacy for the private sector.

Based on the desk work and in-dept interviews with the private sector representatives and field experts this research highlights the challenges posed by dis/misinformation to businesses and the economy exploring the multifaceted nature of disinformation in Armenia, identifying modern trends, channels, and platforms through which it spreads.

The implications of dis/misinformation on the private sector are analyzed, including disruptions to business operations, loss of revenue, and damage to brand reputation. The research also examines the impact of dis/misinformation on consumer trust and the challenges businesses face in managing its risks.

Dis/misinformation finds fertile ground in Armenia's information landscape due to many factors such as inconsistent government communication, propaganda, and low media literacy among the public and business. Efforts to combat disinformation have been made by civil society, media experts, and policymakers, but legislation and protection mechanisms have not been fully comprehensive, leaving businesses vulnerable to unfair competition and reputational harm.

Another finding of the research reveals that there is also some portion of foreign actors when it comes to the spread of disinformation on the private sector. Those actors are mainly interested in damaging the business structures and connections. Businesses yet need to develop resilience techniques to face to disinformation. Some of them already invest in having big and professional teams of communication and PR, however, small and medium enterprises are still struggling to find their effective ways and resources for debunking misinformation.

Diverse media channels are used for spreading disinformation: social media, news outlets, online forums, blogs and vlogs, statements from government and state officials. Vulnerable sectors within the businesses that can be impacted heavily from the dis/misinformation and damage the brand/reputation are SMEs and foreign business operations. The most vulnerable fields which easily can be affected from dis/misinformation are food and service industries, entertainment, tourism, construction and mining sector.

The research assesses the media and information literacy (MIL) within the private sector, and evaluates the existing initiatives and programs for their effectiveness in enhancing critical thinking skills among business representatives and employees. The research highlights successful media literacy programs and disinformation response strategies from other countries, providing guidance for similar efforts in Armenia. The role of collaboration between the private sector, civil society, and educational institutions is underpinned.

Despite a growing awareness that a healthy information space is essential for business to thrive, many private sector actors are hesitant to support or be engaged in media literacy initiatives. The research highlights that many of the interviewed private sector representatives acknowledge that media and information literacy are one of the most effective tools to combat information disorders. Within the private sector there is a clear understanding of the potential damages caused by information disorder as well as the strategic role of the media literacy for tackling it. However, at the same time, the private sector has shown a notable passivity in embracing media literacy initiatives. Despite their understanding of the potential harm and risks caused by disinformation, the businesses have been hesitant to actively engage in media literacy efforts.

This research shows that the private sector can and does play a role in protecting information integrity. While there are very few initiatives which are modest in scope, they provide inspiration for engaging the private sector to help combat information disorder and solve the myriad challenges disinformation poses.

There is no single, universally applicable model for unlocking private capital and enhancing the role the private sector can play in supporting a healthy information space. The recommendations drawn within the research suggest concrete actions for both the private and public sectors to combat disinformation, enhance media literacy, and foster an informed and resilient society.

Thus, this research paper aims to shed light on the disinformation trends prevalent in Armenia regarding the private sector while evaluating the media literacy situation amongst business representatives and employees within the country. By providing a detailed analysis of these interrelated aspects, it seeks to contribute to ongoing efforts to combat disinformation and foster media literacy, ultimately strengthening the resilience of Armenian private sector and society in general against fabricated narratives, information manipulation and ensuring the free flow of accurate and reliable information.

The research provides valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in developing evidence-based interventions to foster media literacy and counter information disorders effectively.

## Introduction

In the modern information and digital age, the active spread of disinformation presents a significant challenge to societies all over the world. Armenia, like many other modern societies, has faced an unparalleled surge of disinformation and increase of intolerance, far right ideological movements and hate speech over the past three years. The dissemination of fabricated (false) narratives has significantly eroded democratic discourse resulting in widespread distrust in the government and key institutions, thereby detrimentally affecting social cohesion and political progress, also having some negative impact on business environment.

Recent surveys indicate that nearly half of the Armenian populace (48%) encounters disinformation and deceptive news on a daily basis<sup>1</sup>, with a substantial majority (80%) refraining from taking any remedial actions when confronted with dubious information<sup>2</sup>. Various forms of false and manipulated information were observed on virtually all communication platforms.

Population highly engaged in social media platforms. The sources of information used by Armenian audiences on a daily basis are overwhelmingly internet-based and social media platforms. In a 2021 survey conducted by the Media Initiatives Centre (MIC) and the Caucasus Research Resource Centre (CRRC), 67% of respondents reported using internet and social media platforms every day. However, only “14 % of those who use internet resources and social media daily reported daily accessing online news websites directly (not via social media platforms)”.<sup>3</sup> The survey found that 90% of respondents used Facebook (an increase, since 2017, from 69%) and YouTube, making these the two most popular networks in Armenia, followed by Instagram (which 45% of respondents reported using). 89% of those reporting the use of Facebook said they did so to access news.<sup>4</sup>

Especially during last three years, the society has experienced the impact of disinformation on various aspects of its society, politics, economy, well-being and private sector. It is crucial to examine the specific disinformation trends and patterns prevalent in the Armenian context to understand the nature and extent of this phenomenon regarding the activities of private sector.

The first part of this research paper delves into the multifaceted nature of disinformation landscape in Armenia with particular focus on the private sector. It explores the modern trends, channels and platforms through which disinformation spreads, such as social media, Facebook groups, news websites, and online platforms. By conducting in-depth interviews with representatives of the private sector, general managers and leaders of businesses, examining notable case studies and incidents, this section provides a nuanced understanding of the disinformation landscape in Armenia, including

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<sup>1</sup> Media Initiative Center and CRRC–Armenia, “Media Consumption in Armenia, 2021”, <https://media.am/en/laboratory/2022/01/26/31479/>.

<sup>2</sup> Directive (EU) 2018/1808 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 November 2018 amending Directive 2010/13/EU (Audiovisual Media Services Directive), article 59, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2018/1808/oj>.

<sup>3</sup> See the ‘Media Consumption in Armenia, 2021’ Survey findings by the Media Initiatives Center and the Caucasus Research Resource Center-Armenia, available at: <https://mediainitiatives.am/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Media-Consumption-in-Armenia-Report.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

some of the tactics employed, the targets affected, and the potential motivations behind disinformation campaigns made against private sector. The implications and impact of disinformation on the private sector is assessed. It examines the potential consequences of disinformation on businesses, including the disruption of operations, loss of revenue, and damage to brand reputation. Furthermore, this section analyzes the impact of disinformation on consumers trust and explore the challenges businesses face in managing and mitigating the effects of disinformation campaigns. Additionally, the economic implications of disinformation on the private sector are evaluated, considering its potential to hinder economic growth, investment, and entrepreneurship.

The second section focuses on the media literacy situation in Armenia, assessing the level of awareness and preparedness among the private sector representatives, employees to identify and counter disinformation. It evaluates existing and implemented media literacy programs, initiatives, and educational frameworks aimed at equipping individuals, business representatives and employees of the private companies with critical thinking skills to evaluate information sources effectively. This section also examines the effectiveness of these efforts in enhancing media literacy within business society, considering the challenges and opportunities unique to the country.

The effectiveness of the struggle against disinformation greatly depends on the level of media literacy in the society: to what extent do people understand the meaning and purpose of democracy and freedom of speech, understand the work of the media, distinguish between suspicious and reliable information, information sources, are they able to check information, control their online behavior? People need to understand the information ecosystem in a better way, as well as to obtain the skills necessary for identifying and checking information sources. The researchers understand the intricate relationship between disinformation and media literacy. Therefore, they underpin that it is vital for developing comprehensive strategies to address and mitigate the impact of disinformation. The research identifies the current media literacy needs indicated by the private sector and provides recommendations for concrete actions to be taken by the private and public sectors to combat disinformation, to build resilience and debunking skills. The research focuses on media literacy, with a view of the ongoing media literacy initiatives in the private sector, in addition to offering certain skill sets necessary in the current digital ecosystem.

The third part of this research paper highlights best practices and case studies from other countries that showcase successful media literacy programs and effective responses to disinformation in the private sector. By analyzing these case studies, valuable lessons and insights can be derived, providing guidance for media literacy initiatives and response strategies in Armenia for private sector.

The findings of this research provide valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and relevant stakeholders in developing evidence-based interventions and policies to combat disinformation and enhance media literacy in the Armenian private sector. The proposed recommendations identify ways for how the public and private sectors can work together and launch future advocacy initiatives to minimize disinformation spread and impact.

## The research purpose, objectives and methodology

The purpose of the research is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the disinformation trends and media literacy situation in Armenia, especially shedding light on the unique dynamics of disinformation within the private sector. By examining the specific disinformation trends in Armenia and evaluating the state of media literacy, this research paper aims to contribute to the discourse on countering disinformation and fostering media literacy for private sector.

To comprehend the most recent disinformation trends and actors in Armenia, and to evaluate the main false narratives and topics presented by them on online and traditional media landscape, professional in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of private sector, business associations, fact-checkers and designated experts and specialists. To maintain balance and completeness in this research paper, in-depth interviews were conducted also with independent media professionals and researchers. In total, 30 in-dept interviews have been carried out by the experts and data collectors. Several online and offline publications, openly available other documents connected to the theme of the research paper, and materials on major disinformation trends and actors in Armenia, which were published especially during the last one and a half years (including the context of the war in Ukraine and its impact on the private sector in Armenia), were analyzed thoroughly.

In addition to the in-depth interviews, the publications from several media outlets of Armenia (selected by the research team on the criteria of their impact and countrywide coverage) were reviewed to identify the trends and actors. The focus was given to the impact of these false narratives and disinformation trends on private sector and business environment.

Researchers work is also built upon the analysis conducted by the [Caucasus Institute](#), which recently developed a policy brief and paper identifying the current state of media literacy in Armenia regarding the private sector.<sup>5</sup>

The desk research has a data collection part, as the researchers extracted relevant data from the selected databases. This includes information on disinformation narratives, specific instances of disinformation campaigns, key topics and themes, spheres of businesses mostly impacted, prominent actors or sources, and their possible affiliations with Russia. Collecting metadata such as publication dates, sources, and publication platforms provides aid in analysis and verification. Additionally, researchers designed a structured interview guide and questionnaire that incorporates open-ended questions tailored to capture insights from field professionals. Selecting a diverse pool of professionals, such as journalists, media analysts, researchers, and policymakers, who possess expertise in disinformation and media dynamics in Armenia, help to have more balanced research.

Data analysis is another major part of this study paper. Researchers analyzed the collected data to identify common disinformation trends, recurring topics, and patterns in the content disseminated by Russia-affiliated media in Armenia. They applied qualitative and quantitative analysis techniques,

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<sup>5</sup> The current situation with media audience measurements in Armenia and its impact on the quality of public information: The perspective of the private sector, Caucasus Institute, Yerevan, July 2022, available at: <https://c-i.am/wp-content/uploads/CI-Policy-Paper-for-CIPE.pdf>.



such as content analysis, sentiment analysis, and network analysis, to gain deeper insights into the disinformation landscape.

Apart from above mentioned approaches, the researcher did cross-reference to the collected data with independent fact-checking reports and credible sources to verify the accuracy of the identified disinformation narratives and claims. This step is crucial for ensuring the reliability of the findings.

The methodology was designed to provide a clear and concise analysis of the identified disinformation trends and topics, supported by evidence from the collected data. The paper included recommendations to address and counter information disorders effectively.

As dis/misinformation evolves rapidly, it is essential to conduct periodic updates of the research findings and repeat the desk research process at regular intervals to track and analyze emerging patterns and shifts in the disinformation landscape.

## A. Dis/misinformation landscape in Armenia with particular focus of the private sector

“If a potential customer of our services is not getting involved in our classes, the person can easily make a negative impact on social media posting bad feedback about our company. Commenting on social media about businesses can harm our reputation”, says one of representatives of Armenian IT business sector. This is just an example describing the media landscape of Armenia, which, like many other modern countries, is facing challenges when dealing with increase of false narratives, disinformation, and misinformation. In the past, false information was prevalent mostly in broadcast media, but the rise of online news platforms and, especially social media has become a turning point, allowing rapid dissemination and amplification of disinformation about everything, including business activities. Various actors, including the state, non-state, domestic, and external entities, are actively involved in spreading false narratives to influence in many fields including private sector. This has become a defining aspect of Armenia's information landscape, hindering its present and future development.

Last couple of years Armenia strives to institutionalize democratic ideals, recover the economy from the consequences of the war and pandemic, and create a shared vision for the future, false narratives have led to divisions not only in civic and political life, undermining democratic progress<sup>6</sup>. Those false narratives have particularly revolved around topics such as the actions of the current government, impact of COVID-19 pandemic to the economic activities, the 44-day war over the Nagorno-Karabakh region, social and cultural issues, and civil society and democracy. Other narratives came because of the Russian military aggression in Ukraine started since February of 2022. Armenia hosts several thousand relocants from Russia, who have opened their businesses or are involved in the private sector of the country.

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<sup>6</sup> L. Grigoryan, General Assessment, Disinformation and misinformation in Armenia: Confronting the power of false narratives, Freedom House, Yerevan, June 2021, pp. 7-8, available at: [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/Disinformation-in-Armenia\\_En-v3.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/Disinformation-in-Armenia_En-v3.pdf).

As showed by the structured interviews with different stakeholders and analyses, disinformation finds fertile ground in Armenia's information landscape due to various factors. For example, inconsistent communication and propaganda by the government during the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Nagorno-Karabakh created informational vacuums and confusion, making the country vulnerable to exploitation by disinformation agents. “At the moment nobody is interested in having monitoring on the news spread on social media. We can't be sure if news is true or fabricated”, shares one of the interviewees, highlighting the fact that such situation is not that good for business activity.

The pervasiveness of disinformation in the past three years has prompted discussions among civil society, media experts, human rights activists, representatives of private sector and politicians. Efforts have been made by different actors to legislate the issue, but they have not been comprehensive, and policymakers may not fully grasp disinformation as a distinct form of harmful content. Further studies on media literacy situation highlight significant vulnerabilities to disinformation among Armenian audiences, with a considerable number of people failing to verify the authenticity of news they encounter, making them susceptible to false information.

“It has happened several times that politicians have come with announcements and some promises which were not well planned and discussed with the businesses. Soon they understand that it's not possible to realize. However, it's quite late, as the businesses are very active when responding to this kind of situations”, mentions one of the business representatives. Later it impacts on the development of businesses, as based on those kinds of announcements private sector starts planning and adopting to the new/expecting reality.

Back in 2021, FOICA [mapped the media in Armenia](#) in the context of the fight against dis/misinformation. When identifying the senders and disseminators of dis/misinformation, experts generally single out several groups of sources:

1. Ideological groups
2. Facebook groups, real or fake accounts and pages
3. Opinion leaders and decision makers on social networks
4. Media owned by the former government
5. Clickbait websites
6. “Mushroom” media
7. Russian websites or translations from those websites

In July 2022, the Caucasus Institute studied<sup>7</sup> ways in which the situation with media audience measurements on the Armenian media advertising market affects media quality and the spread of mis/disinformation, and how the private sector can contribute to positive changes. Advertising based on facts and reality is another case highlighted by the interviewees from the private sector. According to many representatives of the businesses, their opponents/competitors in the market are easily using dirty techniques to blame their business activity: “There is no protection from the state. There is a gap in the legislation, and laws are not working in this regard. Unfair competition can easily harm our way of doing business in Armenia. Nobody checks the content of the ads spread by the businesses. But usually, one can easily find the false and fabricated narratives in those messages. This should be changed as soon as possible”.

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<sup>7</sup> The current situation with media audience measurements in Armenia and its impact on the quality of public information: The perspective of the private sector, Caucasus Institute, Yerevan, July 2022, available at: <https://c-i.am/wp-content/uploads/CI-Policy-Paper-for-CIPE.pdf>.

There are also cases when the competitors use fake social media profiles to blame the opponents' services with bad feedback. This can impact not only the public reputation of the private company, but also demotivate other people who wanted to work with this company. However, there are not that much cases when the businesses reach to the court to recover their reputation from false narratives: "If the reputation damage is not that big, the companies mostly don't apply the court. They understand their position and the current resources, also they need to spend time and resources on each appeal, so better keep things out of the courts", a representative of IT sector highlights the practice of Armenian businesses regarding appealing to the courts.

It's obvious that false narratives impact on the business reputation. However, not all businesses consider it as a problem: "Doing business in Armenia has many specifics. For example, people mostly trust on the experiences of their relatives and friends when choosing services and/or products. When we conducted a survey to know how people get in touch with our company, many of the respondents mentioned about the relatives and friends who told them about us. So even if there is an intensive disinformation campaign about our company, people still will trust on experience of their friends and relatives if they were in favor of our work. For the business it's better to be concentrated on the quality. If it is there, the impact of disinformation can be not that much harmful", an IT company representative shared position on the quality and reputation of services.

Quite often the companies faced to dis/misinformation coming from different groups (including professional) who have no full and comprehensive knowledge on the topic when speaking or sharing information about it. "Once an accountant told the employer that the non-profit organisations are not allowed to start social entrepreneurship activities. This impacted on making decision to open new companies, LTDs, which can have social entrepreneurship. However, in reality non-profits also could make it, there was no need to register a totally new company", says one of the interviewees.

According to another interviewee from a business company, there are several manipulations and exaggerated news about the logistics that Armenian companies do to Russia when transferring goods and products through the Lars checkpoint. There are social media groups where one can easily find terrifying news about the checkpoint which sometimes can work with overloads. "To understand the motivation of those people who spread false narratives on Lars checkpoint is hard to me. Most likely it's more about to blame the government for their work, to show that Armenian politicians can't handle the issue, but in reality, the situation is totally different. Sometimes delays can be related to the goods which are not allowed to transfer. However, there are only few publications about these cases", mentions a representative of a company doing transferring of goods and products.

Another representative of a private sector company mentioned the fact that businesses in Armenia are lacking of having quality analyses about the exchange rate and the situation with the Armenian national currency. It impacts on their business plans, as the analyses they received within the time, have proved to be not trustworthy and correct, "There are so many manipulative analyses about the exchange rate of Armenian dram and the US dollars. I stop trusting in any".

## Dis/misinformation sources and actors

Based on the data collection through the structured interviews and analyses of them along with the available online publications on different media outlets, researchers found that there are diverse dis/misinformation sources and actors in Armenia which can be grouped as follow:

### *State actors*

Within the Armenian private sector context, state-sponsored disinformation campaigns have been identified as a prevalent source of false information. Such campaigns often aim to manipulate public opinion, influence political outcomes, and advance specific political interests. Several cases of these types of activities were mentioned by the interviewees. For example, one of the state agencies released a piece of information about tax evasion mechanisms used by one of the big supermarket chains. Later, the company released their own statement. “At the end, it was not clear if the business was guilty or the mechanism is something commonly used by other supermarkets too”, says one of the business representatives.

Another example of the state-sponsored dis/misinformation relates to the tax benefits that the government planned to give to the IT companies which were somehow impacted because of the exchange of the currency rates. “The minister announced about the possible tax benefits for the IT companies, and our team was trying to understand if we fit to the criteria presented by the state official. We spent so much time and efforts on this, but at the end it became obvious that it was just a statement not well discussed with the stakeholders. Unfortunately, this kind of statements are not rare. From time to time the government official come up with promises and statements which are not going to be realized. It makes the businesses to stop their operation or impact on the plans of enlargements”, highlights one of the representatives of the private sector of Armenia.

Also, the researchers observed several cases when the government officials and legislative bodies are not enough clear with their public communication. Information released by the state sometimes is outdated or needs more clarifications. This makes the social media users and other interest groups actively spread false narratives. Even counter information to the widely spread disinformation comes with some difficulties to be clear for the public and the business. This affects the business environment in Armenia. Several businesses delay their enlargement plans or even investments having no clarity of the state operations.

Another interviewee from the business field mentioned that if the business makes a quick decision, there may be problems later, “We have acquired immunity with experience and strive to verify information from several sources and then make new decisions”. Even information coming from the government officials including the PM office and the cabinet representatives is not trustworthy anymore. Businesses spent more time to verify information released by the state, which is an absurd situation.

Finally, when analyzing media publications of the last year and a half, the researchers found out that state officials are actively speaking with the representatives of media and continuously spread information which later needs more clarifications and verifications. Media presents the statements in the direct way, as it was said by the officials, however, later the officials are coming with explanations of their own thoughts: what they said to the media should not be said in that way and wording. As media spread news faster than the state officials come with clarifications, the public

can't understand what is true and what is false in the end. The state bodies are reactive or quite late with those explanations and clarifications. During last couple of years there were so many contradictory statements coming from the state bodies that the businesses were in need to build immunity to this type of communication.

#### *Nonstate actors*

“Negative content or disinformation can spread quickly, leading to a negative perception of a company's products, services or business practices. Those narratives can lead to legal, compliance or financial problems, loss of customers, difficulty attracting new customers or damage to brand image, decline in sales, loss of investors, stock or falling bond prices”, highlights one of the interviewees, a representative of a telecommunication company.

Especially, nonstate actors such as individuals, costumers, vlogers and bloggers, journalists, media outlets, opinion leaders can cause confusion and uncertainty with their posts on social media. It will impact on employees, affecting morale and productivity. Disinformation can strain relationships with key stakeholders, including partners, suppliers and investors too. One of the representatives of winery business mentioned that there were some rumors that one of their suppliers of bottles is going to close the bottle production, “We decided not to risk our business and it made us work with other companies. However, up to now this company produces bottles. And this is just one of examples in our work.”

In today's digital age, disinformation and false narratives can spread quickly through online outlets and social media platforms. There are people who can use the power of social media to blame the business. There was a case in the food industry presented by an interviewee, “I got a call from an elderly person that our product was outdated and because of buying that she got intoxication. I went to check things on my own. I found out that our product is fresh, and the intoxication can be even made-up thing. However, I was asked to pay for keeping the person to stay in silence. I decided to pay, otherwise she was threatening to go live and bring her thoughts about our company”.

Business people understand that paying people to keep them in silence is not the best option. However, the legal procedures are not that clear to them, it can take time which they don't have. Negative or false narratives can go viral, attracting widespread attention and causing significant damage to any company's reputation, and nowadays everyone having a social media account can bring an impact and damage to any business.

“If someone wants to make negative effects on a concrete bank, the person can just post a note on social media. Especially, Facebook can be harmful. More people come to support and spread dis/misinformation about the company. It goes viral quickly. This is a problem for small companies as they don't have that much professionals ready to fight for their brand and reputation in the equal conditions”, mentioned one of the representatives of business sector highlighting that he sometimes spends time to comment on everyone's statements. However, it's not the best way to tackle the situation, as from the costumers' point of view that can be looked as trying to make excuses.

Business representatives mention that there are social media groups where some active users are posting blaming the companies. This is especially true regarding the food industry. There is a Facebook group on “Healthy food”, where users post their thoughts about many products. Once it

happened that someone posted a note about outdated eggs bought from a supermarket and the news got viral. Many more group members started to share their experiences. It became a reason for having [investigations](#) from the HETQ online media. The publication from a reputable media made the companies suffer from the financial point of view, as they lost customers, their product was staying on the shelves, even some supermarkets decided to cut the supplies.

The research shows that the diverse range of nonstate actors, including partisan and non-partisan media outlets, interest groups (for example competitors and individual costumers), and activists (ideological groups), also contribute to the dissemination of disinformation. One of the interviewees shared a story about a post on social media group where a user who was a customer of the services blame the business for their activities and products. “Even though it was a person, but the thematic group makes his sound be heard and echoed. It impacted on our business activities. Our director decided to go live on Facebook and invite everyone to our factory. He went to the main locations of our production and made the public feel as being present. It helped. We also are ready to organize public visits to our locations”, shares their practice of fighting against social media activists a representative of private sector.

Nonstate actors often capitalize on divisive issues to further their agendas and undermine societal cohesion. Interviewees mentioned that the motivation of those kinds of activities can be personal or based on bad experiences which an activist has with the company.

“Once our company representative was a target for a vlogger who is quite famous recently. Vardan Ghukasyan, nickname Dog, targeted our employee and made strong disinformation campaign against our team member. Another case happened with an activist who went online and shared his bad experience with our company. He also called his friends and relatives to avoid using our services. Of course, this has an impact. We don’t know the exact number of customers who followed these people’s call, but we can see that it impacts our business”, mentioned a representative of a telecommunication company. The interviewee also highlighted that small companies can face to different problems when trying to fight against them, however, big companies have more structural departments which can release a statement.

When it comes to the media outlets, their publications can cause total disaster to the business according to some interviewees. Based on the news and the negativity of the content costumers can easily change their behavior. However, according to a representative of business association, the Armenian business environment has its specifics, “The reputation of the business is not the main driving force for the costumers when choosing services or products to buy. The only thing matters for them is the price, even not the quality”.

Another interviewee confirms that most of the customers in Armenia are not that much worried about the reputation of business companies and how media or other nonstate actors presents them via publications. As far as the services and products are cheap, the costumers will pick that product or service above all. The reputation mostly impacts on B2B relations and partnerships. “We live in the age when a piece of information is actual only for a while, maybe 5-10 minutes, but very soon it becomes outdated” highlights one of the interviewees. This make believe that customers can read on media about some non-fresh products in the market delivered from one company, but the next day they will pick it from the shelves of the supermarket as it’s the cheapest option.

Some businesses are worried about the relationships they have with media outlets. For the business with brand and reputation it's hard to be focused only for their business activities, as there are several destructive publications which has no direct link to the business. A representative of catering services shared his position on this quite clearly, "Media wants to make public to read their articles, so they use our brand and link some stories which has no direct connection with us. For example, couple of years ago a driver who worked for our company had a car accident. The publication had a title where our company name was mentioned. Another issue came with a worm, which was found in our products. However, we checked it in details, and found out that the work was not in our product but in the one of our suppliers. We came up with the statement, as it harmed our reputation and brand, but till now our statement has less publicity that the case which happened with us. This situation makes me take part in meetings with media representatives and talk with them to be more transparent and clearer in our business activities. Hopefully, journalists understood my points".

Several businesses mentioned about the most recent publications of the HETQ online media as a damage to their partners business reputation which cost also financial losses. Series of publications were made after laboratory examinations of products which revealed many issues in the food industry. However, not all of those issues are correctly presented in the publications and the public can easily get lost.

According to a business representative whose product was mentioned also in the article told that it's a normal procedure to have some media interested in the general use products for public and having special laboratory examinations of the goods, "It's important to understand when and how those examinations are done. We don't have anything against those publications, and I don't think that we can blame the HETQ team for being unfair to the businesses, however, there publication needs more explanations and corrections. It impacted on the business environment greatly. I will be happy if the state bodies and the media organisations will cooperate and reveal all the businesses which are cheating the costumers and provide outdated products".

Another representative of business association has contrasting opinion regarding the series of publications. The interviewee is quite worried about them, as they impacted on business partnerships greatly, "The companies suffer the damage cost by those articles. There are already businesses which lost their customers in bigger markets, like in Russia. Nowadays, the export of the Armenian dairy products is stopped because of the publications. It costs also the economy of the country a lot. Business loses partners and customers."

Sometimes businesses can be attacked by individual journalists and not reputable media outlets (publications which spread rumors and gossips). According to interviewees, there were several cases when journalists directly threatened the businesses to publish a piece and damage reputation and the brand. They asked for money to keep the findings that can harm the company stayed out of the general public's focus. The ones who are not ready to pay easily get a portion of false narratives available on online platforms. That's the reason some businesses prefer to pay than have a damage of reputation, as the interviewees said.

From time-to-time competitors and business opponents are also amongst the nonstate actors actively spreading disinformation on business environment. This can be organized with the help of

individuals or by the media. One of the business representatives mentioned that during their short life (the company was established just couple of years ago) at least two campaigns were organized against them by the competitors, “It was said that we are trying to have a monopoly of flights to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). We don’t have flights to UAE at all, however, it was obvious that our opponents did this campaign to ensure their position regarding the flights to UAE”.

This is not the only case related to the spread of dis/misinformation coming from the opponents. A representative of a winery company mentioned that their opponents try to spread disinformation about the quality of their products, “The information is at the level of gossips, they were reached us through different channels. We have loyal customers and it helps us to keep these types of rumors at the level of gossips. However, we know who is the source of disinformation”.

Based on the analyses of the interviews, there is no clear position on how much an individual social media user and/or a customer can make a harm to the business, if the latter publishes a reputation related note on his/her personal space of social media. For some of the business representatives, such an individual can cause the collapse of an entire business. There are also opinions that the most dangerous for business activities are thematic groups on social media and the information circulated there, because it is available to thousands of people and is a totally uncontrolled space.

#### *Foreign influence*

The involvement of external actors in Armenia's information landscape of the private sector is not uncommon. Foreign entities seek to exert influence over Armenia's political landscape, create discord, or promote their interests and businesses.

When monitoring the media publications, it became clear than after the Russian invasion to Ukraine, Russian media tries to impact on the Armenian business environment, control the market raise according to its preferences. Several Armenian media outlets translate and circulate media pieces of the Russian original publications [spread by the media connected with the Russian state](#). This type of publications can easily create an environment where businesses [can start investing in the fields](#) which was not in their focus before. However, media can easily manipulate their investment packages.

However, the interviewees have not mentioned that much threats coming from foreign actors. One of the representatives of services providing company whose business partners are mostly foreign organisations, mentioned that the reputation of Armenian businesses is not that good abroad. Several Armenian companies working with international partners try to steal new partners from each other. This makes them blaming the opponent’s activities.

According to a business representative, there are false narratives that Russian products in the Armenian market are cheaper and the quality is better. However, the reality challenges the information. Even though big online stores from Russia entered the Armenian market, like Wildberries and Ozon, however, not all goods sold there have a high quality or good price. The foreign businesses in Armenia try to position themselves with more orientation to the quality, but it’s not factually true, according to interviewee.

Russia has been known for its active use of disinformation campaigns to influence public opinion and business environments in various countries. Armenia is not an exception. Through the state



sponsored media disinformation is used to tarnish the reputation of Armenian companies (for example banning the dairy products from Armenia), creating doubts about their reliability, financial stability, or ethical practices. This potentially harms the competitiveness of Armenian businesses in the Eurasian Economic Union and deter foreign investments in specific fields.

It's important to note that while there have been allegations and concerns about Russian influence on various aspects of Armenia's socio-political landscape in the context of the war in Ukraine, the extent of Russian business interests and influence on Armenian companies and the spread of disinformation vary and is still a subject to ongoing developments and investigations. Armenia and Russia have historical ties and shared economic interests within the EAEU, and the business relations encompass a wide range of collaborations and partnerships, which do not necessarily involve negative intentions. Additionally, not all Russian businesses are engaged in disinformation campaigns, and in this regard, generalizations should be avoided.

Finally, Russian media outlets have a significant presence in Armenia and are used to spread some negative narratives about Armenian politics and business practices. These outlets usually present biased or false information, which easily impact the perception of both local and international investors and partners. Taking into account the historical ties and current geopolitical dynamics between Russia and Armenia, Russian authorities can use their influence to put pressure on certain sectors or companies in Armenia (as it happened with the dairy products market). This is used as a means to promote Russian interests or even gain more [control over specific industries](#) in Armenia.

Several cases were monitored when disinformation campaigns were organized against concrete businesses to cause some damage and lower the reputation. For example, Rosselkhoznadzor turned to the veterinary service of Armenia with a request to suspend the certification of dairy products in Russia from April 5, 2023 with all the country's enterprises. The department [made such a decision](#), "taking into account the results of negotiations and the unsatisfactory results of the inspection"<sup>8</sup>.

The weakening of the Russian ruble has weakened the competitiveness of Armenian products in the Russian market as well. Last year, when the Armenian dram began to appreciate, domestically produced goods [lost their competitiveness in the US and EU markets](#). However, they maintained their competitiveness in the Russian market. However, in 2023 the Armenian dram continues strengthening and it has started to affect [the competitiveness of Armenian products](#) in the Russian market.

Other speculations are spread about the Lars checkpoint. Companies involved in the transferring goods from Armenia to Russia, are always facing to issues regarding misinformation spread about the Lars checkpoint. An interviewee who is from this sector mentioned that producers of goods always get not enough information regarding the Lars checkpoint, "It's easy to say that the Lars checkpoint is closed. But mostly the reasons are not presented. It can be helpful to the business if the reasons are shared with the public and transferring companies. Otherwise, the prices are raising and it's not good for our business. There are also huge portion of manipulations on this topic, as there is no other ground / land way to transfer goods from Armenia to Russia".

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<sup>8</sup> Россельхознадзор обратился в ветеринарную службу Армении с просьбой приостановить поставки молочной продукции в Россию, published on 31/03/2023, available on 27/07/2023 at: <https://fsvps.gov.ru/ru/fsvps/news/217425.html>

## Dis/misinformation dissemination channels

### *Social media:*

Especially through Facebook and Instagram posts and thematic groups (for example, one of the interviewees mentioned the [Healthy Food group](#) (Անվտանգ սնունդ) as the most active one), several activists and individuals cause remarkable damage to the reputation of some businesses in the food industry. Based on the structured interviews, social media platforms have emerged as primary conduits for disinformation dissemination due to their extensive user base, accessibility, and ease of sharing information. According to the interviewees, these platforms facilitate the rapid spread of false narratives, enabling disinformation to gain widespread traction within a short span. Sometimes even professional groups are used to spread dis/misinformation. According to a business representative, a social media group where one can find professional consultancy and news from the accountants, from time to time spread not clarified and verified information, “This cost taxation related issues one of the companies, as the information was not accurate. When I find time to check information, I try to make some comments, otherwise false information can easily harm others’ businesses”.

### *News outlets*

Certain media outlets, both mainstream and not that much popular amongst the users, perpetuate disinformation through biased or misleading reporting. These outlets inadvertently contribute to the amplification of false narratives. Interviewees mentioned the case regarding the examination of the dairy products market that one of the leading media outlets did recently. Several companies came up with statement releases but not all voices were heard in the same power and spread. Another representative of a business shared a story when their former employee went to the reputable media and told them things which were not true, “We tried to reach out to the media, however, our letter with a statement stayed unpublished. Taking into account the approach of the media outlets in Armenia which is not to publish refutations, corrections and statements from the business organisations, we started a campaign showing how the workers’ rights are protected in our company.”

### *Online forums and blogs/vlogs*

Online forums (specific groups) and v/blogs often serve as echo chambers, further propagating disinformation as like-minded individuals share and reinforce false information. One of the interviewees shared a case when a customer called to get a financial compensation, otherwise threatening the business to act in a video message. Several interviewees confirmed that they also got threatening messages from vloggers and journalists who has audience.

### *Government representatives, state actors and politicians*

State bodies sometimes spread press releases which cause reputation damage to several businesses. This is especially true when it comes to the big companies as some of them might have political interests. State actors and politicians are also quite actively spreading not fact-based information regarding some businesses causing reputation damage. One of the business representatives whose company is operating in the logistics and transferring goods shared the story of having a dry port in Poti, Georgia. The minister has announced about the initiative and start of the works. “I know several

companies where people started to work on new business plans and they spent time on this, however, in the end it was another failed promise from the officials. It's hard to compensate the time and resources spent on planning new strategies and on ground logistics regarding the dry port" mentioned by the interviewee.

Vulnerable sectors within the businesses that can be impacted heavily from the dis/misinformation and damage the brand/reputation were mentioned by the interviewees. Most of them openly think that modern big business companies have already developed enough structures and employed high ranking professionals to face to disinformation campaigns and manage the crisis that the organization may face, but there are several sectors which can fully disappear from the market because of the potential damage of disinformation. These are:

- **Small and medium enterprises (SMEs):**

SMEs are particularly vulnerable to disinformation's adverse effects, given their limited resources and expertise to combat false narratives. According to the interviewees, disinformation campaigns can result in reputational damage and financial losses, potentially jeopardizing SMEs sustainability. They don't have enough human resources to overcome the damage cause by the disinformation campaigns. They are in survival mode, as on daily basis there are so many issues to overcome. According to an interviewee, it can be helpful, if some legal changes will happen, for example each company should employ a person who will be responsible for those kinds of activities.

- **Foreign businesses operations:**

Foreign investments (capital) and companies in Armenia may find themselves at a heightened risk of disinformation campaigns, which can undermine consumer trust, create uncertainty, and impact on future investment decisions. One of the representatives of an IT company mentioned that their company had plans to expand their activities and go beyond Armenia, however, disinformation in the field forced them reconsider their plans for the future.

The disinformation landscape in Armenia poses complex challenges to the private sector, necessitating a robust response to safeguard businesses and the economy. By understanding the current sources, actors, and channels of disinformation, businesses can devise targeted strategies to counter its harmful effects.

### [Dis/misinformation impact on the private sector](#)

Almost all interviewed interlocutors mention that dis/misinformation pose a great threat which can significantly affect the companies' reputation, undermine the organization's reputation and question its reliability. Main consequences of disinformation on businesses in Armenia are multifaceted and can have far-reaching implications for their operations, reputation, and financial stability. Dis/misinformation can lead to a negative perception of a company's products, services or business practices, can lead to legal, compliance or financial problems, loss of customers, difficulty attracting new customers or damage to brand image, decline in sales, loss of investors.

Disinformation can also have severe economic implications causing the company be dissolved and employees asked for leaving. According to the interviewee from the IT sector, there are some false

narratives about their company's hiring policies which make people leave their positions earlier, within a year. "At our company we are organizing training courses. The duration is for 6 months. We are selecting people with no knowledge of the field and help them to develop their capacities. Starting from the half of the training courses we hire some of them. However, there is false information that people are staying at our company only for a year and then they move to a new place with higher salaries and more ambitious projects. This is not true, as at least 7 people stay with us more than a year, but in general there is that stereotype that people are not staying with us", highlights the disinformation impact on their business the interviewee.

According to a representative of business association, spread of disinformation impact on all layers of private sector, "When we speak about businesses, we touch the topic of money. At any stage disinformation cost money losses. Businesses face to many issues starting from losing the trust of the customer. And then there is time needed to restore the good name of the company."

Another representative of a telecommunication company said that the volume of disinformation in Armenia has stimulated the increase in the level of mistrust among consumers in general. And now the companies triple their efforts to keep trust of customers at an all-time high.

There were cases when spread of disinformation caused the whole business operation to stop in Armenia. An interviewee mentioned that especially small businesses and start-ups can face to this kind of issues. However, understanding and addressing these consequences are not an easy task for businesses. They try to find the ways to operate in the market. According to the interviewees, the most vulnerable fields which easily can be affected from disinformation are food and service industries, entertainment, tourism, construction, mining and different services provided online or offline. It's crucial for the businesses to effectively navigate the increasingly complex information landscape and safeguard their interests.

"To protect their reputation, companies are still learning to prioritize transparency, accuracy and open communication. Implementing strong fact-checking processes, monitoring their online conversations, and promptly addressing and correcting any misinformation can help maintain trust and credibility with stakeholders", thinks one of the interviewees. The average 4 points out of 10 is given by the interviewees to the readiness of the private sector to face and tackle disinformation.

According to the business representatives, disinformation can significantly impact the company's reputation and brand image. These are the main priorities modern companies are worried about. When false narratives or misleading information about a business circulate, it almost always tarnishes its reputation and erode consumer trust. One of the interviewees shared her opinion stating that "consumers are increasingly cautious about supporting brands associated with bad reputation, and disinformation leads to decreased customer loyalty and patronage". That is the reason when there was a scandal regarding to a recreational place (the Office Yerevan), their company decided not to organize activities at that place for a while. However, later they found out that young people continue to visit the place frequently.

Reputational damage may require extensive efforts in crisis management and communication to rebuild trust and restore the brand's credibility, ultimately affecting the company's market position

and competitiveness. Taking into account this, one of the interviewees mentioned that he spends so much time replying for the comment regarding to their organization, as “mostly people are not that much informed what is happening and why that thing is happening. It’s always easy to blame for the failure. However, we have our own ways to fight against disinformation”. A company representative mentioned that due to the spread of disinformation, the state agencies spent some time checking his business, as one of the promising former colleagues decided to make a revenge. “He informed the state bodies about the tax frauds at our company. They spent a week checking everything, but it was simple disinformation”.

Another way to fight against possible disinformation is proactive communication with stakeholders. A representative of business association shared a story of former colleague who left the company and started his own business, however, he was using the name and reputation of the organization to organize training courses and seminars. “When I learned about it from other people, I understood that my former colleague spreads disinformation. I decided to text to our partners and members that the person left our organization and he is not connected with us. This helped”.

According to business representatives, in Armenia SMEs don’t have that much human resources to rebuild the trust if disinformation is spread about their activity, when big corporations can allow them to have the best specialists in the field. That’s the reason almost all businesses suffer financial losses due to disinformation campaigns.

False or incorrect information basically led to decreased sales, as consumers avoided products from those companies. People can avoid also services they perceive to be unreliable or untrustworthy. Additionally, disinformation can manipulate stock prices (the stock market is not that developed in the Armenian context; however, the situation is clear especially for the ones which have an idea to expand their businesses), affecting investor confidence and leading to fluctuating market conditions. During recent years some transnational businesses incurred significant losses in their market value, and later shareholders experience reduced returns on investments worldwide. This financial instability can hinder the company's growth prospects and ability to secure funding for expansion, as mentioned by the business representative.

False narratives can also lead to confusion among employees and stakeholders, causing inefficiencies and delays in decision-making and overall business performance. Disinformation about supply chain disruptions, regulatory changes, or financial challenges can further exacerbate operational difficulties, affecting productivity and profitability. According to a business representative this happened to one of the businesses due to unfair competition in the market. It made one of the supermarket chains come up with great discount on a product (egg industry). So, the other supermarkets wanted to get the product as cheap as it was on sale in this chain.

In the Armenian business environment, the best solution to combat disinformation has not yet been found. Each business is trying to mitigate the impact of disinformation as much as possible at the expense of their abilities and knowledge for restoring trust among customers and lost reputation. Large companies have been able to find mechanisms to combat disinformation campaigns targeting their operations through proactive communication and transparent operations.

Perhaps one of the best solutions can be to increase the level of media literacy both in the business environment and among the public. In that regard, it is interesting to note that a number of representatives of the business community have regular meetings with the representatives of the media, trying to discuss the existing issues with them through a face-to-face conversation. But this is not a common practice.

## B. Media literacy needs in the private sector

This section of the research aims to explore the level of media literacy among businesses in Armenia, shedding light on their understanding, practices, and engagement, as well as identifying potential areas for improvement and opportunities for private sector involvement in media literacy initiatives. Understanding the level of media literacy within the private sector can help identify potential challenges faced by businesses in discerning reliable information, evaluating media messages, and promoting responsible practices.

The issue is analyzed in two layers: policy level and its practical implications. On the policy level, there have been essential developments since 2021. The RA government has developed two key strategic documents in relation to the media literacy. In 2022–2023 in close cooperation with the [Freedom of Information Center](#) and with support of the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), the Armenian Government developed and organized public discussions on the National Strategy against disinformation and its roadmap.<sup>9</sup> The strategy unites the efforts of the government, civil society and citizens to combat disinformation. The main goal of the strategy is to ensure the proper response of the Government of Armenia by preventing, reducing and neutralizing the risks of disinformation.

The strategy has three pillars, one of which is related to the private sector engagement in the struggle against information disorders. The document widely recognizes the significant role of the business sector in these processes. It explains that private companies involved in the information technology, communication, public relations, consulting sector can take on the role of developing mechanisms and innovative tools to combat misinformation in active cooperation with both the government and civil society. Private companies can play a particularly important role in the development of useful tools through automated mechanisms and artificial intelligence for combating disinformation. Availability of state funding or grants from international organizations can motivate private tech companies to initiate effective programs for the local market. The document also underpins the key importance of the cooperation between the state and the private sector.

The third pillar of the strategy is related to the development of MIL, “Raising awareness and level of education on media freedoms and media literacy by constituting societal resilience towards disinformation”. As a key priority, the government first has taken over to develop and adopt a comprehensive media literacy development concept and an action plan. It is also planned to establish a government council, a body, which will coordinate the work and activities in MIL and will operate

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<sup>9</sup> The National Strategy against Disinformation and its roadmap were developed by the Freedom of Information Center by the support of CIPE in 2022. The documents are available at: <http://www.foi.am/en/research/item/2263/>.

independently and will be composed of high-profile specialists in the field. The strategy and the roadmap for the struggle against disinformation will be adopted in September 2023.

Another guiding document the “RA Strategy on Digitalization” was adopted by the RA Government in February 2021 which includes a special section regarding media literacy competencies. The 4.1 subsection defines that digital skills training will be integrated into the general educational curriculum in the schools. It is planned to implement programs aimed at revising the school educational program and training teachers will be implemented, which will make it possible to make the public education system more flexible, more in line with the professions of the future and the requirements of the economy. It also envisions that Digital skills development will be targeted among people with special needs as an important means of social inclusion and work skills development.<sup>10</sup> This strategy reflects the private sector as one of the key players in the field. The subsection 10 of the Strategy defines that “As a result of cooperation with all state agencies and the business sector, it is planned to implement complex educational programs for all age and social groups of the public, to make Armenia's digital transformation agenda a reality, to meet the challenges of the future economy and the evolving requirements of cyber security”. However, there is evidence with regard to implementation of the Strategy of digitalization on the mentioned components and the role of private sector in media literacy. In response to the FOICA’s information request addressed to the Ministry of High Tech in July 2023 no concrete information was provided on this matter.<sup>11</sup>

The third strategic reform was the institutionalization of media education and integration of it into the general education system. The cooperation between the government and the civil society gained a new momentum in 2021, when the MIC<sup>12</sup> and other civil society groups actively cooperated with the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports (ESCS) and adopted new educational standards in February, 2021 one of which refers to media education skills and abilities in the field of general education.

The new national educational criteria<sup>13</sup> adopted in February 2021 propose a big step forward. The state standard for general education of the Republic of Armenia (also the state standard for preschool education), identifies 8 competencies, one of which is **digital and media competency**, which, in practice, is a detailed description of media literacy. The criteria 5<sup>th</sup> refers to the digital and media capability; learners master the rules and skills of media literacy.<sup>14</sup>

On the practical level, as our direct observations and the in-dept interviews showed, the private sector remains passive and the level of engagement of the private sector in media literacy initiatives in Armenia is really low. Private sector organizations were generally not involved in supporting media

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<sup>10</sup> RA Strategy on Digitalization, adopted in 2021, available at: <https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docID=149957>.

<sup>11</sup> The information request of the FOICA was submitted on July 20, 2023 and official response was received on July 2023, available at: <https://www.givemeinfo.am/hy/case/3492/>

<sup>12</sup> Medialiteracy resources, Media Initiative Center, [https://mediainitiatives.am/en/medialiteracy/?fbclid=IwAR137bH6OS6Z4ZUdvaL414SBzhLSISJTfNyeGRpWEWi9bVV\\_yjeb9RptkHo](https://mediainitiatives.am/en/medialiteracy/?fbclid=IwAR137bH6OS6Z4ZUdvaL414SBzhLSISJTfNyeGRpWEWi9bVV_yjeb9RptkHo).

<sup>13</sup> The state education standard is available at: <https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?DocID=149788>.

<sup>14</sup> Guidelines developed by the British government on this subject can serve as an example, available at: <https://3x7ip91ron4ju9ehf2unqrm1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/RESIST-Counter-Disinformation-Toolkit.pdf> and <https://www.msb.se/RibData/Filer/pdf/28698.pdf>.

literacy programs and initiatives and had almost no engagement in the process. Private sector is not involved in education, development of educational materials, or supporting public awareness programs.

Civil society leaders complain that the main burden of the development of media literacy in the country was left on the shoulders of the CSOs. All major projects have been initiated by the civil society members while the business remains passive in the field. There have been unique cases when the CSOs worked closely with the private sector towards building and advancing MIL capacities. For example, in 2022 the FOICA with the support of CIPE developed a Media Literacy and Fact Checking curriculum for conducting trainings on fact-checking and media literacy for the private sector.<sup>15</sup> It covers all thematic areas of the topic, including basic media literacy tools and skills, photo, video checking tools, mail and social network accounts' checking, research of news sources, checking geolocation, work with open-source data, deep research of websites, use of personal data, research of accounts in social platforms and other key aspects of fact checking and information security. Based on the developed curriculum, in January-February period the FOICA team conducted a series of trainings for the business companies engaging more than 100 representatives from the business<sup>16</sup>.

While examining the knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to media literacy, we were provided with insights into the current state of media literacy within the private sector. The private sector representatives interviewed within the framework of the research highlight the key importance of the media literacy. As one of the representatives mentioned: "The private sector is always in competition, you must always be flexible, possess a lot of accurate information, so that you can continue the business." Although the private sector understands and points out the key importance of the media literacy for the success of their business and the reputation, however the practice shows that they direct very limited resources towards development of media literacy competencies of their members/staff as well as their customers.

Many of the interviewed private sector representatives acknowledge that media and information literacy is one of the most effective tools to combat information disorders. While they clearly realize the role of media literacy and its significance in countering disinformation, the private sector has shown a notable passivity in embracing media literacy initiatives. Despite their understanding of the potential harm and risks caused by disinformation, the businesses have been hesitant to actively engage in media literacy efforts.

There have been rare and fragmental cases of media literacy engagement. For example, a company informed during the interviews that every year they organize at least 2 training sessions annually for their staff members to educate them and advance their digital literacy. But this example is more an exception rather than a common practice.

The lack of interest and engagement in the media literacy initiatives is conditioned by several factors as stated by the representatives of business companies during the interviews. First, they point out

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<sup>15</sup> Media Literacy and Fact Checking curriculum for the private sector, available at: <http://www.foi.am/hy/training-materials/>.

<sup>16</sup> More information on the tailored trainings for the private sector can be found here: <http://www.foi.am/en/implemented-trainings/item/2173/>.



the lack of awareness and having a misunderstanding on the role of media literacy across the sector. Businesses have limited awareness of the importance and benefits of media literacy. They do not fully understand how media literacy can impact their operations, reputation, and relationship with stakeholders. Certain private sector organizations do not see media literacy as directly relevant to their industry or business. They assume that media literacy is more applicable to media-related businesses and not essential for their operations.

Moreover, some private companies, especially the mid and small size businesses, also underpin that media literacy development of their staff requires resources and prioritization over main business activities. The respondents agree that each private company has various abilities and resources, and this diversity is evident across organizations in how they handle media literacy related matters. Larger organizations often have dedicated support teams, including press officers and communication experts, enabling them to respond promptly to media requests/publications and address potential issues effectively. Conversely, the small and medium size companies have limited resources and manpower. They do not have communications team or a dedicated specialist in the staff to take care of developing communication plans and strategies. Therefore, they responding to disinformation mostly by ignoring attacks which is not the best way, says the private sector representative. “We have chosen not to respond to negative things or misinformation, but I am not sure that is the right option. We don't have a dedicated team, we make the decisions ourselves”. In small teams, they delegate or outsource media-related activities to external agencies to compensate for the lack of in-house expertise or rely on one specialist to manage media communications. In contrast, larger organizations with well-established support teams are better equipped to handle disinformation related challenges in a more comprehensive and efficient manner.

The head of one of the largest business clubs of Armenia explained this by the fact that the business today has so many diverse and vital problems to solve that the turn does not reach this important problem. There are very few stable developing businesses in Armenia. For example, the first 10 large taxpayers can be mentioned as such. And in this case, it is normal that they have no clue of the importance of media literacy.

The interviewed experts also mention that prioritization of media literacy within the corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives may play a significant role in influencing a business's engagement in media literacy efforts. Media literacy is not among the CSR initiatives for many reasons starting from financial constrains to lack of knowledge and awareness. As practice shows, businesses tend to prioritize CSR initiatives that have a more direct connection to their core operations or have a tangible impact on their immediate stakeholders, employees, or communities. Media literacy initiatives, while important for societal development, are perceived as less directly related to their immediate interests or core business functions.

## The role of the state

So far, the Government undertook a role of developing strategic documents and initiating reforms towards the MIL promotion. Two major reforms have been taken forward by the Government as

described in above sections. However, none of the state initiatives directly touches upon the private sector needs and do not comply with the expectations of the business itself and how they see the role of the state to address the identified problems. First, the business highlights the importance of the state's role in advancement of the media literacy. The business perceives the role of the state as the support provider and educator in this field. This support could come in the form of funding for media literacy programs, educational campaigns, or the development of media literacy resources. The second role arbitrated to the state is a regulator and policy/standards developer. The business sector conveys that the state can play a crucial role in setting standards and regulations related to media literacy. By establishing guidelines for media literacy education in schools and institutions, businesses may benefit from a more media-literate workforce.

The state's involvement in integrating media literacy into educational curricula is seen positively by businesses. Media literacy education at an early age can foster critical thinking skills among future employees and consumers. In addition, the state may also encourage and apply mechanisms to encouraging public-private partnerships. However, some business representatives expressed a fear that sometimes when the state takes a leading role in the fight against disinformation, risks might be arisen in relation to the unreasonable restrictions of the freedom of expression. Therefore, they suggest that the fight against disinformation should be considered in the field of media self-regulation, because the state is not always a "good fighter". "The state usually turns the struggle into repression, is guided not by approaching everyone equally", says one of the interviewed business representatives.

Some businesses view the state as a facilitator of public-private partnerships in media literacy. By creating an enabling environment for collaboration, the state can encourage businesses to engage in media literacy initiatives jointly.

It should be stressed that on all the mentioned directions the interviewed large and medium size businesses are not satisfied on how the state fulfills its anticipated roles. They also point out that the state also does not take any initiative to create media literacy competences of the business community. "If there is no government program where one can acquire this knowledge to help the business, the business itself organizes everything. This applies to all areas, not just media literacy." "If the business losses because of disinformation, the state should not let the business fall. If the business is running at a loss due to disinformation, the state should lend a hand, and it will be a mutually beneficial cooperation, because the growth of business helps the state and the first beneficiary is the state.", says one of the large-scale businesses interviewed.

### The role of the media

In the fight against dis/misinformation, the main agenda of the Armenian media includes strengthening independent media outlets, achieving transparency in media ownership and funding, promoting self-regulation mechanisms, and developing fact-checking initiatives. It should be noted that the business sector sees wider and more dominant role of the media in the promotion of the MIL. They convey that "the media plays a crucial role in the fight against disinformation in the private sector. Journalists have an important role to play in investigating and exposing disinformation campaigns, exposing misleading or false information, and holding accountable those responsible for

spreading disinformation. The media can contribute to the fight against disinformation by raising awareness of its prevalence, the tactics used, and the potential impact on society and the private sector. They can educate public and private sector stakeholders about the importance of media literacy, critical thinking and responsible information consumption. “The media should not only be the ones who spread accurate information, but also should provide education and the system of using this information correctly”, highlights on one of the interviewed business representatives.

There have been a number of initiatives led by the media outlets aimed at MIL promotion in the country. Some media outlets launched fact checking units to check and verify facts, others develop and publish media literacy programs, or train young generation equipping the youth with necessary knowledge that helps them participate fully in the multimedia ecosystem.

One of the leading media outlets CivilNet has launched a fact checking unit inside the media outlet #CivilNetCheck. “#CivilNetCheck is here to expose fake news, misinformation, and media manipulation, - as it is stated in the website of the fact checking initiative.<sup>17</sup> Functioning since October 2021, three specialists implement fact-checking research on a daily basis and help the editorial office to avoid fake news. The establishment of the fact checking unit was supported by the British Embassy in Yerevan.

Factor TV, one of the popular online media, also started its own fight against dis/misinformation since June 2021. It is quite active on social media, especially on Facebook. At present the SMM specialists of this media outlet carefully edit FB users’ comments, first warn, then eliminate the fake news and dis/misinformation from their platform, but still do not block the accounts that spread it not to hinder the users’ freedom of expression.

At present, the “Verified” section<sup>18</sup> of “Media.am” professional platform implements fact-checking and verification of various information, circulating on social networks on an almost daily basis. The topics of the publications are also diverse.

In MIL education promotion a significant role should be arbitrated to the public broadcasters. Working to empower and educate citizens should be an integral part of their mission. An attractive and interesting program has been launched on the Armenian Public TV since 2021. The “Media Literacy” program is aimed at expanding the general knowledge of the media literacy. The program host is Samvel Martirosyan, a famous information security expert. The Public TV is also active in capacity building of young journalists. Within the newly established Public Academy of Media in 5-months period the participant young journalists undergo a practical training course to get practical skills and knowledge on journalism.

There are some advanced and quality media which fully realize their role in the development of media literacy. In the meantime, they complain that the media take the first blow of disinformation. Materials on which they spend 4 hours to develop to ensure that it has an effect, and they see, that the garbage which was produced in a minute, immediately attracts the audience. They clearly

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<sup>17</sup> CivilNetCheck, <https://www.civilnet.am/en/news/653131/presenting-civilnetcheck/>.

<sup>18</sup> See the publications of the "Verified" section, available at <https://media.am/hy/category/verified>.

understand that a situation has been created where the media are often identified with those content creators who do not follow the professional standards, as a result they see that the media are losing public trust.

### Strategies suggested by the private sector to address the identified needs in MIL field

The interlocutors mention that advancement of the staff members in MIL should be the first priority for any business. However, majority of the interviewed small and big size businesses mentioned that they rarely organize any MIL related training courses for their whole staff and not only the communication or PR staff. “In many cases, employees do not know what can be posted on social networks and what not, whether it is possible to criticize one's own boss, write what is happening in the department, whether it is possible to give an interview or provide information. Since media literacy education is not yet mandatory in our schools, then this should be the task of each business entity to take care of this lack of knowledge on their own initiative.” However, as it was stated above, it is resource consuming, and specialists should be hired for this purpose.

The representatives also highlight the need for proactive initiatives coming directly from the private sector. They can take proactive steps to organize media literacy events, courses, workshops and educate their employees about the risks of disinformation, focusing on critical thinking and disinformation detection. It is quite strange why the big players of the telecommunication or the banking system which have solid understanding of their potential role in the MIL field and possess sufficient resources, never have taken any concrete initiative until now. There could be several explanations for this, starting from lack of prioritization to the fear of being misunderstood and the need to consider public perception and how their involvement in media literacy initiatives might be perceived by stakeholders.

In the meantime, they declare, that in case the civil society approach them with good ideas, they are more than ready to partner, be engaged and stand for joint initiatives. One of the leading telecommunication companies of Armenia expresses full readiness to cooperate with civil society and the media in advancement of MIL. “We are ready to actively participate in media literacy programs, workshops and campaigns aimed at educating its customers and the wider public about the importance of critical thinking, sourcing and fact-checking. We can cooperate with reputable fact-checking organizations, supporting their efforts in identifying false information and disseminating accurate news.”, says the head of PR department of this company.

Others prefer putting more efforts towards public’ education. One of the companies, for example, created a [cartoon](#) explaining the end-users the importance of accurate information.

Several partners underline also the role of business associations in promotion of the MIL. Associations will ensure that the fight against disinformation is united and their community interests are properly maintained and protected. “Because you can't fight alone”. “When, let’s say, the furniture makers create their union, there will be a " court of friends" to judge “dirty” things against each other. If a manufacturer has caused damage to another, they will not go to the court, but to their internal court and will claim: this member of our union is harming the other, so open the

rulebook, let's see what happens. At least that member can be expelled from the union. It is a much more powerful tool than the court". They brought the good example of [Mantashyants entrepreneurs' union](#) where they regularly organize meetings with the media, exchange of ideas, and the goal is to listen to the problems of both sides, to understand the working style: how should we work and communicate with each other."

It should be noted however that the business associations don't understand their role very well although many business companies see them as the main actors in the field of media literacy.

### State-private-public partnership

Partnerships between government, the private sector, and civil society can be effective in developing policies and guidelines to combat disinformation, promote media literacy, and encourage the responsible sharing of information. By collaborating and pooling their resources, these sectors can develop comprehensive and coordinated policies and guidelines, to organize public education campaigns to combat disinformation and encourage responsible information sharing.

It should be stated that there is a wrong understanding among the private sector of how the partnership should be or who will be the initiator of such relations. From one side the private sector declares that they are ready to cooperate and support MIL development initiatives, from the other, they do not fulfill or support any concrete projects with CSOs or the state in the MIL field. It is important to note that in some cases, the NGOs have certain reservations about receiving financial support from the private sector. "For example, in the case of mining companies, they will be very interested in supporting our projects, but on the other hand, it will put our impartiality under doubt and create a risk of conflict of interests. The only sector is the IT sector, which is not problematic, but they do not have a particular interest in media literacy", says the leader of a prominent NGO. One thing is obvious also, that the business has little understanding about the benefits they might have from MIL projects, how their commercial interest will be addressed by so.

Another leading expert in the field indicates that MIL just doesn't cross their mind. "Several times there was a case that various banks asked me to give speeches under their logo and explain, but I refused because it would not be media literacy, it would be an advertisement for the bank. They do not understand what public-private cooperation means. Also, they always perceive the NGO sector as an opportunity to beg money from them."

In sum, all experts agree that the push for media literacy requires public-private sector collaboration to pool resources and maximize the impact. They note that the state-civil society-business partnership should be strengthened by exchanging resources and experiences, leveraging expertise, co-developing policies and regulations, sharing information and coming up with educational initiatives on the field to advance the MIL in the society and for the business in particular. Collaboration among different sectors will enable a more coordinated and synergistic effort to address disinformation.

And finally, it is important to ensure that private sector engagement in media literacy is transparent, ethical, and aligned with the goals of promoting critical thinking, digital literacy, and responsible media consumption.

## C. Best practices and case studies

Researchers could find out some good practices and case studies from different countries in Europe and the world that highlight successful media literacy programs targeting the private sector, employees of businesses and effective responses to combating disinformation.

It has been a while that Estonia has been at [the forefront of media literacy](#) initiatives in Europe. The country implements "Media Literacy for Business" program focuses on enhancing media literacy skills among employees in the private sector. The program provides training on critical thinking, source verification, and media literacy tools, empowering businesses to identify and combat disinformation effectively.

The Netherlands' experience in the field is also quite impressive: [the Dutch Media Literacy Network](#) brings together various stakeholders, including businesses, educators, and media organizations, to promote media literacy in the private sector. By fostering collaboration and sharing resources, the network helps businesses develop media literacy strategies, train employees, and implement effective measures against disinformation.

[Finland has integrated media and information literacy \(MIL\) education into its national curriculum](#), which extends to the private sector. "Promoting Media and Information Literacy in Businesses" program [promotes](#) MIL awareness among employees and equips them with skills to critically evaluate information sources and combat disinformation within business environments.

[The Media Competence Program in Germany](#) focuses on enhancing media literacy across different sectors, including the private sector. The program offers workshops, training sessions, and resources to businesses to develop media literacy skills among their employees, enabling them to discern disinformation and make informed decisions.

Sweden [has implemented media and information literacy initiatives in the private sector through partnerships with media organizations, educational institutions, and businesses](#). These collaborations aim to enhance media literacy skills among employees, enabling them to identify and counter disinformation effectively. One of those programs is "Media and Information Literacy in the Private Sector".

["Digital Awareness UK"](#) is an organization that provides media literacy training and resources to businesses, schools, and other sectors in the United Kingdom. Their programs based on the available help private sector organizations build resilience against disinformation by promoting critical thinking, digital citizenship, and responsible use of digital media.

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, in the United States, there is [an initiative called "MediaWise"](#). It is a project of the Poynter Institute, focused on media literacy education for young people. While

primarily aimed at students, the program also offers resources and workshops for businesses to enhance media literacy among employees. By equipping businesses with the necessary skills, MediaWise helps build resilience against disinformation.

[MediaSmarts](#) is a Canadian nonprofit organization that offers media literacy resources and programs for various sectors, including businesses. Their initiatives provide training and educational materials to help private sector organizations develop media literacy strategies and navigate disinformation challenges effectively.

There is [an interesting approach](#) to the issue from Australia. "eSafety Commissioner's Cyber Security Education Program" offers a comprehensive Cyber Security Education Program that addresses media literacy and digital skills in the private sector. The program emphasizes understanding online risks, critical evaluation of information sources, and safeguarding business data from disinformation-driven cyber threats.

Singapore has also advanced experience in supporting the private sector regarding the issue: [the initiative "Better Internet Campaign for Businesses"](#) targets the public and people, but also the private sector, promoting media literacy and responsible online behavior. The campaign provides resources, workshops, and awareness programs to equip businesses with the knowledge and tools necessary to combat disinformation and build a safer digital environment.

There are many more examples showing good cooperation between the private sector and non-profit organisations. When analyzing these case studies, the researchers team highlight several lessons that can be learned and used in Armenia.

- 1) Successful media literacy initiatives in the private sector involve collaboration among various stakeholders, including businesses, educators, media organizations, and government agencies. By working together, they can pool resources, share knowledge, and develop comprehensive strategies to combat disinformation.
- 2) Tailoring media literacy programs to the specific needs of the private sector is crucial not only in Armenia. Programs that provide practical training, tools, and resources that align with business operations and contexts are more effective in building resilience against disinformation.
- 3) Addressing the unique disinformation challenges faced by the private sector in Armenia is essential. Media literacy programs should focus on topics relevant to businesses, such as reputation management, customers trust, and financial implications of disinformation.
- 4) Everywhere the landscape of disinformation evolves rapidly, requiring media literacy programs to stay up-to-date and adapt to emerging trends and tactics. Regular assessment, feedback, and improvement are necessary to ensure program effectiveness.
- 5) Integrating media literacy into organizational culture can be the reaction to the current situation. Successful media literacy initiatives in the private sector go beyond individual training sessions and embed media literacy principles into the organizational culture. By fostering a culture of critical thinking, source verification, and responsible information sharing, businesses can build a resilient workforce.

These best practices and case studies offer valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and private sector leaders in Armenia to develop tailored media literacy programs, forge partnerships, and implement effective responses to disinformation threads. By adopting these lessons, Armenia can strengthen its private sector's resilience and contribute to a more informed and resilient society in short and long-term contexts.

## D. Conclusions

The following key findings have been derived from the research. In relation to the impact, channels and sources of dis/misinformation in the private sector of Armenia, the research team concludes that:

- Dis/misinformation finds fertile ground in Armenia's information landscape due to **factors** such as inconsistent government communication, propaganda, and low media literacy among the public and business. Efforts to combat disinformation have been made by civil society, media experts, and policymakers, but legislation and protection mechanisms have not been fully comprehensive, leaving businesses vulnerable to unfair competition and reputational harm.
- **False narratives** spread about Armenian businesses are quite diverse. Telecommunication companies, for example, faced disinformation about their shareholders and ownerships. Food industry is forced to deal with quality related, generalized false narratives from customers who are not satisfied, or competitors supporting them to spread disinformation. Apart from quality related news, food industry is a target for media outlets which do examination of the freshness of the dairy products. Construction and mining sectors also face false narratives regarding their ownership and quality. One company can blame the other one's quality and safety measures. Tourism companies always attacked by the costumers who experiences some bad moments with them, so generalized content is spread about their business activities. Overall, businesses are mainly suffering false narratives spread about their quality and ownership. There are also narratives about how they make their businesses: tax fraud or bad conditions and low payment for employees are there.
- Dis/misinformation and false narratives can **impact** businesses in various ways, from misleading competitors using dirty tactics to tarnishing their reputation on social media, which can demotivate potential customers and affect future business plans. Disinformation harms the reputation of the private companies, it may affect investors' confidence, may create market instability, impacting a company's ability to secure funding and expand. Employees and stakeholders may face confusion and inefficiencies due to disinformation about disruptions, regulatory changes, or financial challenges. Legal and regulatory issues can arise from false information about a company's practices or products, leading to lawsuits and regulatory scrutiny from tax authorities.
- **State actors** in Armenia have been identified as significant sources of disinformation, engaging in campaigns that aim to manipulate public opinion and influence political outcomes, impacting the private sector. State-sponsored disinformation has led to confusion and uncertainty within the private sector, with businesses struggling to discern the accuracy of information released by government officials. False narratives propagated by state agencies have affected businesses' decision-making processes, leading to delays in expansion



plans and investments due to non-clarity in state operations. The lack of clear and consistent communication from government officials has eroded trust in their statements, forcing businesses to spend more time and effort to verify information from multiple sources.

- **Nonstate actors**, including individuals, customers, competitors, vloggers, bloggers, journalists, media outlets, and opinion leaders, also play a significant role in spreading disinformation and false narratives that negatively impact businesses in Armenia. The presence and influence of nonstate actors in disseminating disinformation posed unique challenges for businesses, as they lack the resources and expertise to combat false narratives propagated through various channels and platforms.
- The spread of false narratives especially **on social media** poses a significant risk to businesses. Disinformation dissemination in Armenia primarily occurs through social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram, as well as thematic groups, where activists and individuals spread false narratives about businesses in the food industry and other sectors. Online forums, blogs, and vlogs serve as echo chambers, further propagating disinformation as like-minded individuals share and reinforce false information about businesses.
- **Foreign influence** is present in Armenia's disinformation landscape, with external actors seeking to exert influence over the country's political landscape, create discord, and promote their interests and businesses. Russian media has been observed engaging in disinformation campaigns to impact the Armenian business environment, control the market, and spread false narratives about Armenian companies and products. Disinformation campaigns originating from foreign actors, particularly Russian media, have the potential to tarnish the reputation of Armenian companies, create doubts about their reliability and financial stability, and harm their competitiveness in the Eurasian Economic Union.
- The presence of Russian media outlets in Armenia allows biased or false information to easily impact the perception of both local and international investors and partners, potentially influencing business decisions. The geopolitical dynamics between Russia and Armenia may lead to pressure on certain sectors or companies in Armenia to promote Russian interests or gain more control over specific industries. Speculations and misinformation about the Lars checkpoint, a crucial transit point for goods from Armenia to Russia, can impact businesses involved in transferring goods and raise operational costs.
- **Vulnerable sectors** within businesses, such as small and medium enterprises and foreign businesses operating in Armenia, are particularly susceptible to the adverse effects of disinformation due to limited resources and expertise to combat false narratives.

With regards to the media and information literacy development within the private sector it can be concluded that:

- **State initiatives:** The Armenian government has developed strategic documents, including the National Strategy against disinformation, recognizing the role of the private sector in combating disinformation. Media literacy is also included in the RA Strategy on Digitalization, but there is evidence of limited implementation and engagement of the private sector. State initiatives on MIL focus on information packages, trainings, but they do not directly address the specific needs of the private sector. There is no strategic document on MIL development which results in fragmental and inconsistent interventions in the country.

- Some businesses view the **state as a facilitator** of public-private partnerships in media literacy. According to the business community, the state also does not take any initiative to create media literacy competences of the business community.
- **CSO initiatives:** In the past decade, there has been some progress towards MIL development in Armenia due to a significant increase in programs on non-formal media literacy, turning the fight against dis/misinformation into a unique self-organization process led by **civil society**. The positive responses were mainly initiated by CSOs who were at the forefront of media and information education. The Armenian civil society has taken an active and leading role in promoting media literacy for all levels of society. They are involved in education, development of educational materials, using various media for advancing knowledge and skills among various target groups of society, including teachers, children, community and government officials, adults.
- **Private sector perception of MIL:** Media and information literacy is recognized as one of the most effective tools to combat information disorders. However, media literacy is seen as a low priority due to more pressing business challenges within the private sector. Within the private sector there is a clear understanding of the potential damages caused by information disorder as well as the strategic role of the media literacy for tackling it. However, the private sector has shown a notable passivity in embracing media literacy initiatives. Despite their understanding of the potential harm and risks caused by disinformation, the businesses have been hesitant to actively engage in media literacy efforts.
- **The lack of interest and engagement** in the media literacy initiatives is conditioned by several factors, such as the lack of awareness and having a misunderstanding on the role of media literacy across the sector., limited awareness of the importance and benefits of media literacy. In addition, certain private sector organizations do not see media literacy as directly relevant to their industry or business. They assume that media literacy is more applicable to media-related businesses and not essential for their operations. Some private companies, especially the mid and small size businesses, assure that media literacy development of their staff requires resources and prioritization over main business activities.
- **Assessing media literacy skills** within the private sector is essential to identify challenges in discerning reliable information and promoting responsible practices. Despite the acknowledgment of MIL's significance, many businesses do not organize regular MIL training for their employees, citing resource constraints as a challenge. Limited resources and manpower in smaller businesses hinder media literacy development among staff. Larger organizations with dedicated support teams are better equipped to handle disinformation-related challenges.
- Prioritization of media literacy within **corporate social responsibility** initiatives may influence the private sector's engagement in media literacy efforts. Businesses tend to prioritize CSR initiatives that have a more direct connection to their core operations or have a tangible impact on their immediate stakeholders, employees, or communities. Media literacy initiatives, while important for societal development, are perceived as less directly related to their immediate interests or core business functions.
- Businesses believe that **media plays a crucial role** in the fight against disinformation, exposing misleading information, and educating the public about media literacy and responsible

information consumption. In MIL education promotion a significant role should be arbitrated to the public broadcasters.

- The private sector shows a willingness to cooperate and support MIL development initiatives, but there is a need for better understanding and coordination between NGOs, the state, and businesses.

## E. Recommendations

The following recommendations have been drawn up for addressing the identified challenges in relation to the information disorder and lack of media and information literacy in Armenian business sector. Recommendations consider interests and roles of the key target stakeholder groups.

### For addressing disinformation challenges

#### **Public Awareness and Education:**

1. Invest in public awareness campaigns to educate the general public about the importance of verifying information and identifying false narratives. A well-informed audience is less susceptible to disinformation and can help curtail its spread.

#### **Legislation, Regulation, and Protection Mechanisms:**

2. Work towards the development and implementation of comprehensive legislation that addresses the issue of disinformation and its impact on businesses. Ensure that legal frameworks offer adequate protection to businesses against unfair competition and reputational harm caused by false narratives.

#### **Media Monitoring, Fact-Checking, and Responsible Advertising:**

3. Help to set up independent media monitoring and fact-checking organizations to identify and counter false narratives and disinformation. These mechanisms can provide accurate and timely information to the public and businesses, helping them make informed decisions.

4. Encourage businesses to adopt responsible advertising strategies that focus on providing factual information and promoting transparency. Support initiatives that incentivize advertising on reputable and quality media outlets.

#### **Collaboration, Dialogue, and Media Ethics:**

5. Encourage the private sector to actively participate in initiatives aimed at combatting disinformation. Foster partnerships between businesses, civil society, and media experts to collectively address the challenges posed by false narratives.

6. Enhance the clarity and consistency of government communication to avoid confusion and misinformation. State officials should carefully consider their statements before release, and information shared with the media should be accurate and thoroughly verified.

7. Develop clear guidelines for government officials to follow when communicating with the media and the public. These guidelines should emphasize accuracy, transparency, and the need for timely clarifications when necessary.

8. Media outlets should prioritize responsible reporting, ensuring that information from government officials is presented accurately and with context. Avoid sensationalizing statements that may lead to confusion or misinterpretation.

#### **Transparency, Fair Competition, and Crisis Communication:**

9. Advocate for increased transparency in government operations and decision-making processes. Openness and accessibility to information will foster trust and reduce the prevalence of disinformation.

10. Advocate for clearer legal procedures and protections against defamation and disinformation campaigns. Businesses should be equipped to defend themselves against false accusations and reputational attacks.

11. Develop crisis communication protocols for businesses to respond effectively to false narratives and misinformation that may impact their reputation. Quick and transparent communication can mitigate potential damage.

#### **Foreign Influence and Multilateral Approach:**

12. Monitor the activities of foreign media outlets operating in Armenia to identify and address potential disinformation campaigns aimed at damaging the reputation of Armenian companies and industries.

13. Foster diplomatic dialogue with foreign governments to address concerns about disinformation campaigns originating from their media outlets and promote responsible reporting.

14. A collaborative effort involving the government, private sector, media, and civil society is essential to build a resilient and well-informed society that fosters a conducive environment for businesses to thrive.

#### **For addressing MIL challenges**

##### **Public-Private Collaboration:**

1. Collaboration between various stakeholders, including the private sector, policymakers, and media experts, should be established and promoted to develop comprehensive solutions to combat disinformation. Establish collaborative platforms where private sector representatives can engage with experts and educators to develop effective interventions and initiatives. Collaboration, coordination and networking would improve the efficiency of work and will maximize the effects of

the activities and projects facilitating media literacy. These partnerships can amplify the impact of MIL initiatives and create a stronger network of actors committed to media literacy.

**2. Collaboration is also highly recommended to be established with the fact checking groups** which were established and successfully functioning in Armenia for many years now. Partnering with reputable fact-checking groups can enhance the business's credibility and demonstrate its commitment to combatting disinformation. This collaboration can also help debunk false narratives and reinforce the organization's commitment to transparency. Moreover, fact checking groups may also help the business to develop and establish fact-checking protocols within the organization. Encourage employees to verify information from reliable sources before using it in business or personal communications.

**3. Collaboration with Media Organizations:** The business community should be more active in building and fostering partnerships with reputable media organizations to access accurate and timely information. Such collaborations can help the private sector stay informed about potential disinformation campaigns. Collaboration with media outlets and organizations is crucial in creating and disseminating media literacy content. The private sector can work together with media entities to develop educational programs and awareness campaigns to enhance media literacy among the public.

**4. Collaboration with CSOs:** This partnership may be fruitful for both parties. As the practice shows, the positive responses were mainly initiated by CSOs which were at the forefront of MIL. Their efforts have lasted for over ten years now. By joining forces, businesses and CSOs can pool their strengths, expertise, and resources to address complex societal challenges posed by information disorders. For example, businesses can benefit from the specialized knowledge and insights of CSOs. Partnering with these specialized CSOs allows businesses to tap into their expertise and gain valuable insights into effective media literacy strategies. Businesses can also benefit from partnering with CSOs to develop comprehensive media literacy programs tailored to their staff and their customers. CSOs can contribute to the design and implementation of initiatives that address specific challenges faced by businesses and their stakeholders.

**5. Develop Media Literacy Programs and build capacities of employees:** The private sector in close cooperation with the civil society and media organizations may create media literacy programs specifically designed for the unique needs and challenges of the business community. These programs should focus on critical thinking, fact-checking, and identifying disinformation tailored to the business environment. Based on the developed programs, companies should invest in media literacy training for their employees.

**6. Investing in Artificial Intelligence:** Several interviewees suggested to actively use artificial intelligence tools in MIL and fact checking processes and expressed readiness in investing this kind of initiatives. As it is mentioned in the National Strategy Against Disinformation, Section 2.4<sup>19</sup>, private companies can play a particularly important role in the development of useful tools through automated mechanisms and artificial intelligence for combating disinformation. For this purpose, the

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<sup>19</sup> National Strategy Against Disinformation, 2023-2025, section 2.4, p. 22, available at: <http://www.foi.am/en/research/item/2263/>.

business may rely on the state funding or grants from international organizations to motivate private tech companies to initiate effective programs for the local market. <sup>20</sup>

**7. Promote MIL among private sector customers:** Businesses can take an active role in promoting media literacy and fact checking skills among their customer base. While big companies undoubtedly understand the importance of communication and public relations and invest significantly in these areas, they can further strengthen their position by recognizing the value of investing in media literacy capacity development for their customers. By actively promoting media literacy, these companies can not only save valuable resources but also elevate their reputation as responsible and customer-centric organizations. For example, the Armenian banks may invest in promoting media literacy of their customers in the field of data protection and detecting cyber disinformation or frauds. This, in turn, reduces the risk of customers falling victim to disinformation campaigns that may negatively impact their perception of the company or its services. This can be done through various means, such as hosting workshops or TV programs, providing online resources, partnering with media literacy organizations, and integrating media literacy messages into their marketing materials.

**8. Promote Best Practices:** For promoting best practices, the private sector may work closely with think tanks and research organizations to explore and showcase best practices worldwide to inspire the sector with success stories. Highlighting the positive outcomes and benefits experienced by businesses involved in such initiatives is crucial. Some of these cases are presented in this research.

**9. Transparency and integrity of the private sector:** By incorporating transparency and integrity into the everyday practice, businesses can help build a more trustworthy information environment and contribute to countering disinformation effectively. This not only strengthens their own reputation but also fosters a culture of accuracy and reliability in the broader media landscape. The first step should be directed towards releasing and submitting accurate information about the beneficial owners of the business companies. The company management should take all possible efforts to identify the real owners and submit an accurate and complete beneficial ownership declaration to the state authorities.

**10. Transparent advertising policy:** Businesses should adhere to responsible advertising practices, avoiding misleading or false claims in their marketing materials. In order to ensure a sterile media ecosystem thrives, and as it was also emphasized by our colleagues at Caucasus Institute, businesses have a role to play by adopting responsible policies when designing their advertising strategies and could contribute to an improved media environment and efforts to combat disinformation by, first, avoiding placing their ads in politicized and unprofessional media, and second, partnering with quality media in creative ways.

**11. Supporting MIL as a commitment to social responsibility (CSR):** As the research findings show, there is a little understanding among the business sector of this issue. Incentives should be pushed forward for the business to be proactively engaged in the MIL activities as a part of their social

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<sup>20</sup> One of the leading CSOs in the field, the FOICA recently created and launched artificial intelligence tool “Banali” (Key), a chatbot which helps the organizations and the community to improve fact-checking skills, [www.foi.am](http://www.foi.am).

responsibility programs. Highlighting how media literacy can complement existing CSR efforts and contribute to a more informed and responsible society can help generate interest and encourage private sector engagement.

**12. The role of business associations, chambers:** Business associations may organize workshops and training programs for their member companies. These sessions can focus on enhancing critical thinking skills, fact-checking techniques, and detecting disinformation. Trainers or experts in media literacy can be invited to conduct these workshops, providing practical insights and guidance to the businesses. Additionally, business associations can establish partnerships with media literacy organizations CSOs that specialize in promoting responsible information consumption (such as, FOICA, PJC, MIC and others in the field). These partnerships can involve joint initiatives, awareness campaigns, and media literacy projects tailored to the specific needs of member companies.

#### **The role of the Government:**

**13. Adopt a national policy/strategy.** The RA Government is in the process of adopting a strategy against disinformation and a roadmap. In order to ensure full implementation of these strategic documents, the RA Government should also develop and adopt a concept on MIL through an inclusive process. Holding national consultations and establishing a dedicated working council will ensure that all parties' concerns are considered. Once approved, ensure the operationalization of the MIL concept and implementation through annual or multiyear action plans and by providing adequate resources for these purposes.

**14. Motivation and incentives:** It is also the government's role to create a more favorable environment for the business by launching diversified initiatives for financial sustainability. This can be achieved through funding support, policy frameworks, and coordination with relevant stakeholders. It may also encourage businesses to actively participate in media literacy initiatives. This could include recognition, awards, or tax incentives for companies that demonstrate a commitment to fostering media literacy among their employees and customers. Such recognition can serve as a motivating factor for other businesses to actively engage in media literacy initiatives.

**15. Funding Support:** The government can allocate funds specifically for media literacy programs aimed at the private sector. These funds can be disbursed through grants or subsidies to organizations, businesses, or educational institutions that are actively engaged in media literacy efforts. Financial support can enable the development and implementation of high-quality training materials, workshops, and awareness campaigns tailored for businesses.

**16. Public Awareness Campaigns:** The government can lead public awareness campaigns on media literacy, emphasizing its importance for businesses and consumers. These campaigns can include targeted messages and resources for the private sector, showcasing successful examples of businesses that have effectively countered disinformation and benefited from media literacy efforts. The awareness campaigns may be specifically tailored for businesses in Armenia to highlight the risks of disinformation and the benefits of media literacy. Emphasize how information disorders can directly impact business operations, reputation, and consumer trust.