

# WEST UKRAINIAN MEDIA NETWORK FOR COUNTERING DISINFORMATION: ANALYTICAL REPORT



**LMF**



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**«West Ukrainian Media Network for Countering Disinformation»** is a project with the goal of assessing and developing the ability of local media to resist disinformation in Western Ukraine.

The analytical report sums up the research part of the project that examined disinformation narratives and its spreading practices in Western Ukraine, providing recommendations for West-Ukrainian media to resist and address disinformation in this region.

**The research part, in accordance with the methodology, consisted out of a few consecutive and interrelated parts:**

- Expert interviews;
- Local and social media monitoring;
- Sociological studies.

The results provided by interviews and the monitoring were the empirical basis of sociological research. The analysis of political, safety and media fields of every single oblast of the region was taken into account by sociologists while making the research hypothesis of qualitative and quantitative phases of this work.

# EXPERT INTERVIEWS

The goal of expert interviews was the analysis of the local condition of every single region. By conducting in-depth interviews with local experts, influencers and public representatives we received a cross section of the situation in a region, specifically on the influence that disinformation may have on socio-political processes, how it can be distributed, main distribution channels, characteristics of a local media environment and its capabilities to reclaim toxic narratives.

**In total:** 33 local experts (Chernivets'ka oblast — 8, Ivano-Frankivs'ka — 8, Lvivs'ka — 9, Zakarpats'ka — 8) were interviewed.

## **Expert interviews revealed a number of trends that are common for all oblasts of the region:**

01

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In every oblast, as of the last few years, experts did not detect any disinformation that can specifically target this region or can originate from Russia / any pro-Russian agents in Ukraine. However, that does not mean that the local demographic does not have any contacts with Russian narratives, they can encounter them on social media platforms.

02

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In all oblasts of the region legacy media are not the source / channel of disinformation distribution. Sporadic incidents that may take place are the result of the slander materials or the general incompetence of local journalists.

03

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The decline in disinformation of legacy media is connected to the rise of popularity of social media as a news source for the audience. Agents that can potentially manipulate or create fake news are more comfortable using this channel, since it is easier to maintain anonymity, multiplying and making messages viral, in addition to less resistance from legacy media and data verification.

In the context of the COVID-10 disinformation spreading, experts noted that almost all local politicians tried to use this topic during the 2020 local election campaign. The main communication channels where local audiences could find COVID-19 disinformation were local groups in Facebook and Viber chats.

For the most part internal political manipulations and fake news are remaining the main disinformation type in all oblasts during the last 2—3 years.

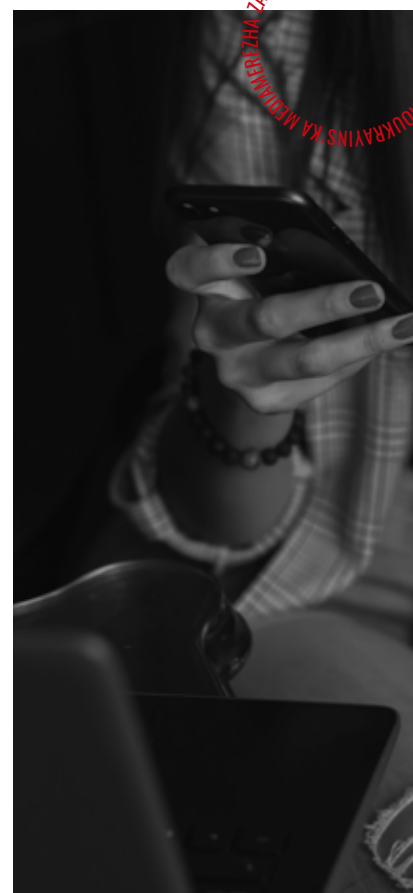
Major requirements of fake news appearance and spread in local towns media are general incompetence and clientelism of the majority of hyper-local media. False messaging about public concerns are shared the most on social media platforms, but one of the main reasons for that is a low public trust in the local actors.

**At the same time expert interviews distinguished specific features of particular oblasts of the region that make them prominent in the context of disinformation processes.**

For example, a great potential for fake news and manipulation in **Chernivets'ka oblast** can be found in topics concerning land lot market, utility costs and decentralisation (first the planning of it, now of its performance). These are questions that draw the most attention and public frustration with the current situation.

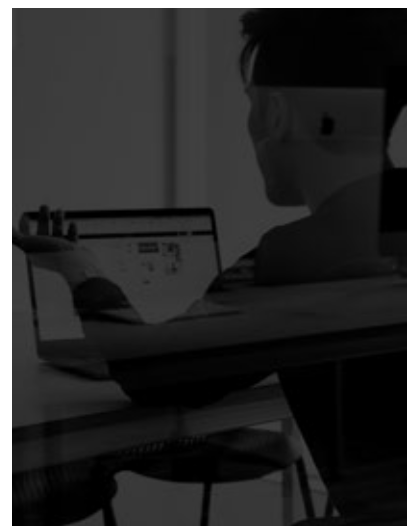
*Ethnic relations* at this moment does not create any major public outcry in Bukovina region. However it can be actualised by foreign actors in the context of rights, identity and memory of any particular national community of the oblast.

*The topic of inter-confessional relations* keeps its attraction for potential disinformation spreaders because of a current competition between OCU (Orthodox Church of Ukraine) and ROCiU (Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine) for local parishes in Chernivets'ka oblast, but any information activity from any of the sides moved to social media and private contacting.



In **Prykarpattya** region public communication manipulations are often used by the mayor of Ivano-Frankivsk Ruslan Martsinkiv. Talking points are the release of unconfirmed data, concealing the truth, giving emotional reactions to events and ignoring public discussions.

In addition, an important note is that disinformation, manipulations and fake news can take place in Ivano-Frankivsk public discussions concerning the topics of diversity, historical memory in the context of its former multiculturalism, LGBT communities, traditional values and human rights. Currently, no active discussion is held on these topics due to avoidance from local media because of an aggressive reaction from the audience.



For **Lvivska oblast**, the main feature is the development of the ongoing disinformation campaign led by the local activist Ostap Stakhiv. According to public speakers, this person is converting COVID-19 disinformation and other economic and political issues in his own social and financial gain. It is also important to note that Ostap Stakhiv's activity lately is reaching beyond Lvivska oblast, slowly making him one of the most influential disinformation agents in Prykarpattya region.



Among others, experts also put emphasis on the **Zakarpatska oblast** situation, which is substantially different from others. Among scoped regions, in Zakarpattia region Russian / pro-Russian agenda and influence are the most prominent. It is incorporated through outside influence and local media activity that is controlled by the political party «Opposition Platform — For Life». The key topic that draws the most speculations and is exposed to manipulations and fake news since 2014 is Ukraine-Hungary relationship (between Ukrainian and Hungarian communities, between Hungarian minority and the Ukrainian government, between Ukraine and Hungary).

In Zakarpatska oblast there are active local actors that are effectively using social media as a platform for manipulations and fake news speculation on social issues that are most alarming among the population: utility costs, healthcare and education quality, corruption and infrastructure condition.

Experts also note the overall low level of professionalism of Zakarpatska oblast media. Despite the high number of media outlets in the region this number does not reflect the professionalism level of the local media. Resistance of Zakarpattia media to any possible disinformation campaigns is unstable. The main factors that can mitigate the resistance are ownership of such media by political groups and the lack of specialists. The main conditions that can improve this are maintaining the professional image by any particular journalists and publishers that can be role models for their colleagues and the audience.

# LOCAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING

The monitoring which was conducted as a part of the research became an important tool of regional media content analysis consisted of 2 stages.

During the first stage the screening of popular online-media and media resources took place, strengths and weaknesses of a local media were defined, themes of the **20 major media resources** were analysed.

The specific goal of the monitoring was the feature analysis of coronavirus and gas pricing news for population topics coverage. These topics are identified as basic for any possible disinformation spreading during the first stage of the research. During the monitoring, quantitative measures of these topics' presence in media narratives of the region, manipulative messaging typology in case of it's revealing (fake news, manipulations or hidden advertising) and source of such materials were analysed.

During the first stage the block of **58 236** messages on **20** websites during the March-May of 2021 period was analysed. For the publication gathering from news feeds from every media SoMo monitoring tool was used.

For narrative monitoring that are broadcasted in mainstream online media the following was chosen:

<b>ZAKARPATTYA WEBSITES</b>	<a href="#">Мукачево.Net</a>   <a href="#">Перший.com</a>   <a href="#">Закарпаття онлайн</a>   <a href="#">Новини Закарпаття</a>   <a href="#">Голос Карпат</a>
<b>LVIV WEBSITES</b>	<a href="#">Zaxid.net</a>   <a href="#">Varta1</a>   <a href="#">Вголос</a>   <a href="#">Твоє місто</a>   <a href="#">Львівський портал</a>
<b>IVANO-FRANKIVSK WEBSITES</b>	<a href="#">Курс</a>   <a href="#">Галицький кореспондент</a>   <a href="#">Фіртка</a>   <a href="#">Галка</a>   <a href="#">ПіК</a>
<b>CHERNIVTSI WEBSITES</b>	<a href="#">ІА АСС</a>   <a href="#">БукІнфо</a>   <a href="#">Чернівецький промінь (ЧП)</a>   <a href="#">Молодий Буковинець</a>   <a href="#">Шпальта</a>

A sample of media outlets that have significant coverage in the region, are influenced (or not influenced) by different political groups, are diverse in terms of journalistic standards compliance.

## SPECIFICS OF MEDIA COVERAGE IN ANALYSED REGIONS

A common trait for the majority of outlets that were monitored is a lot of reprinting, lack of unique material, emphasis on crime and accident coverages in news feeds, internet traffic orientation, overall bloating of the news feed by copy pasting national and international news that do not have any practical meaning and do not attract any interest from local audience.

According to bigmir.net statistics virtually in every region websites like *Znai.UA* та *Politeka*, that are known fake news outlets (commonly referred in Ukraine as «dumpsters») have significant popularity. Another popular website is *gordonua.com* by Dmytro Gordon, that is not a particularly toxic narrative resource, but it's branded after the political inclinations and biases of its owner.

UKRAYINS'KA MEDIAMETRIYA  
ZAKARPOVATSKYI  
KRAJ



Among four regions the most competitive one is **Lviv regional media**. This is linked to the fact that Lviv media are oriented towards not only the Lviv region or Western region only, but also nationwide (*Zaxid.net*, *Vholos*). In Lviv oblast there are more than ten noticeable and stable online resources, media corporations are being created.

The local phenomena is *Varta1*, a website that emerged from the Facebook group of the same name, that is dedicated to emergencies and traffic accidents coverage. This resource is not an example of a media, due to the lack of journalistic standards recognition, but included as a possible source of toxic narratives. It is important to note that websites that do not keep up with journalistic standards are not as popular among Lviv audiences as better-quality outlets.

The weakest region in terms of media is **Zakarpattia**. Among four regions, here the percentage of reprinted materials is the highest, as well as manipulative headlines and orientation on accidents coverage. The number of media resources that cover events in Zakarpattia is significant, although these resources are very similar content- and stylistic-wise, that can disorient the audience and negatively influence its ability to trust the information and resources that are providing it.



In **Prykarpattya** and **Bukovina** regional media there is no trace of any positive influence of high competitiveness, due to the lack of it. Neither any mixed bag copycat resources, which is disorienting the audience. Among analysed there are media that criticise or support local and national authorities and work for different political movements.

Political affiliation of analysed media can also be traced in content and ownerships of these outlets. **Media can be connected to political parties in the following order:**

Opposition Platform— For Life	<b>Pershyi.com, Chernivets'kuy promin'</b>
European Solidarity	<b>Halka, IA ACC</b>
Holos	<b>Firtka</b>
Svoboda	<b>Vholos</b>
Samopomich	<b>Zaxid.net</b>
Varta (Lviv)	<b>Varta1</b>

**The first stage of monitoring** recorded that disinformation in mainstream online publications is not critical, any manipulative or toxic narratives that can get there are isolated incidents and (most times) are filtered by editors.

A notable weakness that can lead to disinformation spread are political affiliations of media owners or political parties connected to owners that can use them for personal interests. Discussed topics, which do not carry any political interest, are spoiled by its incompleteness and non-objective coverage, which is a result of low professional competence of media and its staff.

Special focus needs to be maintained on protest activists that use sensitive topics (such as economic crisis, utility rates, land lot reform, social benefits, nationwide topics, etc).

During the **second stage the monitoring** of regional social media was conducted using the YouScan system. Its specific feature is that the analytical window of the system allows for the deep sampling of data within a scope of 100 thousand mentions.

In case of gas prices and protests discussions this number of mentions was gathered during a 6 months period (starting February 1st of 2021). Toxic narratives related to COVID-19 and vaccination filled the analytics window in one and a half months (starting at the second part of June). That indicates the high number of mentions in Ukrainian and Russian speaking segments of social media.

At the same time it is worth mentioning that tags, posts, comments and reposts with keywords that carry geolocation information tied to the researched region are taking 1—3 % of a total number. That can be linked to the fact that Telegram, Instagram and partially Youtube do not record geolocations of these mentions. However these platforms carry a big part of overall mentions.

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**Social media analysis revealed that social media are main channels of disinformation spreading.**

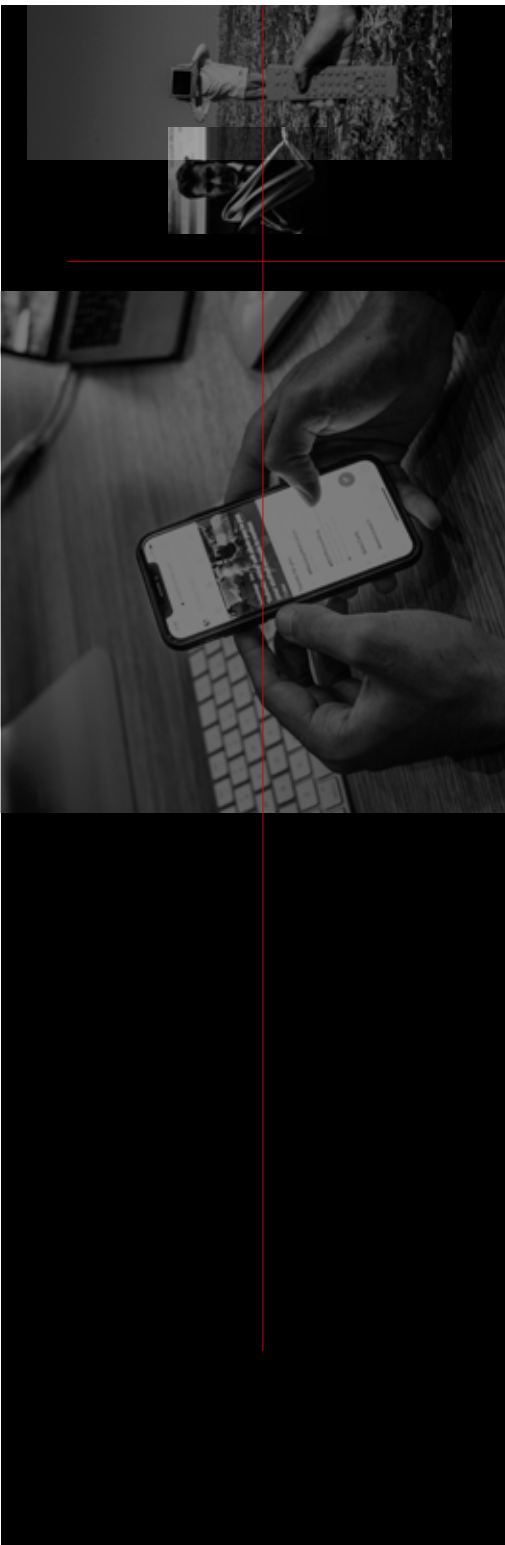
**Social media monitoring** using YouScan showed that in the region there is a systematic work of a particular group of people that has already or just becoming main voices of disinformation (Ostap Stakhiv, Anton Hura, Petro Solohub, «Dosta» movement). These people were mentioned in expert interviews as main disinformation spreaders. Monitoring results show that they basically formed a network, spreading toxic messages regarding coronavirus and gas pricing protests topics.

These types of blogger-activists describe themselves as human rights activists, creating justice warrior-like persona taking on related controversial social topics such as fighting against deforestation, land theft and affordable utility prices.

In the public sphere they call themselves «honest journalists», discredit legacy media accusing it of lying. Local authorities are also being discredited, disinformation agents effectively using public dissatisfaction with living standards and ways of solving urgent problems.

The success of disinformation spreaders is specifically connected to their public reception, as they imply having information that is not open for the public, that they do not want to be a part of a «crowd» and follow the majority. It is important to stress the fact that reporting and deletion of their content from Youtube and Facebook only speeds up the sharing because they ask followers to «share before it's gone».

At the moment, legacy media do not have an adequate reaction to this situation that results in losing a part of their audience that can form its own position influenced by disinformation content from social media.



# SOCIOLOGICAL STUDIES

Sociological studies consist of 2 modules — qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative stage chronologically precedes the quantitative stage, carrying an exploratory function.

For deeper analysis of (dis)information consumption processes two indicative topics were chosen: gas pricing and coronavirus. These themes were constant in questionnaires of qualitative and quantitative components of the research.

## Qualitative module

Data gatherings were conducted in July 2021 using in-depth interviewing method. In total, 16 interviews were held with online-content consumers with age ranging from 16 to 65. Parameters of selection were age, sex, settlement type and region.

**The following goals were set for the qualitative module:**

- To study patterns of media consumption;
- To define a signal of trust in the information and / or its source.

The media consumption pattern study was conducted (among others) through the review of the materials sample and its further discussion. Materials came in different forms and contained truthful, strict and neutral information and a wide range of manipulations in order to determine how these manipulations can be interpreted by participants.

## Quantitative module

Data gatherings were conducted within one year using a face to face interviewing method. In total, up to July 2021 400 residents of Chernivets'ka, Ivano-Frankivs'ka, Lvivs'ka and Zakarpats'ka oblasts aged 18 to 65 were interviewed. During the cross section, the region was treated as a homogenous environment, sampling volume is the optimal considering time and financial resources of the research.

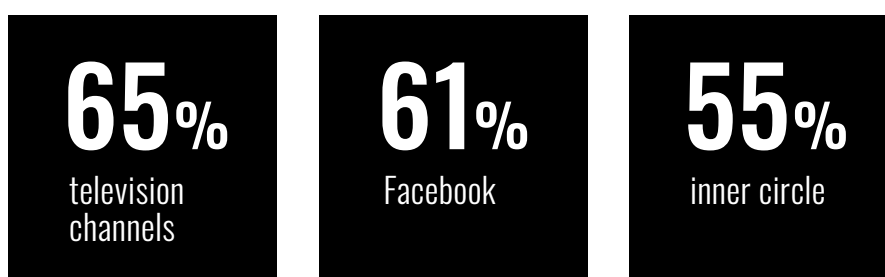
The result of **the quantitative study** showed that trust in the information source and trust in the information itself are factors that can influence the person's attitude to news messages.

Based on these characteristics **4 types of media consumption** were determined: **«blind trust»**, **«sceptical trust»**, **«reflective trust»**, **«informational nihilist»** and defined trust signals that are important for each type.

During **the quantitative research module** the main focus was on media consumption patterns and disinformation resistance.

The research showed that for the third of respondents (35 %) news is just an audio filler, it is listened to / watched while performing other activities. 38 % of respondents assure that they do not actively look for news, but upon finding interesting information they study it closely. 19 % are specifically devoting time for deliberate reading / listening / watching their news.

### THE MOST COMMON SOURCES OF NEWS INFORMATION ARE UKRAINIAN:



The news that were interesting often (in 45 % of cases) are discussed with other people; the frequency of commenting, sharing and sending of such materials through social media is significantly lower (10-11 % of cases for each position). In 10 % of cases respondents declare intent to check news that were interesting for its credibility. Discussions about news credibility or the lack of it with other people are held by no more than a quarter of people interviewed (9 % say that they always do it and 15 % do it often).

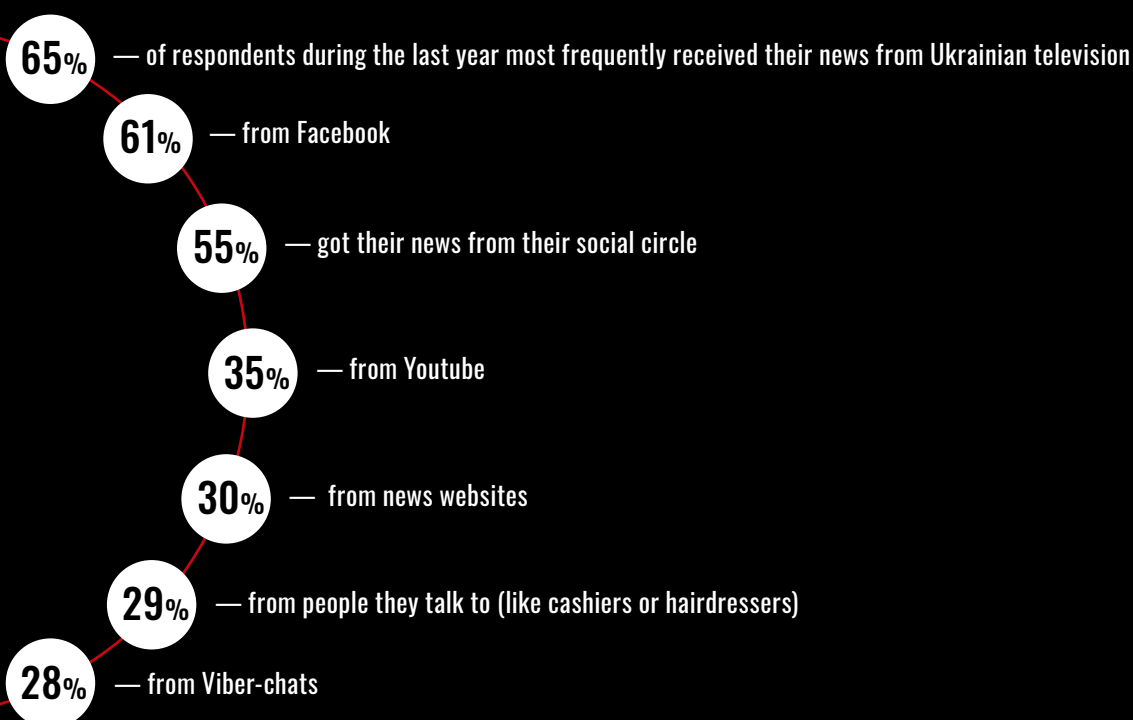
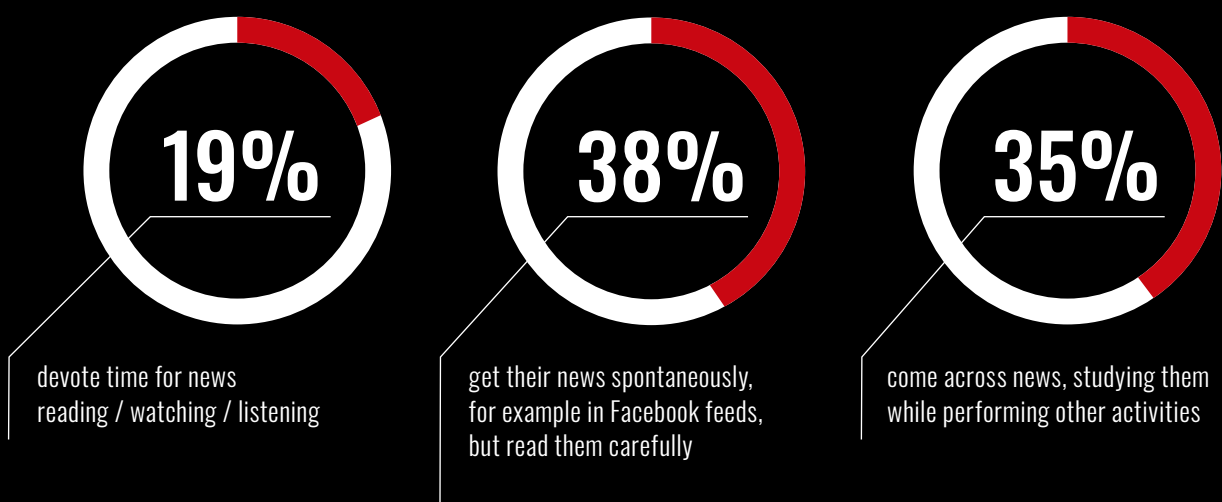
**14 % of respondents assure that they have read the materials about disinformation resistance.** At the same time, these are not always tutorials for media hygiene and among others, respondents also mentioned journalistic investigations, editorials that can indirectly mention disinformation, manipulations and half-truths, ways to reveal and resist it.

COVID-19 and related topics are more popular among participants than «gas pricing». 35 % and 15 % respectively consider themselves well informed of the topic. The news related to coronavirus are being shared on social media more often than the news about gas prices. However in both cases the frequency is not high: frequency for COVID-19 news sharing is at least for 34 % of respondents and for gas pricing it is 20 %. Notably, in messages about coronavirus, participants also notice disinformation more often (74 % remember such cases in COVID-19 coverage, 48 % in gas pricing coverage).

**It is important to note that trust in the information source and trust in the information itself are important criteria that determine the way that media consumers can shape their attitude towards relevant issues of Ukrainian society.**

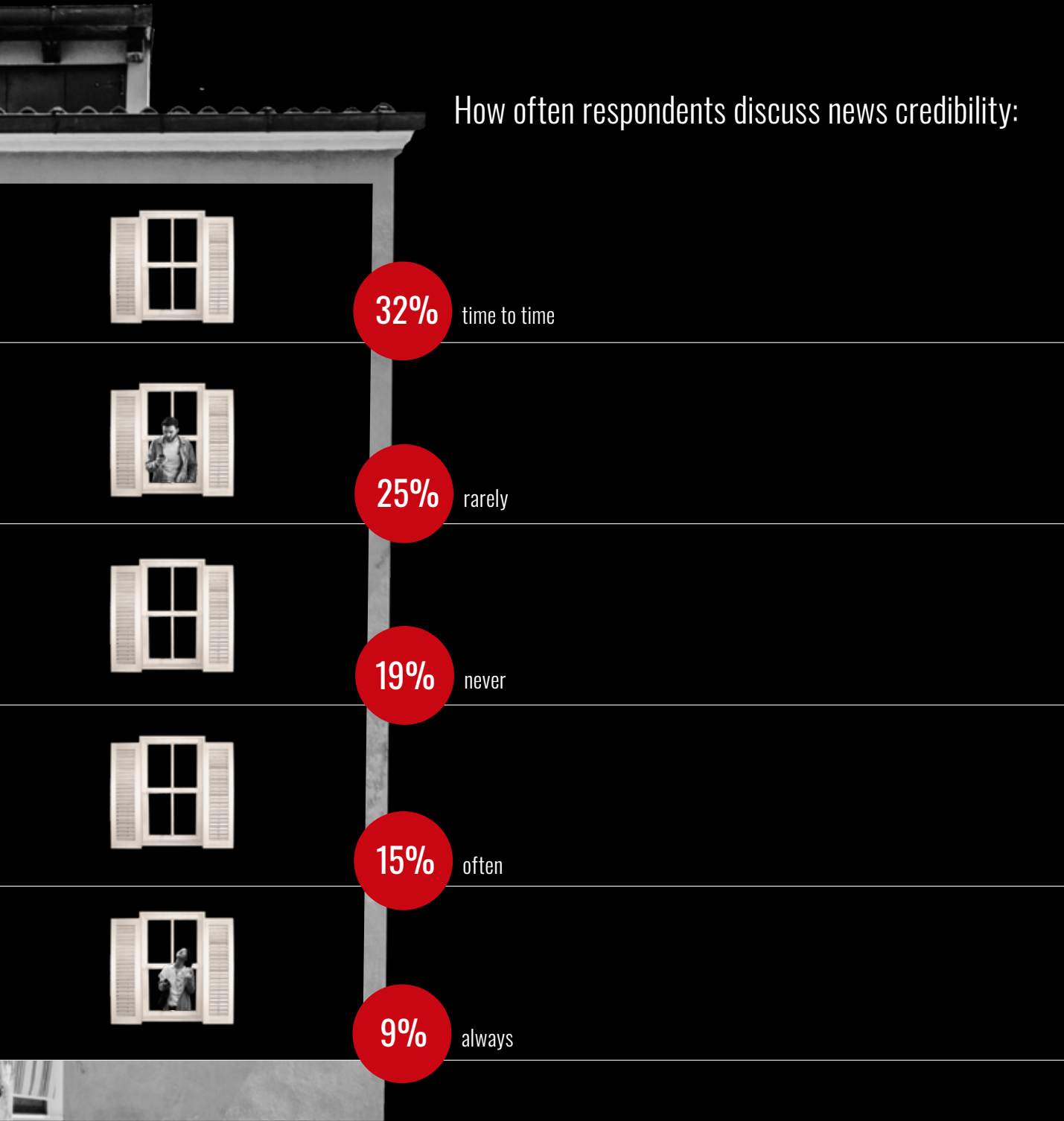
One of the key results is defining types of media content consumers and their detailed descriptions, that will allow regional media to «fight for» the audience that can be influenced by disinformation in one way or another primarily through social media. Especially due to the low level of critical thinking / media literacy among the audience which was revealed by the research.

Local media should pay attention to the attitude of the audience towards news sources and the way they perceive and understand them. Results can provide for local media an opportunity to fix their strategy of informing their audience and demonstrate the necessity of competing with social media platforms as the main alternative source of forming an agenda.



Significantly lower percentage used legacy media. Newspapers and printed materials were the main source of information for **14%** of respondents, radio for **12%**.

### How often respondents discuss news credibility:



Only 14% of those interviewed learned about disinformation resistance materials.

According to the results, **online platforms and social media are main communication channels for disinformation spreading**. Respondents, either intuitively or argumentatively, note that most disinformation about coronavirus and gas pricing news manipulations that they came across was «on the Internet» — 88 % and 22 % respectively.

The research revealed that those who spread disinformation are effectively using online platforms and social media for personal goals, getting support and gaining trust from the audience and basically creating an alternative position to local media.

The research recorded what can **cause trust** in those who spread disinformation and has to be addressed by local media:

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**Anton Hura:** gives truthful information, looks trustworthy, «trust intuitively».

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**Pavlo Pavlov:** covers news constructively, «I know him personally», «Pavlov is an activist that can be trusted».

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**Petro Solohub:** gives truthful information, looks trustworthy.

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**Ostap Stakhiv:** «Ostap Stakhiv is a good politician», good analyst, «wants to support people and do something good».

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**Mykhailo Chaplyha:** speaks up for people, speaks in simple terms, explains, looks trustworthy, often gives smart comments, «I agree with his thoughts».

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In this manner, during the research, regional media space was analysed, features of interaction between local media and the audience with disinformation narratives were highlighted, types and media consumption patterns were defined, main challenges concerning disinformation on online platforms and social media were set up.

Key conclusions of expert interviews, local and social media monitoring and sociological studies were discussed with local media representatives during the two day training with experts and researchers.

Based on the training, local media received recommendations on media planning of publications about disinformation resistance and specifics of working in the media network.

One of the key recommendations on an audience that is prone to trust disinformation narratives and interaction with it:

**Local media must start a «war» with social media for the audience that is in doubt, because not covering disinformation or controversial events is a poor strategy!**

**Media must explain what is happening and answer complicated questions, not simplifying problems that concern the audience.**

Experts and researchers recommended professional tools that can enhance the position of media in the process of resisting disinformation. Among them:

01

Using statistics and assessment data as key arguments against disinformation.

02

Creating analytical profiles of those who spread disinformation.

03

Investigating the nature and causes of manipulation from those who spread disinformation.

04

Explaining how disinformation networks use attributes of civil society for their own gain: «human rights», «journalists», «freedom of speech».

05

Systematic work with controversial topics such as Russian financing / influence, working for the interest of local politicians, causing public unrest etc.

06

Working with emotions of the audience, stressing on the ethical aspect of disinformation spreaders actions.

Separately, **publications format** was developed that experts claim to be effective against disinformation.

- 01 **Explanatory journalism** (why and how disinformation works);
- 02 **Solutions journalism** (how to make right / constructive decisions);
- 03 **Interview** (with experts);
- 04 **Analytical articles** (based on studies);
- 05 **News reports** (from public gatherings or events);
- 06 **Investigations** (where did Stakhiv, Hura, Solohub and others come from; Russian influence);
- 07 **News** (from public gatherings or events);
- 08 **Videos, tests;**
- 09 **Reviews** (who and why can destabilise the situation, toxic media and personalities).

Effectiveness of local media publications against disinformation correlates with their **promotion on social media platforms**, especially in groups and messengers that are most often used to spread toxic narratives.

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Defining key groups on social media platforms, messengers that actively spread toxic narratives and analysing their audience.

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Active promotion of posts aimed against disinformation on social media and messengers.

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Precise audience targeting.

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Interaction with the audience that is in doubt via social media and messengers, getting their attention to their own posts.

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Gaining trust in shared material from the audience.

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Creating short term campaigns / strategizing promotion on social media of own content, considering its relevance or urgent current affairs.

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Consulting SMM-experts and disinformation experts.

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Being creative with social media and messengers content promotions.

