

Prototypes of Democratic Resilience: Virtuous Isomorphism and Applied Research Laboratories in Cooperation Partnerships [†]

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Abstract

In a media ecosystem marked by misinformation and disinformation, democratic resilience requires new strategies for digital and media literacy and participation. In the proposed model, the University, through transnational Cooperation Partnerships, activates applied research laboratories that generate high-social-impact communication prototypes. The European case studies Respectnet and DigiFunCollab demonstrate that the conscious use of digital media, transforming students from passive users into conscious creators, reduces vulnerability to cognitive biases, filter bubbles, and echo chambers, thereby limiting manipulation in democratic processes and stimulating civic participation. The imitative diffusion of such practices generates virtuous circles of collective learning. The theoretical framework combines institutional isomorphism, reinterpreted as a virtuous isomorphism of best practices, with democratic resilience and the UNESCO MIL and DigComp 2.2 frameworks. The methodology adopts a mixed-methods design with a quantitative prevalence. The qualitative phase includes focus groups with national stakeholders and a national report (regulatory analysis, training needs, SWOT on social entrepreneurship) preliminary to course design. The quantitative phase involves monitoring training pathways (online course and project work) and a final questionnaire. Indicators include the number of participants, certifications, projects developed, and engagement levels. By systematically implementing this approach, the Academy fuels multi-stakeholder institutional dialogue. Knowledge transfer creates communicative culture and strengthens the democratic capacity of communities. This approach confirms the role of Visual Education as a tool to integrate the University's three missions, thus structurally reinforcing democratic resilience.

Keywords: democratic resilience; mimetic isomorphism; cooperation partnership; knowledge transfer; digital and media literacy



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1. Introduction: The Media Ecosystem and the Need for Resilience

The current media ecosystem is characterized by unprecedented complexity, exposing information flows to the constant risk of misinformation and disinformation [1,2]. This phenomenon does not represent mere “background noise,” but a structural threat to liberal democracies. The logic of digital platforms [3] favors the creation of what have been defined as filter bubbles [4] and echo chambers, mechanisms that isolate individuals in self-referential information bubbles, making them more vulnerable to cognitive biases [5] and a fragmented view of the public sphere [6].

Faced with these challenges, part of the broader crisis of representation and the “democratic deficit” [7,8], the concept of democratic resilience becomes crucial. It is not simply a system’s capacity to withstand shocks, but its ability to adapt, learn, and strengthen itself [9]. Cultivating it requires new proactive strategies that go beyond the simple deconstruction of fake news, focusing instead on the development of critical and participatory skills, as argued by decades of research on media education [10–12]. Approaches such as “psychological inoculation” [13] demonstrate the effectiveness of a proactive approach.

This contribution examines the role academic institutions can play in this process, acting as agents for the reconstruction of a deliberative public sphere [14] and new forms of civic participation [15,16]. We propose an operational model in which the University, through European Cooperation Partnerships, activates applied research laboratories. These generate communication prototypes that act as catalysts for digital and media literacy [17], transforming users into conscious producers within a “spreadable” media culture [18]. The central thesis is that such an approach can trigger a process of virtuous isomorphism, promoting the diffusion of best practices that strengthen democracy.

2. Theoretical Framework

Building prototypes of democratic resilience requires a solid theoretical architecture. Our model is based on the integration of four conceptual pillars: institutional isomorphism, democratic resilience, and the MIL and DigComp 2.2 operational frameworks.

The first pillar is the theory of institutional isomorphism. Rooted in neo-institutionalist thought [19], DiMaggio and Powell’s theory [20] argues that organizations tend to become similar through coercive, mimetic, and normative mechanisms. We reinterpret the mimetic mechanism in a proactive key, proposing the concept of virtuous isomorphism wherein university laboratories create “successful prototypes” that other actors are incentivized to imitate due to their evident social effectiveness.

This process is functional to the second pillar, democratic resilience. As defined by Merkel and Lührmann [9], resilience is a dynamic process the laboratories aim to strengthen by transforming students from passive consumers into critical content producers, acting on the community’s capacity to resist manipulation and participate constructively [21,22].

We utilize two frameworks. The third pillar is, in fact, UNESCO’s Media and Information Literacy (MIL) [17], a holistic approach providing the pedagogical basis for developing a critical understanding of the media ecosystem [12].

Finally, the fourth pillar is the Digital Competence Framework for Citizens (DigComp 2.2) [23]. While MIL provides the vision, DigComp offers a detailed and measurable grid of competencies, ensuring recognition and transferability.

3. Research Methodology

To investigate the proposed model, a mixed-methods research design was adopted, an approach integrating qualitative depth with quantitative breadth [24]. The research is articulated around the analysis of two emblematic case studies.

3.1. The Case Studies: RespectNet and DigiFunCollab

The selected case studies are two European Erasmus+ KA2 Cooperation Partnership projects: RespectNet and DiGiFunCollab [25,26]. RespectNet laid the foundations for media literacy, while DiGiFunCollab represents a thematic scale-up on social entrepreneurship, offering a complementary view of the model. The latter builds upon the structural backbone of the former, which provides a multimedia competency matrix [27] and an evaluation survey [28] with the ultimate goal to foster a dialogue with civil society that is both scientifically rigorous and attentive to different targets and media. The true experimentation

lay in applying the design framework to the social entrepreneurship sector reinforcing the approach and providing additional value to the previous findings.

The data presented refer to the applied research within the DiGiFunCollab Project.

3.2. Research Phases and Data Collection Tools

The research was structured in three phases:

Preliminary Phase (Ex-ante): Preparatory to intervention design, it included a context analysis carried out through focus groups with national stakeholders, and a desk analysis resulting in a National Report containing regulatory analysis, needs assessment, and SWOT analysis.

Implementation and Monitoring Phase: This concerned the production of digital modules for course delivery, an online course in self-learning mode with Certification and EU Badges, including mentoring specific training for further knowledge transfer, and university project works with digital outputs (video, pitch, business plan), followed by the public presentation of results.

Evaluation Phase (Ex-post): The quantitative phase was based on a set of predefined indicators (number of participants, certifications, projects developed, recognition, engagement levels). The qualitative phase utilized a post-event questionnaire administered at the end of the final Multiplier Event.

4. Results and Discussion

Data analysis yielded significant results confirming the validity of the model.

4.1. Quantitative Impact: Participation, Production, and Recognition

As shown in Table 1, quantitative data reveal a tangible impact. Among the four participating countries, the high level of engagement recorded suggests the creation of active communities of practice and encourages further scaling of the research framework to other areas, as well as further strengthening moments of inter-institutional dialogue with stakeholders to favor placement, match supply and demand in the labor market, and create concrete start-ups based on the project works designed during the course.

Table 1. Quantitative impact and engagement indicators of the projects.

Indicator	Value/Scope
Participants (Training and EU Badges)	195
Certified Mentors	44 (across 4 countries)
Students involved in project work	130
Innovative projects developed	49
Digital outputs (videos, pitches, Business Plans, posters, Business Model Canvas)	100–150
Stakeholders validating best practices	15
Multiplier Events (in Italy, Romania, Slovenia, Germany)	4 (one per country)
Total reach (stakeholders and communication)	>1000

4.2. Qualitative Transformation: From Passive Users to Conscious Creators

Beyond the numbers, the deepest results emerge from the qualitative analysis. The digital prototypes created by students reveal mature critical competence, as per Figures 1–3.

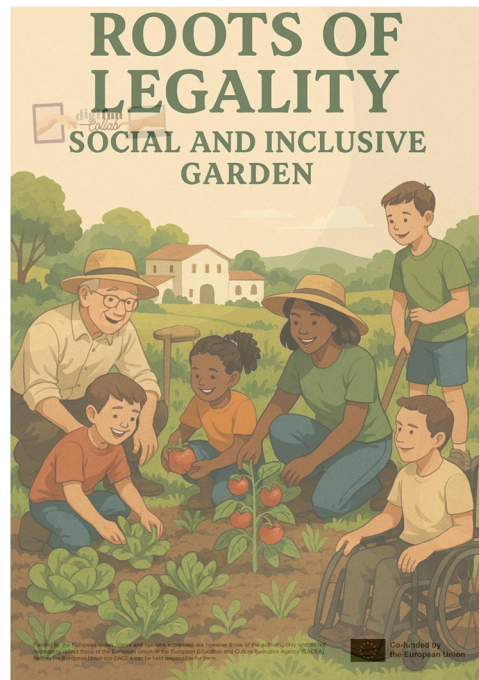


Figure 1. Poster sample from the presentation of the Business Plan idea for Social Entrepreneurship of the Italian Best Project competing in the International Contest.

Business Idea

- Establish 3 fully operational urban gardens (min. 5,000 sqm each) in the Campania region within 5 years.
- Employ at least 10 disadvantaged individuals with stable contracts within the first 2 years, integrating them fully into the workforce.
- Actively involve at least 5 seniors in garden activities and knowledge sharing within the first year.
- Produce and sell at least 5000 kg of certified organic products in the first year, with a 20% annual increase in volume for the first 3 years.
- Generate at least 22,700 kWh of renewable energy annually from Year 1, contributing to operational sustainability and potentially generating income from excess energy sales.



DigiFunCollab

Co-funded by
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Figure 2. Slide sample from the presentation of the Business Plan idea for Social Entrepreneurship of the Italian Best Project competing in the International Contest.

This transformation from passive users to conscious creators is the core of our result. Through the practice of content creation, students internalize the mechanisms of effective communication, developing a rich set of crucial transversal skills: from critical thinking and problem-solving to teamwork and project management, through to communication and entrepreneurship skills. This process embodies the essence of Media and Information Literacy [17] and develops key competencies of the DigComp 2.2 framework [23].

The Business Model Canvas

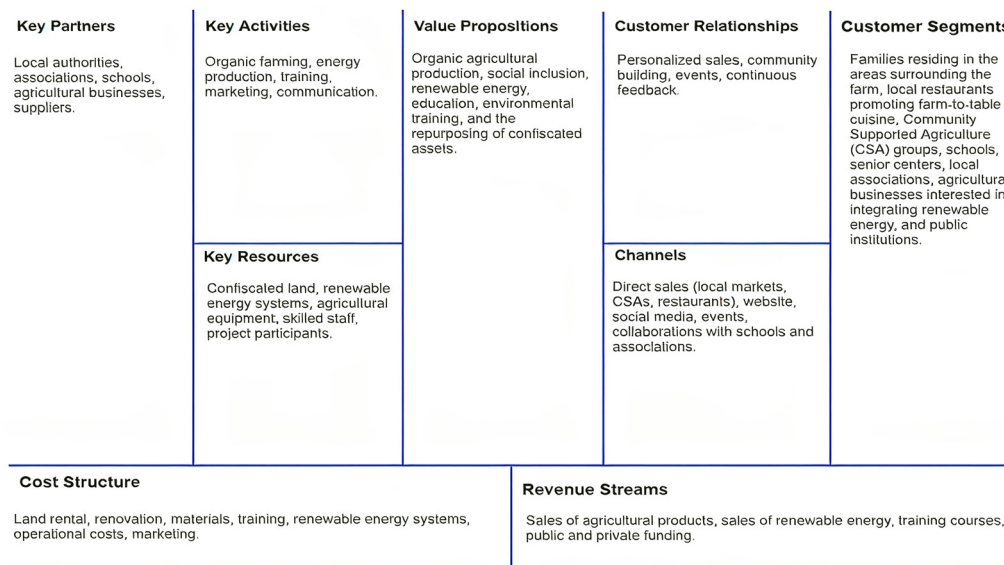


Figure 3. Business Model Canvas example from the presentation of the Business Plan idea for Social Entrepreneurship of the Italian Best Project competing in the International Contest.

4.3. Triggering Virtuous Isomorphism and Strengthening Democratic Resilience

Data collected during the Multiplier Events provide evidence of the triggering of a virtuous isomorphism. External stakeholders showed strong interest in replicating the experience, confirming DiMaggio and Powell's hypothesis [20] regarding imitation under conditions of uncertainty. The imitative diffusion of these practices represents a tangible contribution to democratic resilience [9]. Our model, therefore, does not act only at the individual level (micro), but triggers a change at the system level (meso and macro). The project also systematized research outcomes into a policy recommendations document [29], which is useful for the design of public and private interventions by stakeholders and policy makers to favor the convergence of interests and strengthen civil partnerships.

5. Conclusions: Cooperation Partnerships as Laboratories of Democratic Resilience

In conclusion, this article has validated an operational model in which the University, acting through transnational Cooperation Partnerships, transforms into a permanent laboratory of applied research for democratic resilience.

The main element of originality and added value of our work lies precisely in the strategic use of the Cooperation Partnership framework. These instruments are reconfigured as social innovation ecosystems, offering a unique context in which research co-creates reality together with diverse stakeholders, where students develop not only technical skills but a wide range of soft skills, from teamwork to public speaking, essential for active citizenship and employability. This transnational dimension allows for constant comparison between different cultural contexts, enriching the analysis and ensuring that the developed "prototypes" are robust, adaptable, and scalable.

The implications of this study are manifold. Practically, the model offers a blueprint for designing effective media literacy interventions. Theoretically, the contribution enriches the literature on democratic resilience with a proactive approach and the notion of "virtuous isomorphism."

Despite the limitations of a study restricted to two projects, this work demonstrates that universities can and must be central actors in building democratic resilience. Through

applied research mediated by Cooperation Partnerships, the Academy can strengthen the democratic capacity of communities, confirming Visual Education as a strategic tool to face the challenges of our time.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical review and approval were waived for this study because it involved standard educational evaluation activities and the monitoring of project outputs and did not involve medical or sensitive personal information. Participation was voluntary, integrated into the learning pathways, and all data were collected and processed in an anonymized form without the collection of sensitive personal data, in full compliance with GDPR regulations.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study in the form of information provided prior to participation. Formal written informed consent was waived due to the study’s nature as an anonymous educational assessment and project monitoring activity. All participants were informed that their activities within the project framework would be evaluated for dissemination purposes in an aggregated and anonymized form.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available within the article. Additional documentation regarding project indicators and outputs is available on the Erasmus+ Project Results platform at <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/search/details/2023-1-IT02-KA220-HED-000158730>, accessed on 1 March 2025 and at <https://digifuncollab.eu/>; however, internal reports remain restricted due to the level of dissemination assigned within the project Grant Agreement.

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