

# Media and Information Literacy as a Strategic Guideline Toward Civic Resilience: Baltic–Nordic Lessons

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The chapter informs about the increasing necessity for media and information literacy (MIL) to act as a strategic guideline toward civic resilience against the detrimental effects of digital transformation in Baltic and Nordic countries. Despite evident differences between the two regions, similarities are noted among countries in terms of the urgency of requests to adequately respond to information disruption such as information manipulation and the influx of disinformation. Nordic countries exhibit a progressive outlook on MIL with well-established institutionalized media education programs and a commitment to regularly assess and adjust MIL objectives in response to evolving digital landscapes and their flaws. However, concern is increasing about the economic and business challenges faced by conventional news media on the one hand and public trust in media on the other hand. Particularly, the latter aspect is viewed as a significant risk to informed citizenship in the near future. Precisely for this reason, a close cooperation among groups of stakeholders in each country, as well as regionally and globally, is required to achieve the goal of media-informed and resilient civics to withstand information disruption and to guarantee that the goals of democratic sustainability and well-being are ensured for everyone.

*Keywords: media and information literacy, informed citizenship, digital transformation, mediated communication ecosystem, agency, civic resilience, Baltic countries, Nordic countries*

Today, the abundance of information is one of the most striking signs of the transforming public sphere (Ytre-Arne et al., 2018; Grabe & Myrick, 2016; Cardoso, 2011; Deuze, 2008). Although this attributed could be considered advantageous, it can also be detrimental to the ideal of digital civics. Truth is no longer a landmark in algorithmic governance, and information agendas are set to elicit reaction, instead of cognition, from users (Vilmer et al., 2018; Van Dijck et al., 2019; Bayer et al., 2019). In this new reality, knowledge and skills are required to address the complex and changing information and communication environment, which is furnished by technological innovation, platformization, algorithmization, and datafication (Frau-Meigs, 2022; Bennett et al., 2020; Carlsson, 2019). To protect themselves from the potential risks and dangers of information manipulation, citizens need capacities and competencies to navigate digital information landscapes, critically assess information sources, and discern manipulation.

Classical writings on democracy, which argue for a strong interrelation between the political and media systems, frequently refer to the factor of *informed citizenship*, which is necessary for the functioning of each system and their interrelations (cf. Bal ytien, 2017; Grabe & Myrick, 2016). The foundation of a democratic governance lies in the principle that citizens can choose leaders through participation in the electoral process. This idea agrees with the notion of an informed citizenship (people staying informed about politics) and the concept of the common good (people engaging in the political process and concerned about results). Ultimately, the notion of a functioning democracy refers to collaboration to ensure equal opportunities for access to quality information and engaging environments to act for all.

The idea of informed citizenship appears as a normative (i.e., idealistic) requirement that designates the logic of operation to the political and media systems. After such a provision, citizens are expected to follow and be interested in current news, while the media holds the responsibility to professionally and objectively cover reality and present it to the public. Through the problems raised and actualized by journalists and dialogue and debates in the mediated public arena, which is accessible to all, citizens can form their opinions, which can then be used to influence policy decisions. This is the basis of informed citizenship in which the political and media systems play a role in assisting people in staying well informed and engaged.

Indeed, one can infer that it is a normative approach but never entirely attained. Even in Nordic countries with long-established traditions of democracy, the interaction between public institutions of politics and the mass media remains challenging (Meinander, 2021; Koivunen, 2021; Forsman, 2020). Regardless of the efficiency of journalists and the degree of the accountability of politicians to the public, identifying an equivalent to an entirely flawlessly functioning democratic culture is difficult.

As a moral stance, idealism emphasizes the value of high moral standards and principles and the pursuit of a perfect society. We emphasize this notion not because we seek to criticize and abolish the idealistic view as dysfunctional, impractical, and, thus, unnecessary. On the contrary, from the normative point of view, maintaining a vision of how everything should work or the aspects that require change to achieve the idealistic view is convenient. In the context of the study, idealism is a source of inspiration. We propose that news media systems together with journalistic professionalism ideals, must act as a structural framework for safeguarding the public against the challenging implications of digitalization. Therefore, we consider the following research questions: How should the individual and structural capacities of resilience against the detrimental effects of digital transformation be sought? What new competencies are required to act responsibly in the highly manipulative digital information space?

To gain a comprehensive understanding of resilience against information disruption, conceptual refinement and empirical adaptation are required. Although the body of research on media and information literacy (MIL) in times of digital transformation is growing, less evidence is available on civic agency and digital resilience based on sociocultural factors (e.g., values, knowledge, and experience) and contexts (Reuter & Spielhofer, 2016; Nielsen & Graves, 2017; Nelson & Taneja, 2018; Humprecht et al., 2020, 2021). A search for a set of relevant concepts, social and structural frameworks of media and communications, and human agency together with the ideals of informed citizenship and MIL will be integrated into civic resilience research.

In this chapter, the study firstly explains the digital features of platforms and their internal logic, which are shaped to significantly alter routines against truthfulness and accountability eminent for the news ecology, which is upheld by professional journalists and fact checkers. We will then explore the influence of these developments toward platform influence on

the functioning of media in the selected geographic Baltic–Nordic region (i.e., Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Denmark, Finland, and Sweden), which is represented by neighboring countries with considerable contextual differences. Informed by secondary sources (Eurobarometer and Media Pluralism Monitor [MPM]), the study provides further evidence on the relationship among MIL, civic resilience, and democratic sustainability.

## Platform Power and Social Vulnerability

Contemporary mediated communication environments can act as a connecting and empowering or a degrading factor in society. Digitalization has transformed the methods for communicating and sharing information and the construction of information agendas. Therefore, assuming that the ideals of informed citizenship must be re-discussed by considering registered changes and the new multilayered logics of contemporary hybrid communication is logical.

The *modus operandi* encoded in the functioning of platform logics radically transforms human communication practices. The accelerating trends of datafication, algorithmization, and platformization, which evolve, penetrate, and exceed customary ways and forms of social organization in modern societies, transform the activities of public institutions, including those of media and journalism, and provoke digital transformation by accelerating social changes globally (Kreiss, 2021; Kalpokas, 2019; Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Hannan, 2018).

Much anticipation has occurred about the potential for digitization to improve communication by providing further opportunities for participation and engagement (Dahlgren, 2005; Bennett & Segerberg 2012; Grabe & Myrick, 2016). Unfortunately, this has led to multiple disruptions, including increased surveillance, disinformation, strategic manipulation, instigation of conflict, and the structuration of human activities through opaque processes of data capture and analysis (Achen & Bartels, 2016; Foa, Mounk, 2016; Hauser, 2018; Balčytienė, 2021; Barrett et al., 2021). Ultimately, digital augmentation and the emergence of social media platforms have opened entirely new spaces for the explication and exploitation of discourses of distrust and disappointment and the rise of radicalization and populism (Vilmer et al., 2018; Van Dijck et al., 2019; Bayer et al., 2019; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2020; Kreiss, 2021).

Different forms of information distortion do not only confuse but also especially harm, because they operate on strategic aims to deceive, manipulate, and instigate feelings of uncertainty and helplessness. Unsettling feelings of suspicion, disbelief, and dis-trust are of exceptional damage to democracy and the sustainability of the rule-based and right-focused way of life (Brandtzaeg et al., 2015; Shah et al., 2017; Hofmann, 2019; Porpora & Sekalala, 2019; Posetti & Bontcheva, 2020; Van Aelst et al., 2017).

These critical developments imply that the rules of the operation of platforms should become a major concern for policy makers to ensure an informed public. The intended conceptualization of platform logic is actively influencing regulatory or self-regulatory approaches currently proposed and negotiated by various stakeholder groups in Europe and beyond (Siapera, 2022; Bennet & Livingston, 2018). Innovative approaches toward policy solutions and technological tools, which are applied to issues related to disinformation, digital security, digital ethics and new legal norms, and the engagement of citizens with emerging digital technologies, are, perhaps, more important than ever. As previously known, disinformation and false narratives specifically target issues that instill conflict, radicalize opinion, and lead to social divide (Benkler et al., 2018; Beauchamp, 2019; Bilewicz & Soral, 2020). As Barrett et al. (2021, 11) suggest, “the ideal of social solidarity is a desire for an inclusive democratic practice where there are strong communal bonds and engagement among diverse communities, a contrast to political polarization and social division.” Contrarily, disinformation feeds polarization and erodes trust within institutions and among communities (Bennet & Livingstone, 2018; Parvin, 2018; Carlsson, 2019; Freelon & Wells, 2020).

Hence, we propose that citizenship ideals need to be strategically integrated into three strands of the new communication ecosystem, namely, regulatory frames for media functioning (media policy and regulation), media content plurality (representations and inclusion), and media use, to sustain democracy in highly dynamic and fluid digital information settings. Therefore, we predict that MIL will become a guiding way of thinking, which shapes each strand and acts as a consolidative force among them, which drives toward the common good.

MIL provides the competencies and skills required for critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication; it is a framework that can

contribute to social resilience, solidarity, trust, and well-being (Frau-Meigs, 2022; Jolls, 2022; Bennett et al., 2020; Carlsson, 2019). Therefore, this study views MIL as a contextually embedded phenomenon, which is strongly dependent on public and political culture, media development and professionalism, the role of the state, and the nature of a civil society.

## Agency-Endorsed Conceptual Framework for Civic Resilience

Platform logic requires engagement, that is, consumers must participate in the exchange of information; otherwise, the social network engine will not be effective. This concept is beneficial if it encourages active involvement and participation. Evidently, this logic of operation is favorable for disinformation and the goals of manipulation. Algorithms tend to create clusters of people with similar interests, which can lead to the polarization of society into clearly divided camps. In other words, this *grouping* into clusters, which is the object of support of algorithms, precisely determines the increasing polarization in society (Siapera, 2022).

With the logic of platforms, the human agency is determined via material and non-material resources, including economic capital and resources and social (social relations, networks, trust, and reciprocity), cultural (knowledge, skills, and education), and symbolic (power-related resources; e.g., authority, honor, and prestige) capital. To explain the manifestations of human agency, such as responses to disinformation, a refinement of what is conceptualized as *social* and *civic* resilience are required to consider the influence of platform-mediated communication on people. As a key factor of sustainable development, social well-being, and successful societies, social resilience is defined as the capabilities of communities to respond to, cope with, and adjust to various challenges (Brown, 2013; Hall & Lamont, 2013; Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013; Lorenz, 2013; Haavik, 2020).

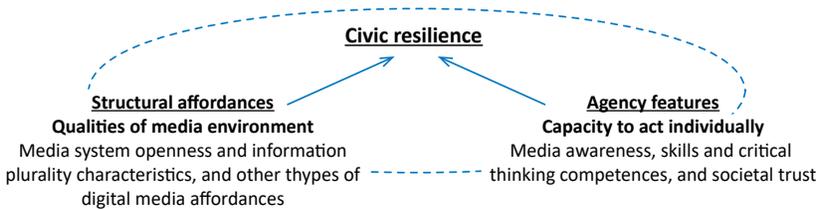
Bearing in mind that social resilience is not a uniform concept but includes structural and cognitive dimensions is important. In other words, material (institutional structure and framework) and non-material (social, cultural, economic, and symbolic) resources should be available to members of communities and societies for the adaptive potential and transformative ability of social organizations (Obrist et al. 2010). If structural resilience is strong, then it promotes the cognitive aspects of the process. If structural

resilience can be considered a *safety net* that offers citizens the means and frameworks to endure systemic risks (e.g., business model disruption, inequality in media and information access), what, then, could serve as a similar safety net from the cognitive (attitudinal) perspective?

In general, discussions on resilience frequently focus on the human capacity to respond to potential threats, which require structural and agentic capacities. As previously mentioned, accessing and acquiring information in digital environments require agency. However, structural constraints may limit these acts: freedom to access information may be limited; in addition, participation in dialogic communication may be ineffective. Moreover, information plurality may be insufficient, among others. Furthermore, a crucial aspect of digital environments is the algorithmic logic of information structuration and predetermined methods for accessing and using information. Thus, the existence of structural constraints that limit the human capacity to respond to potential threats should be considered in digital environments.

When approaching civic resilience in relation to information disruption, we propose an integrative conceptual framework, which is in close alignment with a well-informed notion of citizenship and is facilitated by professional journalism and MIL as public goods (Figure 1). In this regard, a structuration approach that focuses on practice (Giddens, 1984; Bourdieu, 1984; 1986) is useful due to its dialectic relationship between human agency (open, enduring, and experience-based schemes of perception, classification, and action) and structural condition (social, political, and, for our argument, significant, media institutions). This type of relationship results in the particular formations of specific practices and representations, such as adjustment, nonconformity, and reconciliation (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2003). These faculties converge into the modern capacity of (digital) civics.

**Figure 1.** Civic resilience as a capacity to adapt and transform supported by a twofold structure–agency system approach



Eventually, the importance of strategies of context-specific resilience cannot be underestimated. A holistic understanding of resilience requires analysis of the structural conditions (media institutions and discourses) and social actors involved in the resilience-building process. Contextual factors, such as social, political, and economic conditions, as well as institutional settings and power relations are of great importance, because they frame the social actors in a particular field of practice. The following section will further discuss the contextual specificities of civic resilience, while comparing Baltic and Nordic countries challenged by information disruption such as an influx of disinformation and information manipulation.

## Lessons From Baltic and Nordic Countries

Accelerated digitization has introduced several disruptions to media markets: information abundance, decreased trust, collapse of traditional businesses, emergence of new reception practices, and, ultimately, uncertainty, which led to changes in the relationship between the media and social domains.

To approach both, namely, the structural and individual qualities of democratic practices in the studied Baltic–Nordic region, the need emerges for an in-depth analysis of macro-level indicators on the basis of available empirical data and agency-level characteristics of subjective understanding and individual perceptions. Data from News & Media Survey 2022 by

Flash Eurobarometer and MPM 2022<sup>1</sup> are instrumental in illustrating the major assumptions of the increasing importance of agency in changing the public sphere.

In comparative studies on politics and media, Baltic countries are frequently presented as successful examples of CEE democratization (Duvold, 2017). These countries are characterized as small and highly competitive media markets. Nevertheless, despite many successes, evident risks exist in relation to media functioning and plurality, which do not allow a determined implementation of a universalist principle that would ensure equal media reach and accessibility and availability of quality content for all (Table 1; see the rows labelled Social inclusiveness and Access to media for local/regional communities).

Another evident tendency, which is clearly visible in each of the three Baltic countries, is formulated as risks linked with limitations in media market diversity (Kõuts-Klemm et al., 2022). Such an assessment is determined by objective conditions (limitations on the size of the national market and a broad applicability of national languages) and an overtly liberal character of ownership regulation. This aspect overlooks cross-media concentration and competition enforcement, commercial and owner influence over editorial content, and the lack of transparency of media ownership (Jastramskis et al., 2017). These risks of media market plurality have been enduring and even slightly increasing in all Baltic countries (Balčytienė & Juraitė, 2022), which will most apparently remain the key area of risk in the future. Another obvious notion is that the effects of the digital revolution (e.g., the impact of global platforms on local contents) are another factor that exacerbates this (see Market plurality in Table 1).

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<sup>1</sup> The Media Pluralism Monitor (MPM) is a research tool designed to reflect on the monumental changes shaped by the Internet on news media and to assess information and media pluralism on and offline in all EU countries and two candidate countries: Albania and Turkey. The main indicators, covering four main areas (Basic protection, Market plurality, Political independence, and Social inclusiveness), contain variables that cover legal, economic, and sociopolitical questions measured according to a risk scale of low, medium, and high. The MPM project is supported by the European Union and coordinated by the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (CMPF) at the European University Institute. More information on MPM is available at <https://cmpf.eui.eu/>

**Table 1.** Risks to media pluralism in Baltic and Nordic countries  
(Media Pluralism Monitor, 2022)

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania	Denmark	Finland	Sweden
<b>Fundamental protection</b>						
Protection of freedom of expression	27%	29%	17%	12%	19%	24%
Protection of right to information	50%	19%	29%	26%	38%	13%
Journalistic profession, standards, and protection	31%	44%	36%	22%	30%	33%
Independence and effectiveness of the media authority	3%	18%	13%	15%	10%	3%
Universal reach of traditional media and access to the Internet	27%	27%	52%	15%	33%	21%
<b>Market plurality</b>						
Transparency of media ownership	69%	38%	25%	38%	63%	50%
News media concentration	86%	86%	94%	85%	89%	96%
Online platforms concentration and competition enforcement	58%	88%	75%	50%	67%	50%
Media viability	64%	40%	55%	49%	39%	32%
Commercial and owner influence over editorial content	52%	80%	73%	43%	63%	68%
<b>Political independence</b>						

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania	Denmark	Finland	Sweden
Political independence of media	35%	44%	52%	50%	55%	25%
Editorial autonomy	25%	63%	<b>75%</b>	25%	38%	3%
Audio–visual media, online platforms, and elections	25%	31%	18%	31%	35%	15%
State regulation of resources and support to media sector	25%	29%	25%	17%	33%	8%
Independence of PSM governance and funding	33%	17%	3%	25%	58%	3%
<b>Social inclusiveness</b>						
Access to media for minorities	33%	35%	50%	46%	57%	22%
Access to media for local/regional communities and for community media	63%	58%	52%	25%	<b>75%</b>	17%
Access to media for women	48%	47%	23%	45%	47%	20%
Media literacy	42%	<b>67%</b>	42%	3%	4%	8%
Protection against illegal and harmful speech	54%	<b>92%</b>	17%	17%	38%	42%

An illustrative similarity within the mediated ecosystems of the three Baltic countries is that political independence of news media has retained a moderate risk score, except for Lithuania, due to major concerns about the lack of editorial autonomy (75% of risk) and indirect political pressure and control over media outlets, including public service broadcasters. As previously demonstrated, political interference is emblematic across the six countries under study.

Another important area of risks for media pluralism in Baltic countries is social inclusiveness. Based on measures of access to media by various social and cultural groups, including women, ethnic minorities, local communities, and disabled people, the area also covers MIL as a precondition for the effective use of effectively and, therefore, is an important element of media pluralism and citizenship. Despite increased attention to public agenda and different measures introduced at the media-policy level, MIL education and applicability remain an issue of major concern due to the lack of a systematic and comprehensive approach to MIL in the Baltic countries (Juraitė & Balčytienė, 2022).

Thus, from the plurality perspective and considering the structural and representational aspects of news media functioning, economic challenges mainly constrain the discursive arena in the Baltic countries. Evidently, the identified risks have been ongoing for years now. In addition, rapid digitization and datafication with their consequences do not eliminate but replicate it.

Alternatively, the Nordic countries are commonly discussed as a region that paints a relatively homogeneous picture about the media and democracy. Nordic countries are considered to offer robust societal structures and institutionalized professional practices attentive to civic needs (Aylott, 2017; Henriksen et al., 2018; Meinander, 2021). A strong media and education sector are considered crucial pillars, because they operate on universalist principles, that is, they offer equal opportunities to all. International studies clearly depict trends that these countries possess high degrees of interpersonal trust and that the media is widely used and that these countries generally live in a culture of mediated information welfare and prosperity (Forsman, 2020; Wadbring & Pekkala, 2017; Matovic et al., 2017). The notion of a *media welfare state* is based on high levels of media consumption, pluralistic content, and trust in the media (Syvertsen et al., 2014). Such values are evident in the editorial policy of the media and in public policy, which is based on the principle of dialogue and agreement among stakeholders.

Conversely, a tendency is observed even in the Nordic countries, which corresponds to the processes of populist polarization and radicalization of attitudes that are globally visible. In the not-so-distant past, the information space in the Nordic region, which was created by the media, was seemingly open to everyone and supporting dialogue. Now, this scenario is far from

reality. Social networks and the increased use of digital information transpose marginalized voices into a formal public space (Koivunen, 2021). It not only increased awareness of the increasing social divide between groups but also polarized the media and public space.

Table 1 provides a comparison and demonstrates that the Nordic media is less sheltered by economic and cultural (e.g., supportive media use and trust) safeguards, and a real risk exists that this sector will change significantly in the future. Although the Nordic countries maintain a progressive outlook on MIL (Table 1; Social inclusiveness and Indicator of MIL), they have well-established, institutionalized media education programs and a commitment to regularly review and adjust MIL objectives within media and education policies in response to evolving digital landscapes. Consequently, the risk level remains low. Simultaneously, the conventional news media is struggling with economic challenges, including concentration issues, which exert detrimental effects on media viability and the profession of journalism. This scenario poses a significant risk against informed citizenship in the near future.

Furthermore, media landscapes in the countries of both regions under study are facing profound economic challenges and exhibit the highest levels of risk (Table 1, Market plurality with indicators of News media concentration and Online platforms concentration). While encountering apparent economic and media governance uncertainties, news media organizations are drawn into re-structuring and re-organization. No adequate policies and regulations have been developed, at the moment, to resist the negative effects of the convergence between the operations of news media and global online platforms. Crucially, the problems emerging from such an act of convergence instill and deepen information disorders, such as disinformation.

Indeed, the latest European Union policies, which focus on information disruption and media response (e.g., the European Media Freedom Act [EMFA]), signal important changes on the way toward media pluralism and securing media functioning. Indeed, this step is a big one forward regarding support for professional journalism and public service media operations and, hence, the ideal of common good. For example, EMFA stresses the significance of communication monitoring and institutions to observe the development of pluralism in the media sphere. These guiding strategies are good at the transnational level. Once again, however, the

regulation of flaws in national media, such as emergent cross ownership forms, increased media concentration, lack of ownership transparency, state/public financing, and others linked with the economic aspect of national media operations, is left to national states (Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom, 2022). As previously argued, ideologies/values enlisted in policies and media regulation are crucial for ensuring the functioning and viability of news media for serving as a public good (UNESCO, 2022; Allern & Pollack, 2019; Picard & Pickard, 2017).

In the abovementioned context, resilience and the capacity to cope with information disruptions are country-specific and highly dependent on political, economic, and media environments (Humprecht et al., 2021; Boulliane et al., 2022). The increased polarization of society and the emergence of populism as well as the low levels of confidence in news media, weak public service broadcasters, and fragmented audiences are among the key factors that limit the resilience of citizens to disinformation. We consider these features and discuss media use and the experience of the public of different news sources, including disinformation and other types of information disorders. We apply data on public opinion collected by News & Media Survey (2022) by Flash Eurobarometer to examine differences and similarities in the public perceptions of media use and news sources between the Baltic and Nordic countries.

**Figure 2.** Media use in the Baltic and Nordic countries  
(Flash Eurobarometer, 2022)

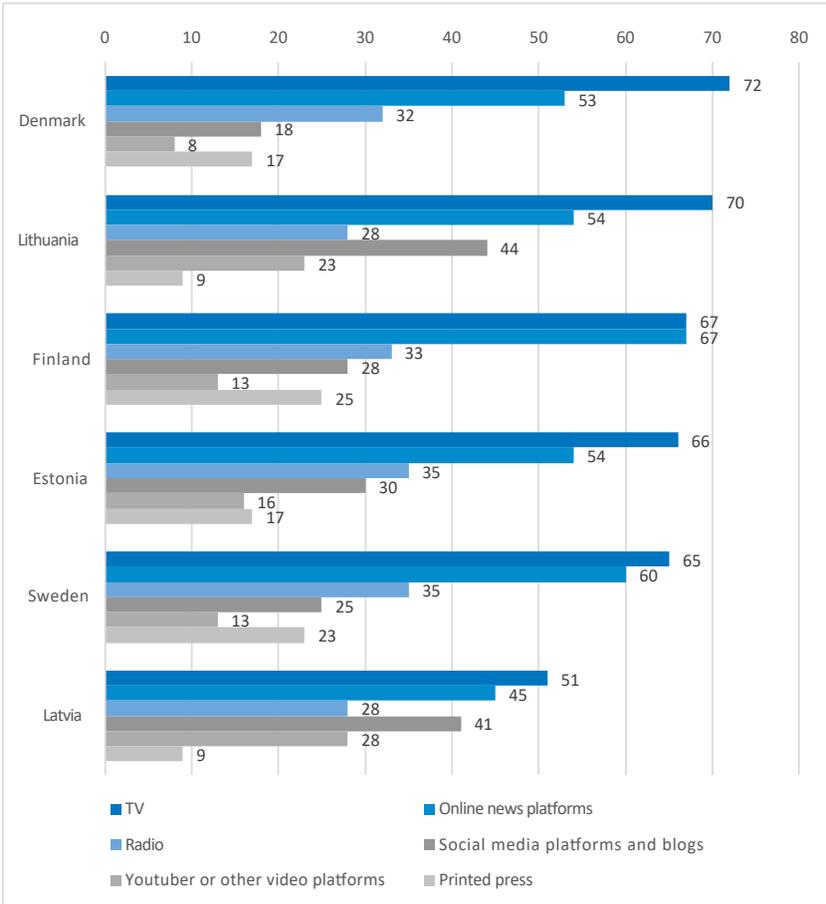
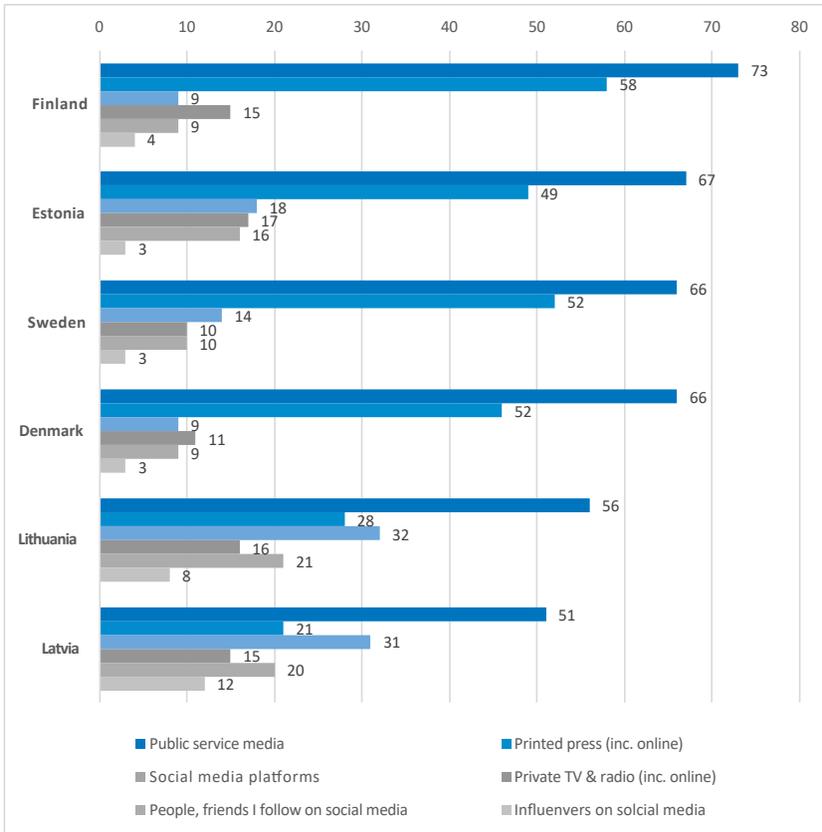


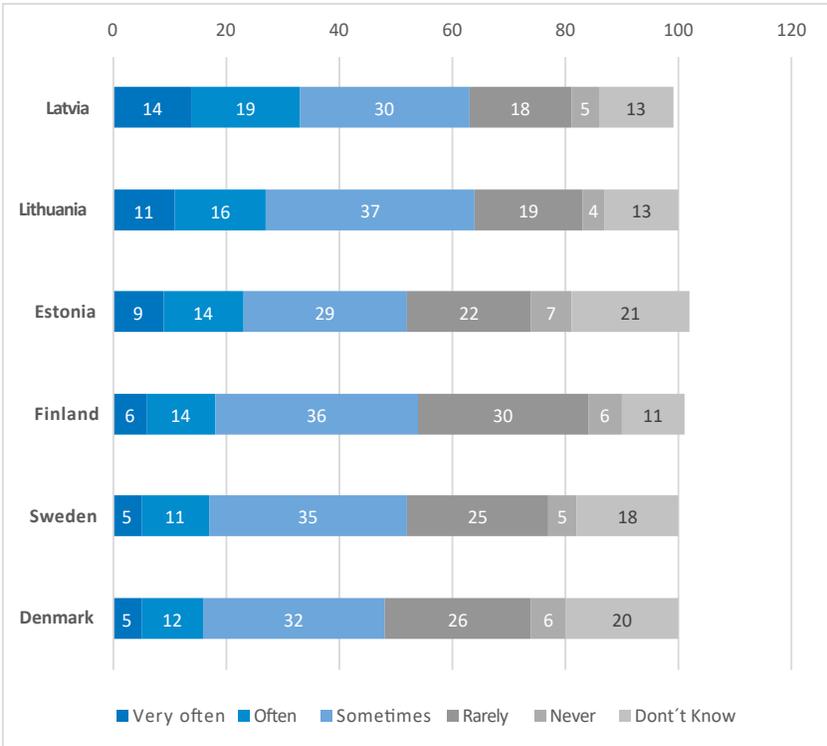
Figure 2 demonstrates that the majority of the Baltic and Nordic populations are opting for TV and online news platforms as primary news sources with the largest number of TV viewers in Denmark and Lithuania, while the most active online news readership is observed for Finland and Sweden. Clear differences exist in the use of social media and video platforms, which are more likely to be part of the news media repertoire in Lithuania and Latvia than those in the other countries.

**Figure 3.** Most trusted news sources in the Baltic and Nordic countries (Flash Eurobarometer, 2022)



Public service media channels, including TV, radio, and online portals, are the most trusted news sources among the Baltic and Nordic populations in which Finland and Estonia obtained the largest number of respondents who trust these channels (Figure 3). Public service media is followed by printed and online press in most of the countries, except for Lithuania and Latvia, wherein social media platforms are more trusted than printed press, private TV, and radio. People in Latvia and Lithuania are likely to rely on the people, groups, or friends they follow on social media more frequently than those in the other countries. The increasing exposure to social media platforms and changing habits of media consumption are raising questions about the capacity and resilience of the public to confront the risks that emerge from the digital media environment. Figures 4 and 5 provides public opinion on disinformation to illustrate the Baltic and Nordic climates.

**Figure 4.** Exposure to disinformation and fake news over the past 7 days (Flash Eurobarometer, 2022)



Comparing data on public opinions about exposure to disinformation and fake news over the past 7 days, we observe notable differences between the selected countries (Figure 4). Apparently, the Baltic respondents are overall more likely to respond that they were exposed to information disorders during the last 7 days. For instance, the Latvian respondents reported that they were confronted with disinformation and fake news twice more often than those in Denmark or Sweden (Figure 4; *very often* and *often*).

**Figure 5. Confidence in recognizing disinformation**  
(Flash Eurobarometer, 2022)

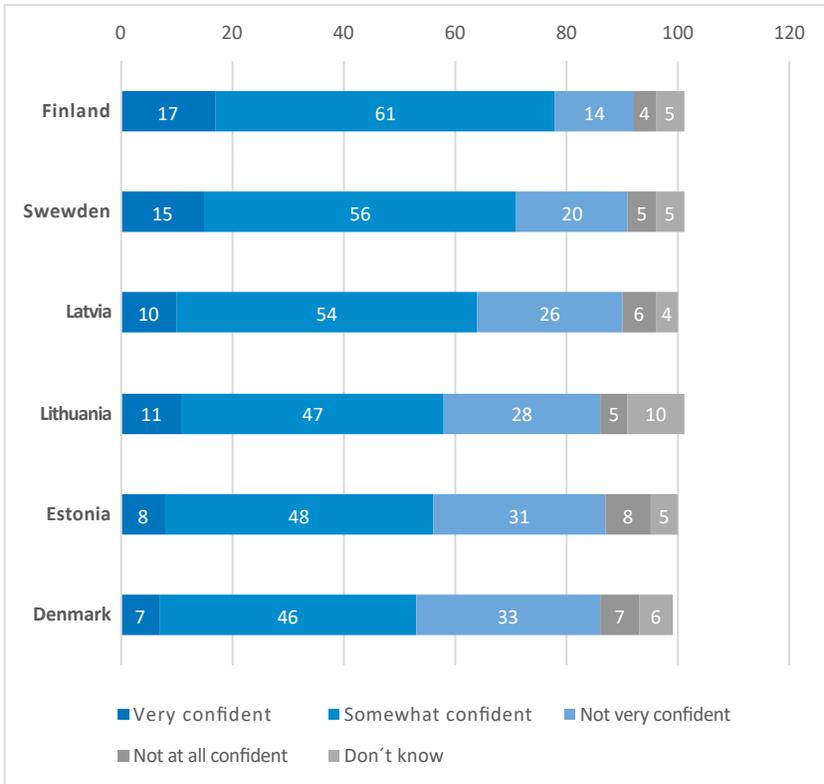


Figure 5 depicts the levels of confidence of the respondents relative to their ability to recognize disinformation and fake news. Once again, the study observed certain differences, because populations in Finland and Sweden seemingly displayed higher levels of confidence than those in the three Baltic countries. Interestingly, Denmark is an exception, because its population is seemingly the least confident in recognizing disinformation.

Briefly, the dynamics of media transformation and public opinion illustrate fundamental changes in the Baltic and Nordic media ecosystems. Despite the dominance of the public service media as reliable and significant news sources in these countries (Figure 3) and the proliferation of social media platforms in Lithuania and Latvia, the current study argues that perceptions of people about their degree of confidence in identifying and recognizing disinformation are insufficient. Therefore, the urgency of developing MIL as a strategic guideline for all communication agents

(stakeholders) and not only for media and education institutions remains a major concern in the Baltic and Nordic regions.

## Promises to Fight Information Disruption

Although information in general and accessibility to digital communications networks in particular are well advancing and opening new forms of information access, participation, and self-expression, these altered structures of communication do not automatically lead to adequate cultures and routines of information exchange, co-habitation, and *communing* (Balčytienė & Juraitė, 2022). As argued in this chapter, we strive toward an idealist vision and normative understanding of the democratic process, which is rooted in the ability of the public to communicate, share ideas, and engage in dialogue. This democratic process has been disrupted by the rise of digital technology on the one hand and by the entrenched societal inequality on the other hand. As a result of these mixed processes, the notion of a common good has become increasingly contested, and the culture of democracy has been weakened.

Without the experience to understand how the logic of platforms are encoded in digital information distribution and without knowledge of its influence on individual choices, people become targets of strategic manipulation. Left by themselves, users tend to follow the pre-defined logic of digital communication environments (Siapera, 2022). However, the most worrisome aspect for democratic well-being is that hybrid communication arenas are highly susceptible to manipulative and propagandistic operations that are intended to deceive (Chadwick & Stanyer, 2022). Crucially, remaining safe in such an environment is unimaginable without appropriate attentiveness and strategic preparation not only to withstand but also to counter inforuption (Frau-Meigs, 2022; Tenove, 2020). In this sense, *civic resilience* is a useful conceptual apparatus.

Civic resilience, which is a user-agency focused outcome (thus, civics-centered), fits well with the objectives of UNESCO (2022), which advocates that information is a public good and requests agency and will for supporting and cherishing it. It is precisely in this aspect of civics-centeredness that a relationship between the notions of agency and MIL is viewed through civic resilience.

As envisioned in the previous sections, common good and citizenship ideals must be incorporated into the new communication ecology, that is, all layers of the complex communication ecosystem. As such, a new communication ecology perspective requires the examination of digital transformations and emerging communication environments from a specific angle, that is, by integrating several strands into one analysis. Among these strands, three aspects are significant: the structural characteristics of media functions (i.e., legal, political, and economic contexts for journalism/media to support its workings), content plurality (i.e., questions of the viability and socially inclusivity of media), and audience reception characteristics (who uses which types of news, and how they determine civics).

Briefly, we propose that informed citizenship ideals and, hence, MIL, need to be considered in the light of civic resilience and as the core focus of public operations in highly hybrid digitized environments. As demonstrated in media education research, MIL has been the topic of debates across years as a policy strategy for enhancing citizenship through certain pedagogic interventions and learnings on advancing the knowledge and awareness of the public about responsible media use (Jolls, 2022; Stix & Jolls, 2020; Carlsson, 2019). Such strategies have focused more on content aspects and functions of journalism and less on technologies and digital innovations. With intensified digitization and platformization, any outstanding attention of different stakeholders, such as policy makers, media, IT professionals, and educators, needs to be concentrated on digital transformation processes and social outcomes.

Thus, this study proposes that MIL should act as a guiding philosophy that assists different stakeholders in tackling crucial issues required to consolidate all effort toward civic resilience. Along this line, MIL policy should envision that policymakers (and stakeholders) must be active advocates of MIL by supporting relevant policies and regulatory and co-regulatory forms in the media system. Similarly, journalists must be trendsetters of innovation, teachers (designers of targeted pedagogical interventions), and citizens (responsible learners and digital media activists).

## Conclusion

As ideally envisioned, democracy is a political system and a way of life, which entail the ideals of co-habitation and intends to ensure that the principles of freedom, equality, and pluralism are working for all. Such ideals of general welfare (common good) are also duplicated in the information context and media system that are unfolding via two specific aspects. The first highlights the issue of individual communication rights and freedom and how they are considered and recognized in the digital communication arena of a concrete country. The second aspect refers to the result of such collective media, information use, and participation in the realm of politics and public service.

Succeeding these two aspects, we examined and analyzed, for example, the recognition of media systems of the principle of press freedom and other fundamental rights (Table 1; the MPM 2022 project data) and explored the realization of the principle of accessibility of information to all in the countries under study. Additionally, we investigated the actual exercise of citizens of their freedom: their selection of media channels (conventional news media or social networks) for information, engagement in communication and whether or not they are interested in political or community issues, and assessment of their experiences (skills for recognizing manipulation and whether or not they responsibly use information).

This study took a normative stance and argued that maintaining all democratic principles in digital communication is important; hence, we aimed to synchronize both aspects. To illustrate emerging cultural specificities, we searched for evidence in the Baltic–Nordic region.

To respect the rights of others and to act responsibly – and to aim for a common good – one needs more than knowledge. In digital environments, a critical view on how digital logics determines one’s information choices and learning and an awareness of the influence of individual actions on others, become of paramount significance. These latter competencies are within the realm of MIL.

Although obvious aspects of resilience are notable, such as media infrastructure and the individual capacities of the public framed to counter manyfold inforuptions (disinformation and manipulation) in

the Baltic–Nordic region, necessary steps in the media policies of these countries require the urgent and focused attention of multiple stakeholders. In highly integrated, hybrid, and networked communication ecosystems, possessing a clear understanding of the intentions and commitments that motivate diverse agents and stakeholders of communication arenas is essential. Conventional news channels, such as print media and television, as well as social networks, operate under the growing influence of global platforms in which every participant actively changes roles by shifting one's position from user to producer and vice versa.

Although this chapter discussed the roles of all agents in the digital communication ecosystem, such as platforms, their algorithmic functioning and business logic, policy makers, conventional news media, and citizens, utmost attention was drawn to producers of reliable and verified contents, that is, the news media and journalists. Consequently, the most important idea expressed here is that the *structural* aspect of overall resilience (i.e., media freedom, system viability, and accessibility) requires a new reinforcement, that is, MIL-informed guidance, which considers the new specificities and detrimental effects of the evolving information ecosystem.

Furthermore, the hybrid character of communication environments also dictates the urgency of searching for new forms of cooperation among the stakeholders involved. The collaborative aspect of *stakeholderism* also has a built-in logic of civics. With regard to Baltic–Nordic practices, we present good examples of collaborative partnerships in these countries, such as the Nordic Observatory for Digital Media and Information Disorder Hub in the Nordic region, the DIGIRES research initiative in Lithuania, and the Baltic Engagement Center for Combatting Information Disruptions Hub, which aim for informed public and media education in the three Baltic countries. The identification, debate, and sustainability of common goals across interest groups who joined these initiatives, such as civil servants, IT professionals, media, teachers, librarians, and citizens, remain to be revealed.

To better understand public response and civic resilience against disinformation and other communication media-related disorders, research insight and conceptual refinement of issues that are at stake for each stakeholder and require revisions are needed. For example, academics and IT groups must initiate innovative methods and projects to understand and address disinformation. Similarly, media must advance fact-checking

operations to curb fake narratives, while policymakers must advance strategic thinking and partnership at the regional and transnational levels. However, to promote the success of each specific goal, a consensus exists in the evolving information ecosystem that MIL must occur as a guarantee of resilient civics, sustainability, and well-being for all.

## Acknowledgments

The conceptual ideas discussed in this essay were developed within the frameworks of several research studies and empirical analyses. The concept of informational vulnerability and varied forms of resilience was tested in projects DIGIRES (<http://digires.lt>, 2021-2022) and BECID (Baltic Engagement Center for Combatting Information Disruptions; grant agreement ID: 101084073, 2022-2025). Risks to informed citizenship, informational cohesion, the ideal of common good, and responsible communication were further explored in the *Transmedialios komunikacijos modelis žiniasklaidos atsparumui ir visuomenės informaciniam integralumui pasiekti* (TRANSINTEGRAL project financed by the Lithuanian Research Council, Nr. S-VIS-23-20, 2023-2025), and the Dialogic Communication Ethics and Accountability (DIACOMET; Fostering Capacity Building for Civic Resilience and Participation; grant agreement no. 101094816, 2023-2026) projects.

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