

## Can this be true?

### Predictors of media literacy and resilience to the post-truth phenomenon in Europe

*The issue of post-truth has gained significant prominence as a catch-all term related to a number of today's social and political phenomena. The concept of media literacy is employed to gauge the potential for resilience to the negative effects of diminishing public trust, severely polarized politics, and fragmented media, among others. In this brief, select indicators are used to measure and rank European countries in areas such as media freedom, education, trust and new forms of participation in order to identify the level of media literacy of the society. The assumption is that countries with better educated people, freer media, and higher levels of trust in society are better equipped to address the negative effects of a 'post-truth' world.*

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It is rather ironic that at a time when “data” is becoming the most sought after commodity, ‘post-truth’ dictates current political and social trends in disregard for information. In 2016, ‘post-truth’ was selected as the Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year – an adjective defined as “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief”. The term ‘post-truth politics’ was coined.

There are a number of explanations and proposals how to address this situation. Probably a most fitting and important related concept is ‘media literacy’. According to one definition, ‘media literacy’ is a wide concept that “includes all technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow a citizen to access, have a critical understanding of the media and interact with it”<sup>1</sup>. A related concept – digital information literacy – should be mentioned too, taking into account the usage of social networks and new forms of communication.

The current paper contains a proposal for measuring media literacy through predictors for media and possibly digital literacy with the aim to rank societies in their potential for resilience in the face of the post-truth phenomenon. The model, suggested in this brief, employs several indicators that correspond to different aspects related to media literacy and the post-truth phenomena. Level of education, state of the media, trust in society and the usage of new tools of participation seem to be predictors of media literacy. As they have different importance, the indicators are included with a corresponding weight. The

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<sup>1</sup> As used by EU’s Media Literacy Expert Group, DG Communications Networks, Content and Technology.

media freedom and education indicators carry most weight, with reading literacy attributed relatively most importance in education. Trust and e-participation indicators are attributed the remaining share.<sup>2</sup>

Media Literacy Index	
Indicators	Weight
<b>Media Freedom indicators</b>	
Freedom of the Press score by Freedom House	20%
Press Freedom Index by Reporters without Borders	20%
<b>Education indicators</b>	
PISA score in reading literacy	30%
PISA score in scientific literacy	5%
PISA score mathematical literacy	5%
Share of population (%) with university degree	5%
<b>Trust</b>	
Trust in People	10%
<b>New forms of participation</b>	
E-participation	5%

### Media environment

“Print is dead” the fictional character Egon Spengler, PhD, announced back in the 1984 supernatural comedy *Ghostbusters*. This was 30 years before Facebook and well before the advent of the internet, when ‘media’ meant ‘media’. Fast forward into 2017, there is high chance that the *Ghostbusters*’ hilarious calamities would be regarded as “facts” by the many people who take conspiracy theories or fake news at their face value. But given the effect on politics and society, the current situation is no laughing matter. Media freedom is an essential indicator. The rise of fake news amidst the severely fragmented media landscape or outright weak and controlled media in some countries has accompanied the deterioration of the public and political debates and the overall quality of the democratic process. In the model, suggested in this brief, two commonly accepted indices are used – of Freedom House and of Reporters without Borders - to measure media freedom.

### Education

Education is another essential component. For example, Finland’s government considers the strong public education system as a main tool to resist information warfare against the country.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore,

<sup>2</sup> The data used is from the Catch-Up Index of the Open Society Institute – Sofia. You can find description and data available at [www.thecatchupindex.eu](http://www.thecatchupindex.eu). The scores range from 0 to 100 (lowest to highest) and the ranking is from 1 to 33 (highest to lowest). The model uses basic indicators with different raw data (percentages, diverse index scores, years, etc.). This necessitates the standardization of the values according to a statistical procedure, which recalculates them in one and the same scale and at the same time preserves the order and proportions between them. The standardizing is done following the normalization method of z-scores, which uses mean weighed score and standard deviation. More about the methodology can be found in the Catch-Up Index reports ([www.thecatchupindex.eu](http://www.thecatchupindex.eu)).

“widespread critical thinking skills among the Finnish population and a coherent government response” is thought to be a key element for resisting fake news campaigns. In general, it is thought that more educated people are more informed, more critically thinking and less likely to fall into the trap of a fabricated news. But there is also a more complex psychological mechanism at work. A study by Jan-Willem van Prooijen on conspiracy theories have found that more educated people feel more in control of their lives, do not believe so much in easy solutions and have more analytical skills.<sup>4</sup> The included indicators for educations are PISA reading performance, PISA science and PISA mathematics components with reading attributed the highest importance in this case. PISA provides picture not only of pupils’ achievements, but also the overall outcomes of the educational system in a country. The indicator “Share of people with university degree” is also included, although with smaller weight, as education indicator.

### **Trust in society**

Trust is another important aspect. The entire post-truth phenomenon is accompanied by extremely high levels of mistrust towards institutions, mainstream media, politicians, experts. Conspiracy theories about the functioning of the world both reflect and bring about low level of confidence in existing institutions. The current model uses a related indicator - “Trust in People”. It measures the level of trust in society and “reflects people's perception of others' reliability”, according to the definition of OECD. As a rule, high level of trust is a hallmark of successful societies and a proxy for the development of civil society.

### **E-participation**

In addition, “E-participation” indicator is also included to measure the use of information and communication technologies to enhance political participation, making possible for citizens to communicate with each other, the elected officials and authorities.

### **The complexity of it all: a disclaimer**

But before going further, there is a word of caution. There are some aspects of the ‘post-truth’ phenomena, which are very specific and difficult to assess. The already mentioned Oxford dictionary definition of post-truth puts a strong emphasis on the role of emotions. For example, there is no simple causality between education and post-truth as there are more complex psychological mechanisms at play. They may be attributed to confirmation bias, prior-attitude effect, etc. People prefer or outright seek information that confirms their own preconceived views, tend to dismiss evidence which does not coincide with their already formed opinion and disregard objective accuracy. Also, there is a whole range of details that should be taken into account when discussing post-truth and related phenomena. For example, fake news is fabricated news and deliberate presentation of falsehood as fact that may pursue political or financial gains and should not be confused with lazy journalism.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Foreign Policy, “Why Is Finland Able to Fend Off Putin’s Information War?”, 1 March 2017, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/01/why-is-finland-able-to-fend-off-putins-information-war/>

<sup>4</sup>See “Why Education Predicts Decreased Belief in Conspiracy Theories” by Jan-Willem van Prooijen, Applied Cognitive Psychology, Appl. Cognit. Psychol. 31: 50–58 (2017). Published online 28 November 2016 in Wiley Online Library ([wileyonlinelibrary.com](http://wileyonlinelibrary.com)) DOI: 10.1002/acp.3301, and also James N. Druckman, The Politics of Motivation, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Financial Times, “Fake news in the post-factual age” by Lionel Barber, 16 September 2017, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/c8c749e0-996d-11e7-b83c-9588e51488a0>

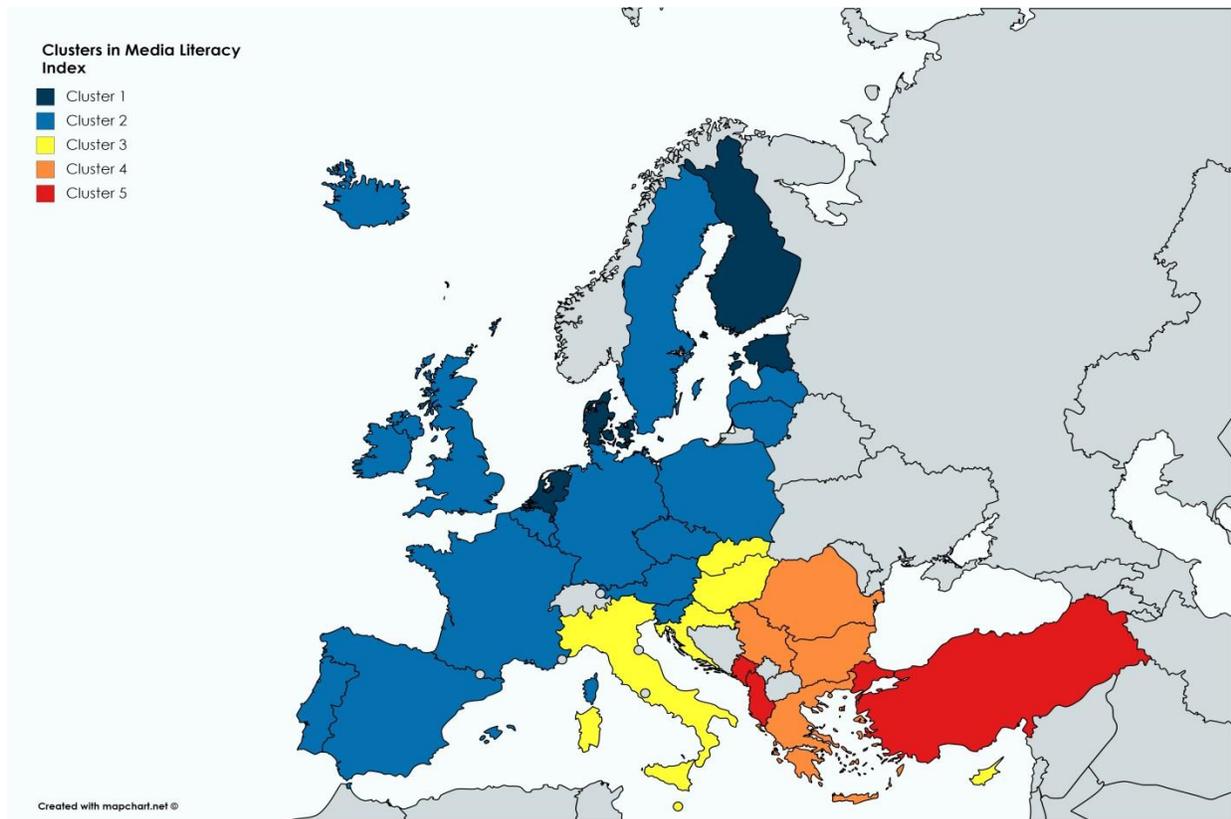
## The results: country ranking

Media Literacy Index Ranking and Resilience to Post-Truth			
Rank (1-33)	Country	Score (100-0)	Cluster
1	Finland	78	1
2	The Netherlands	72	
3	Denmark	72	
4	Estonia	71	
5	Ireland	67	2
6	Sweden	66	
7	Belgium	64	
8	Germany	63	
9	United Kingdom	62	
10	Slovenia	61	
11	Austria	61	
12	Luxembourg	60	
13	Iceland	59	
14	Portugal	59	
15	Spain	58	
16	Poland	57	
17	Latvia	56	
18	Czech	56	
19	Lithuania	55	
20	France	55	
21	Slovakia	50	3
22	Malta	49	
23	Italy	48	
24	Croatia	43	
25	Hungary	42	
26	Cyprus	41	
27	Romania	37	4
28	Greece	36	
29	Serbia	33	
30	Bulgaria	32	
31	Montenegro	25	5
32	Albania	24	
33	Turkey	15	

The assumption in the suggested model is that societies with freer media, better education and trust among citizens would result in higher media literacy and such societies would be better equipped to address the post-truth phenomena.

The combined indicators provide average scores for each country as well as ranking. At the country level, among the 33 European states included in the model, there are several identifiable patterns. The countries that have better scores across all indicators (media, education, trust, etc.) include the Northern and Western countries with Finland, the Netherlands and Denmark on the top three positions. This coincides with the view of Finland, mentioned above, as a country best prepared to face such challenges because of its best education system and educated population. It is worth noting that Estonia is 4<sup>th</sup> in the ranking as along with free media has Europe's best PISA results and among the freer media. These countries also have the highest level of trust among people, making their societies better at coping with any challenges. They

also tend to have higher levels of e-participation as Estonia, the Nordics and the others high on the list excel in using ICT solutions.



The scores provide the opportunity of further analysis. A cluster analysis of the results was also made, dividing the countries into five groups with similar characteristics. The clusters, visualized on a map of Europe, show a clearly visible geographic pattern. A number of North and Northwestern countries are in the lead, followed by the rest of Western European countries. There is a middle transitional cluster between Italy and Slovakia that encompasses neighboring Hungary and Croatia. The Balkan countries, including Greece and Turkey remain in the last two clusters.

The poorly performing countries tend to have more controlled media environments, lower educational levels and higher distrust among people. These are the predictors of poorer media literacy and higher susceptibility of societies to the post-truth phenomena – post-truth politics, so-called alternative facts, prevailing conspiracy theories about the functioning of the world.

### Final words

There have been basically two approaches proposed to deal with the post-truth phenomena. The first one is regulatory and restrictive, e.g. creating new regulations for the new media age. While some may be necessary, the drawback might be a toll on free speech, for example. The second one is investing in critical reading and analysis skills, e.g. raising media literacy skills as effective and future-proof method. It should be given a try. In any case, better education, healthier media environment and higher trust among citizens have multiple benefits.

Media Literacy Index: used sources and data*										
Index ranking and scores		Used sources and data	Freedom of the Press (Freedom House)	Press Freedom Index (Reporters without Borders)	PISA score in reading literacy (OECD)	PISA score in scientific literacy (OECD)	PISA score mathematical literacy (OECD)	Share of population (%) with university degree (Eurostat)	Trust in People (Eurostat, EQSL)	E-participation Index (UN)
Ranking (1-33)	Score (100-0)	Country/Scale	On a scale from 0 to 100 (best to worst)	On a scale from 0 to 100 (best to worst)	The higher the score the better; 500 is very good and below 300 is a very poor result	The higher the score the better; 500 is very good and below 300 is a very poor result	The higher the score the better; 500 is very good and below 300 is a very poor result	In percentages from 100% to 0% (higher is better)	On a scale from 10 to 0 (highest to lowest)	On a scale from 1 to 0 (highest to lowest)
1	78	Finland	11	8.59	526	531	511	35.5	7.4	0.9153
2	72	The Netherlands	11	8.76	503	509	512	30.5	6.9	0.9492
3	72	Denmark	12	8.89	500	502	511	30.7	8.3	0.8136
4	71	Estonia	16	14.31	519	534	520	33.3	5.8	0.8136
5	67	Ireland	17	12.4	521	503	504	37.4	6.4	0.7119
6	66	Sweden	11	12.33	500	493	494	34.0	6.9	0.7627
7	64	Belgium	11	14.18	499	502	507	32.7	5.7	0.6441
8	63	Germany	20	14.8	509	509	506	23.8	5.5	0.7627
9	62	United Kingdom	25	21.7	498	509	492	37.6	6.1	1
10	61	Slovenia	23	22.26	505	513	510	26.6	6.5	0.7288
11	61	Austria	23	13.18	485	495	497	28.1	5.9	0.8814
12	60	Luxembourg	13	14.43	481	483	486	35.2	5.5	0.6949
13	59	Iceland	15	15.3	482	473	488	31.7	7.0	0.661
14	59	Portugal	18	17.27	498	501	492	20.7	5.3	0.661
15	58	Spain	28	19.92	496	493	486	32.1	6.3	0.9322
16	57	Poland	28	23.89	506	501	504	24.4	6.0	0.8814
17	56	Latvia	28	17.38	488	490	482	28.1	6.5	0.5254
18	56	Czech Republic	21	16.66	487	493	492	19.8	5.3	0.5593
19	55	Lithuania	23	19.95	472	475	478	33.2	6.1	0.8305
20	55	France	28	23.83	499	495	493	30.4	5.0	0.8983
21	50	Slovakia	24	13.26	453	461	475	18.9	5.8	0.5424
22	49	Malta	23	23.84	447	465	479	18.1	6.2	0.7797
23	48	Italy	31	28.93	485	481	486	15.5	5.7	0.9153
24	43	Croatia	42	27.91	487	475	464	19.6	5.1	0.7797
25	42	Hungary	40	28.17	470	477	477	20.9	5.3	0.4915
26	41	Cyprus	24	18.26	443	433	437	36.3	4.5	0.5254
27	37	Romania	38	24.29	434	435	444	15.0	6.4	0.6271
28	36	Greece	48	30.35	467	455	454	25.4	5.3	0.6102
29	33	Serbia	45	27.6	432	446	441	16.25	4.2	0.8305
30	32	Bulgaria	40	34.46	432	446	441	24.1	4.2	0.6949
31	25	Montenegro	41	32.79	427	411	418	17.00	4.2	0.8305
32	24	Albania	51	29.92	405	427	413	11.00	4.2	0.6441
33	15	Turkey	71	50.76	428	425	420	14.8	4.5	0.6271

\* Data used is the latest available up until the end of 2016. In case of missing data, imputation techniques were used as explained in the Catch-Up Index methodology ([www.thecatchupindex.eu](http://www.thecatchupindex.eu))

 <p>European Policies Initiative</p> <p>Open Society Institute – Sofia</p>	<p><b>POLICY BRIEF 52</b></p>
<p>This is a revised version of an earlier brief, published in September 2017.</p> <p>The policy brief series is a product of the European Policies Initiative (EuPI) of the Open Society Institute – Sofia.</p> <p>The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Open Society Institute –Sofia.</p> <p>Please, check EuPI’s web-site at <a href="http://www.eupi.eu">www.eupi.eu</a> regularly for new policy briefs, other publications and events. You can subscribe to EuPI’s updates via the RSS or the subscription services at the bottom of the web-page.</p> <p>© 2017, Open Society Institute – Sofia</p> <p><b>About the author</b></p> <p>Marin Lessenski is Program Director, Open Society Institute – Sofia.</p>	<p><b>October 2017</b></p> <p><b>About EuPI</b></p> <p>The European Policy Initiative (EuPI) aims at stimulating and assisting new Member States from CEE to develop capacity for constructive co-authorship of common European policies at both government and civil society level. As a new priority area of the European Policies and Civic Participation Program of Open Society Institute – Sofia, EuPI will contribute to improving the capacity of new Member States to effectively impact common European policies through quality research, policy recommendations, networking and advocacy. The initiative operates in the ten new Member States from CEE through a network of experts and policy institutes.</p> <p><b>Contact</b></p> <p>Address: 56 Solunska Str. Sofia 1000 Tel.: (+359 2) 930 66 19 Fax: (+359 2) 951 63 48 E-mail: <a href="mailto:eupi@osi.bg">eupi@osi.bg</a> Web: <a href="http://www.eupi.eu">www.eupi.eu</a></p>

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