

THE BALTIC CENTRE FOR MEDIA EXCELLENCE
A CASE STUDY ON MEDIA LITERACY AS A TOOL
AGAINST RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION

Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy Capstone Project

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Introduction

In their report *Winning the Information War*, Edward Lucas and Peter Pomeranzev provide comprehensive recommendations to target the spread of Russian disinformation in different contexts. One recommendation focuses on popularizing media literacy for the 21st century digital age, and they broadly suggest ways that media literacy can be used to educate mass audiences.¹ It is positive to see media literacy receiving more attention from policymakers and experts outside of the education field. Despite this, their recommendations on media literacy lack an explanation of how media literacy should be implemented and what effective media literacy interventions look like. Other studies have also simply recommended that more media literacy initiatives be incorporated at the federal, state, and local levels of different countries, but they fail to give specific information regarding what that would look like.² If media literacy is being recommended as an effective tool to counter Russian disinformation, then current and future research must answer questions related to creating, implementing, and monitoring the effectiveness of media literacy initiatives.

Aside from the paucity of research on what characterizes effective media literacy implementation, there is also a gap in rigorous research on how the most vulnerable countries are specifically utilizing media literacy tools to counter Russian disinformation. A variety of post-Soviet countries with large Russian-speaking populations, such as Latvia, are regularly facing a barrage of disinformation from Russian media. Russia has strategically designed tailor-made disinformation campaigns against countries like Latvia to exploit their internal vulnerabilities.³ This necessitates more research on how these countries are adapting their own media literacy initiatives to counter Russian disinformation as well as a discussion on their effectiveness.

The purpose of this research is to explore how Latvia, a country that is more vulnerable to disinformation because of its media environment, is modifying its own media literacy initiatives to counter Russian disinformation campaigns. This paper will discuss one case where Latvia is utilizing media literacy tactics to do so: the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence (BCME), which is a journalism non-profit organization located in Riga that is relatively unknown in the United States. This organization has become a hub for smart journalism in the Baltic region and beyond, and it provides independent media outlets with practical professional training and mentorship related to media management, essential media market research, and audience analysis. It is also working to broaden its impact among the public by encouraging media literacy, critical thinking, civic awareness, and demand for quality journalism in schools, public discussions, and online.

The argument of this paper is that the BCME is successfully implementing media literacy interventions that are grounded in well-established components of media literacy. It is, however, a very young organization operating within a country that does not have fully-formed media literacy traditions, is hyper-focused on the journalism community, and has yet to publicly share outcome data to significantly prove the effectiveness of its interventions. By focusing on this case, this research will explain how effective media literacy programs could be tailored to specific country contexts. This paper will provide insight on what media literacy is, how it is being measured, how it is being applied in the Latvian context, what challenges exist within media literacy research and implementation, and avenues for future research.

Why is Media Literacy Important to Study?

The amount of information that is offered by the media and easily available to people at the click of a button has become massive, and it continues to grow every day. At the same time,

the content is arguably diminishing in quality and reliability over time.⁴ Therefore, there is a growing need for people to navigate critically and effectively through this expansive information environment to formulate opinions or make important decisions. Advocates of media literacy have argued that media literacy programs create a more informed society, and they also give citizens the tools to be active in the governing process. Media literate people are better capable of understanding and evaluating the media, creating new media, protecting their access to free information, using their rights of free expression, and guarding against hate speech or false information.⁵ It has also been described as a tool for citizens to pressure governments to be more accountable and expose and eliminate corruption.⁶ Despite these positive assertions of the power of media literacy, it has mostly received extensive study in the fields of health and medicine rather than in relation to foreign disinformation.⁷ If increased media literacy levels among people have societal and political implications, researchers should be exploring the ways in which this type of literacy applies to foreign disinformation.

Media literacy is not a new concept, and yet recent events have ignited efforts to reexamine the concept by expressly focusing on Russian digitally-enabled disinformation campaigns. In the aftermath the 2013 crisis in Ukraine, the subsequent Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, disinformation campaigns waged against a variety of Western countries, and the 2016 United States presidential election campaign, the need for effective strategies and tools to counter disinformation has grown exponentially. At the same time, researchers have pointed out that countries across the European Union are lacking comprehensive and coordinated media literacy policies to deal with this problem.⁸ The terms ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’ have become buzzwords that are used to disparage all types of information, factual or not, which has undermined public confidence in media outlets and has fractured societies into various opposing

groups. At the same time, “media literacy” has also gained catchphrase status as a panacea to combating foreign disinformation. Many news agencies, think tanks, and politicians, however, have not rigorously examined why media literacy is key to battling Russian disinformation or how media literacy could be tailored to specific contexts.

Particularly in the Latvian context, which has a significantly high population of Russian speakers within its borders, two distinct media environments have formed: one which caters to its Latvian-speaking population and the other which serves its Russian-speaking audience. Domestic Russian media outlets are successfully competing with Latvian ones to exploit this division by capturing and sustaining high rates of Russian-speaking viewership. There is also a paucity of Russian-language media in Latvia that is not Kremlin-controlled, making it even more difficult for Russian-speaking Latvians to receive unbiased and dispassionate information. As this paper will show later, it is evident that such disinformation campaigns are useful to Russia, and this subversive tool is not going away. In response, Latvia has undertaken media literacy initiatives to combat these problems, but more research is needed to understand how media literacy is being tailored and how effective these interventions have been. Therefore, studying how countries have incorporated media literacy tactics and techniques at different levels of society will shed light on the usefulness of the concept in countering Russian disinformation.

Other Research

Before discussing the case of the BCME, it is imperative to ground this paper’s argument in an overview of current media literacy research. First, this paper will address complications of both defining the term ‘media literacy’ and methods of assessing it. Ultimately, how the term is defined will impact how it is studied, implemented in real-world contexts, and understood. Such challenges around defining the term pose questions for how Latvia should be implementing and

assessing media literacy interventions. The paper will then turn to a discussion of how media literacy is connected to countering Russian disinformation and what characterizes Russian disinformation in Latvia. Third, it will highlight potential characteristics of successful media literacy interventions within other research as well as two examples of media literacy programming in practice today. Last, it will end with a discussion on the current challenges to conducting research on media literacy.

Definitions and Metrics of Media Literacy

A myriad of definitions of the term ‘media literacy’ exist throughout current literature, and those definitions sometimes differ by organization or geographic region. This poses problems for organizations such as the BCME, which has teaching media literacy skills as one of its goals. Differences in conceptualizing the term can create misunderstandings about how organizations like the BCME should teach, apply, and assess the acquisition of media literacy skills. It also makes it more difficult for vulnerable countries like Latvia to have a coordinated approach on teaching and assessing the concept. Last, it prevents individual countries within the EU from coherently sharing outcome data at the supranational level, and there are risks associated with comparing one country’s media literacy ranking to another’s if the underlying methods of assessment fundamentally differ.

The European Commission (EC), Latvia, and the BCME have all given their respective definitions of the concept, with some overlap. For the EC, media literacy

“refers to all the technical, cognitive, social, civic and creative capacities that allow us to access and have a critical understanding of and interact with media. These capacities allow us to exercise critical thinking, while participating in the economic, social and cultural aspects of society and playing an active role in the democratic process.”⁹

In 2016, Latvia's *Mass Media Policy Guidelines: 2016-2020* identifies media literacy as a skill for "audience[s] to use mass media, search for and analyze information, and critically evaluate the messages of mass media to promote communicative integration of the society."¹⁰ Finally, the BCME claims that its media literacy programs are aimed at "advancing a deeper understanding of complex media messages, strengthening analytical skills and [the] ability for critical assessment of information sources, as well as developing a stronger immunity towards disinformation, fake news and populism."¹¹ All three definitions include the ability to critically find, understand, analyze, and evaluate news sources. There are, however, some key differences; the EC highlights the use of these skills in the democratic process, Latvia includes the integration of society, and the BCME stresses helping others develop immunity to negative forms of media. It is clear, therefore, that there is not a unified approach to understanding the concept. From this, one can see that there are many challenges for the BCME to overcome in terms of how they understand the term. Finally, all three definitions do not address the creation of new media and they only focus on how to engage with current media. This is a skill that the BCME is explicitly teaching through its media literacy programs, but it is not explicitly stated in its conceptualization of the term.

There are eight components within the concept of media literacy that have been widely accepted throughout the literature. Knowing these components is integral to evaluating the effectiveness of media literacy initiatives, and this paper will later examine how the BCME in Latvia is incorporating these components in their activities. They are as follows:

1. Critical thinking skills, which enable people to form independent assessments of media content, to choose which media sources to consume, and to interpret the information that was obtained

2. Comprehension skills of mass communication processes, including the knowledge of media work, goals, functions, and audience, as well as the ability to compare different media
3. An awareness of how media impacts individuals and society
4. Strategies of media message analysis and discussion
5. An understanding that media content reflects a contemporary society's culture, which includes values, attitudes, behaviors, problems, and ways of thinking
6. The capacity to comprehend, evaluate, and enjoy the entertainment cultivated in media
7. Effective and responsible media message creation skills' development
8. Comprehension of media practitioners' ethical and moral duties¹²

There is also a debate on the best methods for assessing media literacy, which may have roots in the problem of defining the term. Studies have been conducted to determine how to quantify and measure the acquisition of media literacy skills at the individual, local, and national levels, which are shown in further detail below. At the individual level, teachers have typically used a rubric-based grading system to determine whether participants successfully acquired and applied media literacy skills. Unfortunately, these studies suffer from their short-term nature and follow-on studies to see how participants are incorporating their media literacy skills in their daily life are rare. Very few longitudinal studies have been conducted at the individual level. At the national level, aggregated data on media use and availability has been conducted, but this method of assessment also has its challenges which will be discussed further. The BCME is a young organization that has been unable to collect and publicly share individual or large-group longitudinal data on its media literacy programming, which makes it difficult for researchers to understand how the BCME is tailoring its media literacy programming to vulnerable populations.

Looking at previous studies that attempt to measure the concept, however, may provide organizations like the BCME with new methods for assessing program effectiveness.

In 2003, Renee Hobbs and Richard Frost attempted to measure an individual's media literacy skills by giving three print, audio, and visual media sources to a group of students. They graded the students' comprehension and message-analysis of the media sources using a checklist of items that included identifying purpose, target audience, techniques, values and point of view, omitted information, and comparison-contrast.¹³ Their results suggested that explicit media literacy instruction does improve a student's ability to identify main ideas in media and successfully obtain the skills within their checklist.¹⁴ As the discussion section will show, the BCME is sharing general information about the topics being taught within its media literacy trainings, but it has not explicitly shared outcomes or methods of assessing participants of its media literacy interventions. This study provides a useful starting point for individual assessment of media literacy programming that could improve the BCME's work.

A 2009 study at the individual level attempted to build on the previous one but measured media literacy skills acquisition differently. Participants were evaluated using seven measures: recollection of information, identification of purpose and sender, recognition of missing information and techniques used to create the media, and evaluation and deduction.¹⁵ This assessment brought increased rigor to the measurement of both media literacy skills acquisition and programming at the individual level. This study, however, did suffer from limitations including a small and homogenous sample size, a focus only on the cognitive aspects of media literacy, and a short timeframe with which this study was conducted.¹⁶ Both of these study's methods of measuring media literacy skills at the individual level show that the BCME's data collection methods might benefit from utilizing a rubric-based system that incorporates these

components. This paper will later assess the current state of the BCME's media literacy data collection efforts at the individual level.

It is also useful to discuss how experts have measured media literacy on a national scale and whether national media literacy scores are a useful way to gauge the acquisition of media literacy skills. In 2009, the European Association for Viewers Interests made the first attempt to develop a comprehensive framework of criteria and indicators for media literacy as well as to collect comprehensive and empirical data from EU member states.¹⁷ They split assessment criteria into two broad categories: individual competencies (i.e. reports on individuals' use skills, communicative abilities, critical understanding) and environmental factors (i.e. media availability, media literacy context).¹⁸ Their data was compiled from sources including Eurostat, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's information literacy data, the Global Information Technology Report, Eurobarometer, and the World Economic Forum.¹⁹

Then in 2011, the Danish Technological Institute published a report that built on the 2009 study to both assess and recommend methods for measuring national media literacy levels across the EU.²⁰ One important outcome of this study is that it presented a tool for measuring media literacy levels across a range of ages, education levels, incomes, access levels, and geographic locations. In the report, a total of 59 country-level and individual-level indicators for measuring and assessing media literacy were identified, which were then narrowed into a smaller subset for individual countries to measure when administering such large surveys.²¹ At the country-level, indicators included national surveys of media-related activities, reports on media access, and evaluations of the environmental context that was assessed through surveying media literacy experts. They drew from databases and reports compiled by *Eurobarometer* and *Eurostat*.²²

While both the 2009 and 2011 studies were steps forward in establishing methods of quantitatively measuring media literacy, others have responded to these studies with caution. Some argue that defining media literacy skills acquisition at the national level using simple measures and aggregated data fails to capture the complexity of the concept's interdisciplinary nature. Instead of only aggregating data that is easily quantifiable, for example data on the number of people who have access to televisions or newspapers or how much time they spend listening to the news, researchers should be addressing questions that call for qualitative measurements. Examples of more complex indicators could include questions regarding how and why individuals may be evaluating the news they consume on a regular basis.²³ It is, therefore, crucial for future research to examine how cases like the BCME are able to overcome these challenges of media literacy data analysis and collection.

These methods for assessing national media literacy levels, which utilize both aggregated data on individual and environmental competencies, have implications for how the BCME can consider collecting its own media literacy data. First, national media literacy data is just one way of providing a snapshot of Latvia's media literacy environment. While it may provide useful information about what, where, how often Latvian citizens access different forms of media, it does not address why. National surveys are focused on aggregated numbers and they rarely provide qualitative information of media use habits. The BCME is strategically poised to be able to obtain useful qualitative data on media literacy habits since it operates at a smaller scale. Although the BCME is a young organization within Latvia and its data collection tools have not been made publicly available yet, existing literature on how media literacy data is being gathered presents new possibilities for how the BCME could make their initiatives more data-driven. The

indicators and measures used in individual and national media literacy data collection efforts provide the BCME with a starting point for its own future data collection practices.

Media Literacy and Russian Disinformation

To better understand how media literacy could be an effective tool against Russian disinformation, it is important to first understand the aims and objectives of Russian disinformation. Russia has recognized that it cannot compete conventionally with NATO, and it stresses the importance of asymmetric capabilities instead. One avenue for achieving strategic and political goals, which can even include defeat of an enemy's armed forces, is using information activities.²⁴ Through the use of different media, Russia seeks to predetermine an adversary's decisions in Russia's favor by altering the enemy's perception of the world. Russia also pursues efforts to supply polluted information within foreign policy-making chains and mass and social media environments, with the hopes that Russian narratives will be picked up and promoted as factual by trusted sources. Over time, such information activities can lead to broad-based, long-term weakening and undermining of an adversary's society overall to increase Russia's relative strength.²⁵ Russian disinformation has been shown to have very little in common with Cold War information activities, which were typically focused on promoting communist ideology. Today, Russian disinformation seeks to add noise in mainstream media outlets by purposely offering discordant messages and confusing media consumers rather than promoting one ideology or argument. As a result, consumer trust in media outlets and political institutions can erode over time and divisions within society can become more pronounced.²⁶

By spreading disinformation, Russia aims to encourage Russian speakers in Latvia to support local parties that favor closer ties with Russia instead of the EU. They also aim to legitimize Russia's revanchist foreign policy by claiming that Nazism is being reborn in Latvia.

Russian radio and television stations such as Rossiya, Perviy Kanal, and NTV that are easily accessible to Russian-speaking populations in Latvia have promoted such false ideas that Latvia voluntarily joined the Soviet Union during World War II or that Nazi groups like the Latvian Legion are growing and plaguing the country.²⁷ Russia also seeks to undermine Latvian support for international organizations like NATO. Deceptive reports written by Russian media outlets against Latvians have included the assertion that allied troops currently stationed in Latvia would be allowed to roam the country with loaded weapons. In another instance of Russian propaganda, American soldiers in Latvia were alleged to have been poisoned with mustard gas that was dragged out of the Baltic sea—a claim which was later debunked.²⁸ From these examples, it is evident that Russia is specifically exploiting fissures between Russian speakers and the rest of Latvian society to undermine public confidence and trust in Latvian political institutions.

Knowing how Russian disinformation operates within Latvia, it is now possible to better understand how media literacy can be wielded against it. The eight components of media literacy listed earlier are linked to countering Russian disinformation in the Latvian context. Because it is impossible for Latvian media organizations to shut down all sources of disinformation or entirely prevent it from spreading, media literacy skills such as awareness, critical thinking, comprehension, evaluation, and inference help to inoculate Latvian media consumers, to contain the spread of disinformation, and to encourage institutional resilience.²⁹ These skills also equip citizens with the ability to engage effectively with news content so they are more mindful of what media outlets they are placing their trust and confidence in. If the goal of Russian disinformation is to undermine that sense of trust, then media literacy skills will provide Latvia's Russian-speaking population with the understanding that trust in any media source is a conscious choice. Effective media literacy has the potential to help rebuild a sense of trust between Russian

speakers and Latvian media or political institutions, and it can also encourage the growth of new Russian-speaking media outlets in Latvia founded in the principles of media literacy.

What Makes an Effective or Ineffective Media Literacy Program?

Previous studies have provided insight about the characteristics of effective and ineffective media literacy programs. According to one study in advertising research, visual persuasion may be more effective than verbal persuasion. This has implications for how people can learn the tactics of visual media to resist harmful media messages and disinformation.³⁰ Aside from how media is created, audience involvement might also be key to resisting disinformation. A different study found that interventions which included teaching how to produce media messages, aside from simply the analysis of media messages, may be more effective because they involve active rather than passive audience involvement and components.³¹ These characteristics of media creation and audience involvement have implications for ways in which the BCME may choose to plan and implement their programs.

Coordinated media literacy interventions within schools might also be another effective method of countering disinformation. Some country's education systems might already have procedures, structures, and curriculums in place that are conducive to media literacy education. School environments are also arguably useful settings for media literacy interventions because researchers can control and manipulate for a larger number of variables. For example, Finland's Foreign Ministry officials have noted that coordinated media literacy efforts in its school systems have helped students turn away from fake news and propaganda sources such as the Russian-owned *Sputnik*. The organization's Finnish-language bureau ended up closing in March 2016 due to low readership.³² While the BCME is primarily a journalism organization, there might be positive reasons to collaborate more closely with schools.

In a meta-analysis of fifty-one media literacy interventions, one study showed that media literacy interventions were more likely to be effective if they involved fewer components but more sessions for teaching and practicing. They inferred that this was the case because too many components can lead to information overload and loss for participants, while repetition provides them with multiple opportunities to learn and practice the skills of media literacy. The results of this study also suggested overall that media literacy interventions may be effective in reducing potentially harmful effects of media messages.³³ Teaching media literacy had a positive effect on outcomes that included media knowledge, criticism, influence, perceived realism, beliefs and attitudes, self-efficacy, and behavior. The results also showed that intervention effects did not vary by agent, target age, setting, audience involvement, topic, country, or publication status.³⁴ Therefore, organizations that focus their media literacy initiatives on quality and repetition rather than quantity of components may be more effective in the long term, which has further implications for how the BCME may choose to structure its interventions.

Other studies have argued, however, that the agent who is conducting the media literacy intervention does play a role in the learning outcomes. Russian-speaking media consumers might be more likely to accept criticism of Kremlin disinformation if other Russian speakers or media outlets that communicate information primarily in Russian openly express criticism.³⁵ This has important implications for how the BCME in Latvia may choose to select trainers or conduct its media literacy interventions.

In a more recent study, researchers also found that individuals who reported high levels of media literacy learning opportunities were more likely to rate evidence-based media more accurate than media with elements of misinformation. This was the case even when participants were presented with two separate pieces that initially aligned with their personal policy

perspectives. Therefore, media literacy initiatives that aim to promote accurate evaluation and judgment of truth claims may help with countering disinformation.³⁶ While these results help to highlight the ways in which media literacy organizations might structure the learning outcomes of their programs, it is important to keep in mind that this study solely relied on self-reports of media literacy learning opportunities.

Some authors have argued for future studies of media literacy to focus on developing a coherent understanding of the media environment.³⁷ By understanding media literacy in terms of a country's complex media and information environment, future research can provide better analysis and evaluation of how media literacy education and training can be leveraged to improve responsible media consumption. This paper attempts to fill this gap in research by providing insight on Latvia's media environment as well as how the BCME operates within that larger context.

How Are Vulnerable Countries Successfully Tailoring Their Media Literacy Strategy?

While the goals of Russian disinformation remain the same for different countries, previous studies have shown that Russia is successfully tailoring its disinformation campaigns to different contexts by targeting vulnerable groups, creating specific narratives, and keeping them invested in those narratives.³⁸ Exploring how other countries are successfully implementing media literacy programs to combat these challenges will help to ground this research in two ways. First, it will show how media literacy is being applied in different ways and in different contexts. Second, it will help to shed more light on some of the characteristics of successful programs that may or may not be useful against Russian disinformation in the Latvian context. Considering that these two examples have been hailed as success stories, it is worth taking a brief look at them and discussing later if the BCME could operate similarly.

In the aftermath of the Crimean annexation in 2014, Ukraine formulated the Learn to Discern campaign to combat Russian disinformation from July 2015 to March 2016. Within the literature, this program has been regarded as a successful media literacy program breaking new grounds in the field beyond the classroom.³⁹ Through this program, fifteen-thousand citizens received face-to-face training on safe and informative media consumption techniques which included avoiding emotional manipulation, verifying sources and expert credentials, identifying hate speech, detecting censorship, and debunking a variety of media forms.⁴⁰ In the aftermath of the training, 89% of the participants reported using the skills in their daily lives while 91% shared their new skills with an average of six people.⁴¹ This suggests that in-person trainings can be successfully implemented outside of a school setting, can raise awareness about the skills of media literacy both with direct participants and non-participants, and can be popularized among diverse groups. The creators of the study, however, have not conducted a follow-up study that tests whether participants have been successfully applying their media literacy skills outside of the training, which raises questions about the longevity of the program's initial successes.

In Moldova, the Strengthening Independent Media and Media Literacy project (SIMML) is coordinating trainings and education opportunities of media literacy skills specifically in the context of libraries. According to IREX, the organization implementing this program, the Moldovan public feels frustrated and overwhelmed by the media, specifically regarding the lack of quality news available and overabundance of media online.⁴² To address these problems, the project has trained ninety-nine librarians in media literacy skills, who have later led more than one-hundred media literacy trainings and activities around the country. In addition, participating libraries have set up media corners for locals to access print and digital media with guidance from library staff and check their information against other sources.⁴³ This project has reached

over six-thousand librarians, students, and citizens in both Romanian and Russian-speaking regions. It has also spurred the creation of local newspapers by media literate individuals who see the need for local media to compete against sources of disinformation. Through anecdotal evidence, participants have internalized how and why media literacy is a necessary skill for individuals to be thoughtful consumers and engaged citizens, which shows that this program is teaching Moldovans one of the components of media literacy—the importance of media reflecting the values and beliefs of Moldovan society.⁴⁴ Anecdotal evidence on its own, however, is not sufficient to conclude the program’s success. Like the Learn to Discern program, data regarding the application of media literacy skills has also not been released yet.

Current Challenges Within Media Literacy Research

Despite the progress that has been made regarding raising awareness about and developing new methods of measuring media literacy, many challenges remain. First, there is a debate within the literature about who should be responsible for leading the charge in media literacy education. Some have argued that fighting Russian disinformation should not only be the responsibility of international organizations like NATO or the EU, but instead it should also fall on state governments to embed the concept within their national agendas.⁴⁵ Others have explicitly argued for a “whole-of-society” approach towards combating disinformation with media literacy initiatives, which Nordic countries like Finland have done with evidence of success. Finland, however, is a country that is demographically very homogenous, which raises questions about how successful whole-of-society approaches can be in other countries with very diverse populations.⁴⁶ Last, some have discussed the drawbacks of making media literacy a requirement of school curriculums and giving educators an additional responsibility of teaching this concept explicitly. Relegating media literacy only to the education sphere can place an

undue burden on school districts, which will then need to provide more professional development, to devote more time and resources, and to shift priorities in the middle of academic years.⁴⁷ This practice also implies that only children will be receiving targeted media literacy instruction, which raises questions about whether children, adolescents, adults or all people should receive this training. The BCME is a case in which media literacy is being argued as the responsibility of well-functioning media organizations.

Another debate within the literature is whether private companies share some of the responsibility of media literacy education or if the focus should be on an individual's capacity to discern disinformation. Media literacy research typically focuses on individual responsibility for determining what constitutes a true and accurate media message. As companies like Google, Facebook, and Twitter increasingly personalize the news that individuals receive and as users obtain their daily news more from social media sources, how much responsibility should private companies have regarding media literacy education?⁴⁸ In the case of the BCME, this is an organization that is working towards shifting the responsibility of media literacy to include private journalism organizations.

Because of these debates, the field is still lacking a coordinated effort to study, refine past studies, and implement media literacy initiatives, whether it is across nations, across international organizations, or within nations. Many countries are talking about the need for more media literacy initiatives to happen and can easily articulate why media literacy is important in the fight against disinformation campaigns. Research, however, is still not quite clear on how media literacy is important, and there is a lack of proof regarding the generalizable effectiveness of media literacy initiatives across a variety of environments and contexts. The

BCME in Latvia presents a unique case in which the organization is working to establish a more coordinated effort to research and implement media literacy initiatives.

Despite efforts within the EU over the last few years, there remains a need to rigorously develop, refine, and validate objective measures of media literacy.⁴⁹ One issue that continues to plague both media literacy initiatives, and education more broadly, is that most studies will be longitudinal in nature. This means that evaluating the success of media literacy interventions in the short-term can be extremely difficult because it might take many years to ascertain the outcome of an intervention.⁵⁰ While media literacy-related programs are gaining in popularity and have already been completed, it will take time for the organizers behind these initiatives to evaluate and release data. The BCME is a case in which the true effects of its media literacy interventions will take years to ascertain. This does not mean, however, that current research should ignore such cases because Russian disinformation campaigns are not going away.

Methodology

To answer the initial question set out at the beginning of this paper, namely how is Latvia tailoring its media literacy initiatives to counter Russian disinformation, a qualitative analysis of one case in Latvia is a useful starting point for addressing both the question and research problems. Case studies are useful when data either cannot explain a phenomenon or does not exist. Considering that media literacy has been difficult to quantify and reliably measure, it is important to qualitatively study how certain countries, such as Latvia, are tailoring their media literacy interventions to counter disinformation. This study compiled research from academic articles and journals, both documents and digital media directly from the BCME's website, and newspaper articles covering the BCME's involvement.

When considering which countries are vulnerable to Russian disinformation, Latvia is unique. Compared to many other post-Soviet countries, Latvia has a relatively high population of people whose first language is Russian which is roughly around thirty-seven percent.⁵¹ Because Russian state-controlled media is very popular among Russian speakers living in Latvia, this population is exposed to Russian-created narratives about Latvia that may be deliberate forms of disinformation. Therefore, this population is considerably vulnerable to Russian influence. Latvia is actively working on addressing the problem of Russian disinformation, but there are very few cases of media literacy programs with enough information for researchers to study in-depth. Considering that the BCME is an organization that is gaining ground and recognition in the field of media literacy, the BCME is a useful case to study.

To better understand why the BCME was chosen for this paper, it is important to understand the media environment within Latvia. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Latvia's media environment was closed, centrally controlled, and used as a tool for strict ideological control of Latvian society. From the late 1980s and onward, Latvia's media environment has been shifting towards one that is highly commercialized yet economically weak, exceedingly competitive, and lacking skills of critical media assessment or overall standards of journalism quality.⁵² A variety of assessments have placed Latvia low on the spectrum of countries in the EU with strong media literacy policies, initiatives, or skills among its population. For example, the 2011 *Testing and Refining Criteria to Assess Media Literacy Levels in Europe* ranked Latvia number sixteen out of twenty-nine for media literacy⁵³ and a 2015 study placed them in the "underdeveloped" category.⁵⁴ Latvia has also been designated a medium/high risk country in the 2016 *Media Pluralism Monitor* in a variety of categories: media pluralism, basic protections of freedom of expression and right to information, independence and

effectiveness of media authority, status of journalistic profession, and political independence.⁵⁵

In addition to these problems, some authors have argued that Latvian media seldom functions as a contributor to democracy, the public is generally disappointed with political institutions, and media literacy is hardly ever discussed in public.⁵⁶

The BCME is not the only media literacy initiative working towards combating disinformation in Latvia. In a 2016 study, a total of forty-eight media literacy stakeholders were identified within the country whose programs include library activities, online games, computer learning sessions for seniors, and university initiatives.⁵⁷ These media literacy projects, however, are mostly implemented digitally by information technology and internet organizations. The BCME is a unique case for analyzing how Latvia is implementing its face-to-face media literacy training. Other organizations that incorporate media literacy components, such as Re:Baltica, conduct investigative journalism to debunk fake news. The BCME, however, is the leading Latvian journalist organization that advocates for increased media literacy initiatives specifically within its organizational goals. It also mostly focuses its work on providing media literacy tools to individuals within the journalism field, although it has participated in other initiatives among schools and within wider public spaces. Its target audience includes not only journalists in Latvia, but also journalists throughout the Eastern Partnership countries of Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine. This organization, therefore, might have discovered important tools for countries to use to tailor their own media literacy strategies against Russian disinformation. Compared to other programs in Latvia, there is also more information readily available to researchers about the BCME's operations to conduct a more in-depth case study.

Evidence from other research that was discussed earlier in this paper also demonstrates why the BCME is an excellent case in the field of media literacy to study. It is an organization

that appears to be incorporating the eight components of media literacy in its programming, utilizing visual persuasion and audience involvement, and is expanding its role in collaborating with schools. It also seeks to use Russian-speaking agents who can target Russian journalists and media organizations to provide them with media literacy training, which suggests that they are incorporating one element of successful media literacy interventions. Exploring these aspects of the BCME and taking a deeper look at their media literacy practices will provide a better understanding of how the BCME is tailoring its practices to combat disinformation in the region.

Discussion

Research Findings

After assessing other research, several tentative conclusions can be drawn. First, the BCME is an organization operating in a difficult environment that is still working to institutionalize its media literacy policies and programs. Second, the BCME seems to be incorporating all the main elements of media literacy regularly in its programming, utilizing visual persuasion, and carefully selecting Russian-speaking agents to deliver media literacy interventions. It also appears to be assessing local and regional needs of other journalism organizations and schools and tailoring its media literacy interventions to those needs. Despite this, the BCME is still a very young organization that has yet to release data and information on the outcomes and effectiveness of its programming. It also continues to remain hyper-focused on journalists as their main target population despite its desire to attain more collaboration with public schools and in public settings.

Latvia's National Media Literacy Strategy

In November 2016, Latvia's Cabinet of Ministers approved two official policy documents created by the Ministry of Culture related to media literacy for the first time: the "Latvian Media

Policy Guidelines for 2016-2020” and the “Plan for the Implementation of Latvian Media Policy Guidelines for 2016-2020.” Media literacy was pinpointed as one of five main areas of its national media strategy for the Latvian government to strengthen within its mass media environment.⁵⁸ Although this is a positive step regarding media literacy in Latvia, how the strategy is implemented will be even more important. Since the approval of both documents, experts have argued that Latvia is still lacking clear traditions, legislation, and division of responsibilities related to media literacy programming. Three different ministries of the Latvian government all claim some form of responsibility in the implementation of its national policy guidelines, but what those responsibilities should be are still unclear and confusing. There is also no shared understanding of media literacy definitions and best practices across government agencies despite relatively recent efforts to institutionalize definitions in Latvia. In addition, information- and data-sharing is not taking place between media literacy organizations and the Latvian government on a regular basis and media literacy is not fully embedded within school curriculums nationwide.⁵⁹ It is, therefore, evident that the BCME is operating in an environment where the implementation of media literacy initiatives is arguably nascent and uncoordinated.

The Baltic Centre for Media Excellence

In 2015, a study coordinated by the European Endowment for Democracy (EED) was released titled “Feasibility Study on Russian-language media in the Eastern Partnership and beyond.” The EED became the main body for implementing the report’s key findings, one of which included the creation of the BCME in 2015.⁶⁰ Today, the BCME is a fully-functioning, independent, Latvian-registered, non-profit organization that is considered a key regional player for media literacy. Its founders include a long list of Baltic media organizations and academic institutions such as the ERR and LTV television networks, the Estonian Publishers’ Association,

the Lithuanian Online Media Association, RE:Baltica, the Latvian Journalist Association, Riga Stradins University, and several others.⁶¹ It is also almost entirely funded through grants from donors such as the EED, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Latvia, the Danish Cultural Institute in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, the United States Embassy in Latvia, and The British Council.⁶² From the top down, the BCME leadership is comprised of an Executive Director, Project Manager for the Baltics, Office Manager, Program Assistant for the Eastern Partnership, Principle Development Adviser, Principle Adviser for Media Literacy Projects, Project Manager, and Strategic Adviser for the Eastern Partnership Program. Underneath this leadership are a host of experts and trainers that are conducting on-the-ground trainings, sessions, and events.⁶³

The mission of the organization is to “promote professional growth, media intelligence and critical thinking, and strive for positive change in journalism and [the] communities it serves.”⁶⁴ Overall, the organization is a center for journalism knowledge and expertise, gathering information on regional media trends and skills, using that information to conduct needs-based training and promote professional dialogue for offices of independent and local media, and researching media audiences who are most vulnerable to disinformation. The BCME hopes to confront the challenges associated with both the decline of print and radio journalism and the proliferation of digital media and disinformation. Most of the BCME’s activities are intended for Latvian and other Baltic journalists working in the Russian-language media space as well as other journalists who work throughout the Eastern Partnership region. The purpose of their research and trainings is to provoke critical thinking skills among both junior and senior media professionals who work in universities or media organizations, media owners, and even politicians who are invited to take part in lectures and trainings.⁶⁵ Its activities have included

organizing and attending conferences at the local, regional and international level, workshops and trainings for networking and peer-to-peer exchange, and seminars for experts to attend.

Although it has been intended as a hub for journalists, its target audiences also include educators, high school students, and the wider public. BCME members have conducted a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews with teachers in Riga and throughout other parts of Latvia. They have also held a series of media literacy workshops for school teachers and principals to develop in-school training programs for high school teachers, and they have also prepared and delivered media literacy kits for teachers. One last method they have used to collaborate with schools is through a media competition called Pilna Doma, which is a competition for students to create media products using media literacy skills.⁶⁶

The BCME's Tailored Media Literacy Approach

The BCME has been adapting its media literacy approaches to its environment and targeted populations in different ways. First, it appears to be conducting assessments of its operational environment as well as needs assessments related to media literacy, which has been pinpointed in previous research as a potential element of successful media literacy programs.⁶⁷ In their 2016 study, the BCME conducted a series of case studies of the six Eastern Partnership countries to determine the state of Russian-language media skill sets in the media environment. They combined qualitative assessments using interviews and desk research with quantitative data on country demographics, economics, size of the media environments, and level of media freedom. They shared their key findings, which included financial struggles of local media organizations, an absence of high-quality audience research, and underdeveloped reporting in investigative journalism and conflict reporting.⁶⁸ In a second study, the BCME led an annual “Baltic Media Health Check” from 2015-2016. They found that the Baltic media environment

has been characterized by falling audience numbers and advertising revenues as well as changing consumer habits.⁶⁹ The BCME is currently in the process of utilizing their findings to drive the production and implementation of the media literacy services they provide.

In addition, the BCME has carried out a variety of media literacy-related activities that integrate the eight components of media literacy. They have provided vocational training programs for regional, local, public, and Russian-language media in the Baltics as well as a mentorship program for newsrooms. In these trainings, the BCME has been able to teach the critical thinking, comprehension, ethical and moral, evaluation, and creation skills necessary to be considered a media literate journalist. These skills provide journalists with the tools necessary to provide quality news to compete with Russian disinformation. Aside from working with journalists, the BCME's Pilna Doma media competition for high school students is a unique opportunity for aspiring journalists to obtain and apply critical thinking and comprehension skills, to become more aware of and understand the importance of high-quality journalism, and to create new media in an ethical and responsible manner. At other times, the BCME has led public media literacy events to share the organization's core values with the hopes that its events and media coverage will reflect the positive values, attitudes, and behaviors of Latvian society. A series of events, for example, were formed by the BCME to commemorate the Rumbula massacre of 1941 near Riga, which was dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust. Events such as these enable Latvian citizens to write their own societal narratives that can compete with Russian-made narratives and disinformation.⁷⁰

The BCME is also tailoring its media literacy programming with regards to two potentially successful characteristics: its use of visual persuasion and strategic selection of agents. The BCME has created a multilingual and comprehensive website that provides rich

visual content on media literacy practices that anyone can access for free. The website is currently translated into English, Russian, and all three Baltic languages. On their “Media Tips” page, journalists can watch concise video clips of BCME trainers and leaders discussing how to conduct interviews, the basics of editing, the use of blogs and other digital media, photojournalism, innovation, and data analysis and collection methods.⁷¹ With regards to the use of agents, Russian-language media organizations have been pinpointed as a target population of their training and mentoring sessions. Therefore, the BCME has placed fluent Russian speakers in charge of trainings to ensure that media literacy skills of analysis, evaluation, and creation are successfully communicated to Russian-language media organizations.⁷² At this time, data is not publicly available on who or how many people have accessed the website’s content or specifically how many Russian-language media organizations have been trained in media literacy skills by Russian-speaking agents.

The only data that is publicly available through by BCME on its media literacy programs and outcomes relate to the number of events that have been conducted. No data on programmatic outcomes, specifically relating to whether the target audiences of its projects have either obtained or applied the skills of media literacy, can be found in BCME publications. In its 2016 report, the BCME shared several pieces of data that included the following: thirty-five seminars on vocational journalism training reached one-hundred fourteen journalists from five countries⁷³, eleven training seminars for one-hundred fifty-nine teachers to reach nearly two-hundred students⁷⁴, and a breakdown of the BCME’s 2016 budget and expenses.⁷⁵ Throughout the research, very little evidence regarding the success of the BCME’s media literacy trainings could be found, with the exception of anecdotal evidence from a news article which discussed three BCME trainings back in 2016.⁷⁶

Assessing the BCME's Media Literacy Practices

One important aspect for organizations when implementing media literacy programs is that they have extensive knowledge and understanding of the needs of the media environment they operate in. After analyzing reports, academic articles, and content published by the BCME, one can conclude that the organization is working hard to understand and maintain knowledge of the local and regional dynamics of the Latvian environment as well as other Baltic and Eastern Partnership countries. The organization distinguishes the challenges that each region is facing and works to tailor its media literacy programming to their needs. With regards to the Baltic countries, the BCME recognizes that they are collectively doing relatively well on rankings of press freedom, however all three countries are heavily exposed and vulnerable to disinformation from Kremlin-controlled media. The Eastern Partnership countries are facing different challenges that include relatively high levels of corruption, vulnerability to disinformation, underfunded or even nonexistent public media, and low demand for quality journalism.⁷⁷ Tailored trainings to each region have covered a broad range of subjects that were identified as gaps in knowledge of the local and regional journalists they served such as newspaper design, interview techniques, data journalism, and visualization. Information, however, was not available on the outcomes of these trainings, which raises questions about the effectiveness of trainings. More information on the specific content and pre- and post- data would be needed to determine if the BCME's media literacy programming is meeting their target population's needs.

Although the BCME is working to target multiple populations vulnerable to Russian disinformation, they also appear to be mostly focused on the journalism community which is evident in the number of events they have done specifically for that target population. Previous research has shown that focusing on less content within a single media literacy intervention and

repeating that intervention to the same target population over time will ensure that subjects both gain knowledge and properly apply it is a characteristic of successful media literacy programming.⁷⁸ By choosing to remain hyper-focused on the journalism community and tailoring media literacy programming mostly to this audience, the BCME could be achieving better results than if they fully expanded their work to schools and larger communities. On the other hand, the BCME does have relationships with schools and the public by providing seminars for teachers and activities for high school students. This may mean that the BCME is working to expand its influence and use a whole-of-society approach for achieving its media literacy goals. Currently, the BCME has not shared information about whether it is already broadening its impact more in the coming years, as it has yet to release its 2017 annual report. They have expressed a desire to advance media literacy and critical thinking skills through Pilna Doma specifically related to its content, promotion, and implementation of new competitions.⁷⁹

The BCME has also either not disclosed its data analysis and evaluation methods for its media literacy interventions, or it is possible that they have yet to fully develop and institutionalize such methods. This is clear from the lack of reports on the outcomes of their media literacy interventions, such as what learning objectives were met, who or how many attended, how many individuals are utilizing the skills daily, and how much the organization has grown since it was founded. One study discussed how the BCME conducts surveys to collect information about content production, communication, and business skills of independent Russian-language media, identifies gaps in media skill sets, and delivers trainings tailored to their needs.⁸⁰ But more information about how those interventions were implemented would help to form a more solid understanding of their media literacy programs. Since the organization is very young, it is possible that the BCME has yet to gather sufficient data to analyze, evaluate,

and draw long-term conclusions from. The organization has also recognized that media literacy interventions can take many years to assess, which means that they may have already collected data but are not ready to release it publicly, for fear that public audiences might make the wrong conclusions about the data.⁸¹ One piece of information that might indicate that the BCME has inspired future media literacy initiatives is that an abundance of trainers and funding have moved into Latvia since the BCME's inception.⁸² This conclusion, however, cannot be directly attributed to the BCME because there are many other variables that could be at play.

Conclusion

To reiterate the research findings, the BCME is a young organization that is earning its name in the field of media literacy against Russian disinformation in Latvia as well as the greater Baltic and Eastern Partnership region. It is working to gather data on its target populations—journalists, educators, and youth—and is using that information to tailor its media literacy interventions. In addition, the organization is utilizing Russian-speaking agents to deliver media literacy interventions to vulnerable Russian-language media outlets, and it includes elements of visual persuasion on its website. These findings may suggest that the BCME is successfully implementing aspects of its mission through its media literacy interventions. While these characteristics have been pinpointed as potentially successful elements of media literacy programs in other research, the BCME has not publicly shared data regarding the outcomes of its interventions. Therefore, conclusive understandings cannot be fully made due to insufficient data. Some anecdotal evidence, however, shows that the BCME's media literacy trainings for journalists have led to positive results, but anecdotal evidence is insufficient to draw further conclusions as well. Overall, these findings help to shed light on how Latvia is tailoring its own

media literacy interventions through the operations of the BCME, but more research is needed to better understand media literacy practices.

There are several shortcomings of this research worth noting. First, it is very possible that important research and information was missed because it might only be available in Latvian, Russian, or other foreign languages that could not be translated for this paper. Second, this research was lacking in primary source data that could have included interviews with BCME staff or participants of interventions or even in-person visits to BCME facilities and events. Such primary source accounts would provide this case study with more detailed evidence of how the BCME is tailoring its media literacy interventions to combat Russian disinformation. Third, this organization is a little less than three years old, which places limits on the amount of data and information that can be gathered on the organization.

Future studies that seek to better understand how Latvia is tailoring its media literacy interventions to counter Russian disinformation could utilize a mixed methods approach, combining both quantitative analysis and case studies that include more primary source data. Such mixed method approaches would allow for more conclusive generalizations of how Latvia continues to tailor its media literacy programs. If data becomes available on the outcomes of the BCME's media literacy interventions, that data should also be analyzed and evaluated for new insights on successful programs. It would also be useful for future studies to conduct case study analyses of other country's media literacy programs, either in the Baltics or the Eastern Partnership region. This will help to determine whether countries are tailoring their approaches in similar or different ways. In addition, future research should be conducted by a team of individuals who are able to communicate in Latvian, Russian, or other languages pertinent to the type of analysis being conducted, which would provide researchers with access to new

information. Lastly, the BCME is an organization that should continue to receive attention in new research or media coverage, both in its operational environment and from Western countries. As time passes, more information will become available about the BCME's methods and outcomes which could provide important insight on new ways to tailor media literacy interventions to disinformation.

Through a case study analysis of the BCME, which is a relatively new and unfamiliar media literacy organization, this research hoped to better understand the ways in which an interdisciplinary topic such as media literacy can be applied to different contexts. Although there is still a significant amount of research that remains to be done in both the field of media literacy and in the Latvian context, this research provides a more contextual and focused analysis of the Russian disinformation problem and is a starting point for a more depoliticized conversation on tailored media literacy approaches.

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⁷⁹ *Setting Off the Long-Awaited Change*, 19.

⁸⁰ Signe Van Zundert, “Strengthening pluralistic media and information environment through journalism training, media literacy and knowledge-sharing across Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the EU Eastern Partnership and beyond: The Baltic Centre for Media Excellence,” *Resisting Foreign State Propaganda in the New Information Environment: The Case of the EU, Russia, and the Eastern Partnership Countries*, Riga: Foundation for European Progressive Studies, September 16, 2016, <http://www.feps-europe.eu/en/publications/details/441>, 116.

⁸¹ *Setting Off the Long-Awaited Change*, 5.

⁸² Audra Cepkauskaite, Aija Krutaine, Eliisa Matsalu, and Rudite Spakovska, *Baltic Media Health Check, 2014-2015*, Riga/Tallinn/Vilnius: The Centre for Media Studies at SSE Riga, The Baltic Centre for Investigative Journalism RE:Baltica, 2015, https://www.sseriga.edu/files/content/baltic_media_health_check_2014-2015.pdf, 20.

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