

Echoes of the Digital Age: Youth Perceptions and Interactions with the Media in Green Topics

Summary of the Comparative Report with Recommendations:
Estonia, Portugal and Croatia



Research Summary and Recommendations

Media literacy and young people

Media literacy has become a key competence in the digital age, especially for younger generations who are most exposed to media content.

According to the **Media Literacy Index 2023, Estonia, Portugal, and Croatia exhibit notable differences in their rankings and scores.** Estonia ranks 4th with a score of 71, placing it in the first cluster, indicating a strong media literacy environment with high freedom of the press, strong educational outcomes, and robust digital participation. Portugal, ranked 12th with a score of 60, is in the second cluster, showing solid performance but with room for improvement, particularly in trust in people and e-participation. In contrast, Croatia is ranked 25th with a score of 45, positioning it in the third cluster, which includes countries at risk of further decline, characterized by lower scores in press freedom, trust, and digital engagement (Open Society Institute Sofia, 2023).

A study conducted in January and February 2024 as part of the project "**Media and Information Literacy for Climate Change and Environmental Topics**" highlighted the importance of media literacy for young people, especially on topics related to environmental issues, about which they have predominantly neutral opinions.

Here, we present some of the key conclusions of the study, as well as relevant recommendations that can be used in further advocacy efforts.

Key research results in three countries

The research aimed to **explore the relationships between youth and the media, with a special focus on green topics.** More specifically, the focus of the research was to detect youth's critical thinking about various aspects of the media, their skills in media content production and Internet use, and the presence of green topics in the media.

The data gathering was done using a questionnaire, which was put in an online form and distributed to the participants via various promotion channels (direct communication, Instagram, Facebook, and e-mails).

In all three countries that have participated in the research, the total sample size was **731 respondents.** Looking closely, in Croatia, the total sample size was 295 respondents, in Portugal 230 respondents and in Estonia 206 respondents.

The research results indicate that laptops, smartphones and TVs clearly dominate as electronic household appliances. Laptops have strong computational power and can take over the functions of other devices such as PCs or radios, while major use of smartphones has led to reduced use of landline phones. Logically, the most intensely used household devices are the ones that are most represented in the households – smartphones, laptops and TVs. Simultaneously, the **Internet is the most dominantly used technology because smartphones, laptops and TVs can work to their full potential when on-line.**



Major use of the Internet has led to the change in youth reading patterns – the amount of printed newspapers reading has declined and reading of on-line news has increased. Apart from the change in the youth’s reading patterns, the Internet is used by the youth for communication via email, searching for information about products/services, streaming music or movies, shopping, communication via messengers or social media, and using on-line forms of data storage.

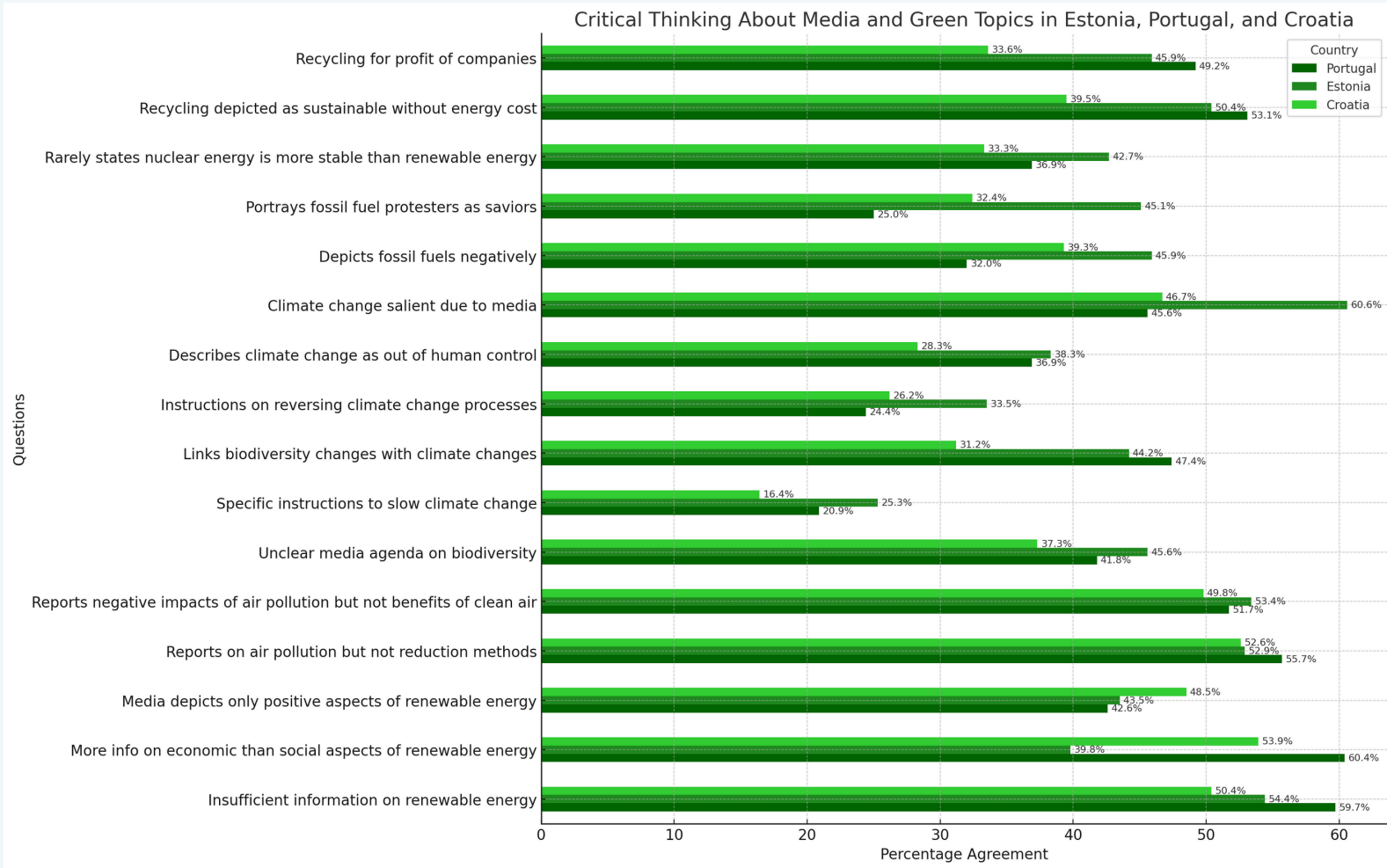
Youth’s critical perception of traditional media is dominantly neutral. However, youth slightly agrees that the owners of media companies try to influence the production of the content, agree that different people extract different information from the same news and agree that the media chooses stories which will attract their audience. When observing youth’s perception of truthfulness of various digital tools, **young people are slightly concerned about the truthfulness of information shown on Instagram and TikTok.**

Additionally, participants from Croatia generally

distrust the news received from various digital tools, while Portuguese respondents tend to have most trust in news received that way. Trust in the media can be related with the use of AI, as young people claim they have difficulties in telling if an information on-line is true or false.

Young people have **challenges in differentiating between sustainable green approach and greenwashing**, and Portuguese respondents tend to trust media reports about climate change or biodiversity. Additionally, youth notices that **media provide biased reports about some green topics.** According to youth, **media insufficiently talk about ways of reducing air pollution, or social aspects of renewable energy.** Apart from these perceptions of green topics in the media, youth generally has neutral opinion about media and green topics, which might indicate their lack of critical thinking in these domains.

In conclusion, youth tend to report that the **media portrays them as slightly organized, educated, polite, active, curious, peaceful, creative, tolerant, independent and political.**



Recommendations

Systemic level

On a systemic level, it can be recommended that the **formal education system should introduce overarching media literacy programs**. These programs should aim to develop youths' critical thinking about the production of media content and its consumption, as well as the skill of distinguishing between fake and real news. Furthermore, media literacy programs should address the downsides of overuse of the Internet, since the content shown on social media can cause severe mental health problems among youth. Also, significant attention should be dedicated to the (mis)use of artificial intelligence. Artificial intelligence is not a new technology, but the development of the Internet and computers have facilitated its spread in the last couple of years. This implies that youth should, through media literacy programs in formal education, learn how to find the real, valid and trustworthy source of specific information in the media, and rely on their own knowledge and common sense in making conclusions about different issues. **More focus should be put on the topics dealing with climate, environment, biodiversity, air pollution and other green topics, as the perception of young people is in general neutral and it can show that we need to put more emphasis on this.**

Media level

Furthermore, formal education should, as well as the media companies, **train their journalists to use artificial intelligence cum grano salis, and they should provide both aspects of the same story** which is particularly important to reduce the biased decisions readers can make. Consequently, this intervention can position a media company as a trustworthy source of information. Media should also encourage their readers to participate in democratic processes such as public debates that can be done online, as the media sometimes report very actively about certain legislative changes. **In the domain of green topics, the media could intensify coverage of some topics, such as energy costs of recycling which is in accordance with the recommendation that media should report both sides of the same story.**

Family level

Family-wise recommendations imply that **parents should teach their children that (social) media are platforms where one's thoughts can be expressed**, but that everything we say has certain consequences. Additionally, parents should be encouraged to **discuss with their children the truthfulness of information presented in the media.**

Individual level

On an individual level, **individuals should try to investigate the same topic in different media sources, since each source provides aspects of the story** that are interesting to their readers and aligned with their business model and strategic plans. Additionally, before posting on social media and different (micro)blogging services, youth should learn what kind of content is posted and what are the rules of behavior on that social network. In case **young people want to use AI in content production, they should check whether the content provided by an AI tool is trustworthy.** In case guidance is needed, help could be searched for either **media literacy programs within formal education, or some other educational non-formal programme.** They can also seek help from other professionals, including youth workers.

About the project „Media and Information Literacy for Climate Change and Environmental Topics”

“**Media and Information Literacy for Climate Change and Environmental Topics**” is a project that aims to raise capacities and provide practical tools for youth workers and youth, starting with research showing the real-time situation in three involved countries: Croatia, Estonia, and Portugal. The project is supported by the European Union, particularly by the Erasmus+ programme and the contracting institution is Agency for Mobility and EU Programmes in Croatia.

The consortium implementing the project consists of experienced organizations dealing with media literacy. The project partners include:

- **DOMAS from Croatia, a small company** specializing in non-formal education, youth work, and media literacy;
- **AgoraAveiro, a grassroots NGO from Portugal** focusing on grassroots youth work and environmental topics;
- **Learning Library, an edu-tech company from Estonia** specializing in e-learning in non-formal environments.

Project activities are the following: are the following:

1. **Research “Media and Information Literacy in Environmental Topics”**: The research aims to assess the level of media literacy among young people, especially those aged 15 – 30, focusing on media literacy and environmental topics.
2. **Toolkit for Youth Workers and Educators “Media and Information Literacy of Youth in Green Topics (covering climate change and environmental topics)”**: This toolkit will cover topics of media and information literacy and will consist of 20 workshops, providing ready-to-use materials for youth workers and educators.
3. **Pilot Sessions (21 sessions of 90 minutes each) for Young People**: Based on the developed Toolkit, project partners in each country will test and implement 7 workshops (1.5 hours each) with young people and gather their feedback for further development based on the needs of young people.
4. **Online Learning Course for Youth “Media Literacy and Green Topics”**: The e-learning will contain 8 modules, each with 4 lessons, and will be based on a gamified learning experience enabled through the non-formal education approach of youth work.
5. **Local Training Courses for Educators and Youth Workers**: The developed and improved toolkit will form the basis for local training courses for 60 educators (trainers and teachers, expert associates in schools) focusing on media literacy, fake news, and how to engage young people in these topics.
6. **Local Dissemination Conferences**: A 1-day local dissemination conferences will be organised in each country, where the project results will be presented to the wider community of youth workers and youth organizations.

Interested in detailed research results and other project outcomes? Scan the QR code or visit the website www.domas.hr to get more information!

