# NORTH MACEDONIA

Vibrant
Information
Barometer

2 0 2 2

Highly Vibrant (31-40): Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.

Somewhat Vibrant (21-30): Quality information is available in this country and most of it is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Most people have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information, although some do not. Most people recognize and reject misinformation, although some do not.

Slightly Vibrant (11-20): Quality information is available on a few topics or geographies in this country, but not all. While some information is editorially independent, there is still a significant amount of misinformation, malinformation, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.

Not Vibrant (0-10): Quality information is extremely limited in this country. The vast majority of it is not editorially independent, not based on facts, or it is intended to harm. People do not have the rights, means, or capacity to access a wide range of information; they do not recognize or reject misinformation; and they cannot or do not make choices on what types of information they want to engage with.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE

23

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

North Macedonia's media and information system continues to wait for sectoral reforms. The Ministry of Information Society and Administration invited civil society organizations (CSOs) to nominate members for the proposed Council on Media Reforms, which was envisioned to contribute to the design and adoption of necessary legislative and policy changes.; however, the continued focus on foreign relations and Euro-Atlantic integration, the 2021 population census, the 2021 local elections, and the political crisis that emerged after Prime Minister Zoran Zaev resigned has meant that these media reforms are delayed.

The October 2021 local elections were the first major electoral setback for the Social-Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM)-controlled Government, as it won just 16 mayoral races compared with the 57 it won in 2017. The opposition VMRO-DPMNE recorded major gains, winning 42 mayoral seats. In the Albanian block, all parties recorded similar results as in 2017, but the leading party of Albanians in the country and a partner in the ruling coalition, the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), lost some Albanian-majority urban centers.

The local election results brought a new political crisis after Prime Minister Zaev resigned over the poor showing of his SDSM party. Traditional media had balanced campaign coverage, while online media and social networks were more prone to partisan reporting and misinformation during the election. For several weeks afterward, there were "new parliamentary majority" announcements from both the government and the opposition—a tug of war that the incumbent ruling coalition won, thereby increasing its majority in parliament.

The COVID-19 pandemic has continued to have a huge effect on all aspects of life. Protection and prevention measures were softer and more lenient in 2021 than in 2020. North Macedonia has faced challenges with vaccine rollout and has a lower-than-normal vaccination rate. The "infodemic" has continued, especially online and on social networks, with intense debate on mass vaccination and protective measures. Broadcast media's annual fees for broadcasting permits have been waived, and the government has announced a €1 million (($1.1 million) interest-free credit line to support broadcasters and continued subsidies for print media's printing and distribution costs.

The media have heavily covered two huge tragedies: the fire at a COVID-19 field hospital in Tetovo, which killed 14 people, and the deadly bus accident in Bulgaria that killed 45 North Macedonian tourists. The second incident has exposed the low quality of reporting and coverage in low-resourced Macedonian media, compared with their Bulgarian counterparts.

The overall VIBE country score increased to 23, reflecting the panelists' shared position that the overall situation concerning freedom of speech and media freedoms is improving. Average scores for all four principles are higher than in the 2021 study, with small improvements in all areas. The quality of information principle scored 23, although professionally produced news and information are still unevenly spread between traditional media and new online players, as social networks are on the rise as major sources. The panel concluded that: issues with lack of true pluralism and diversity remain despite the high number of available channels for information flow; information consumption and engagement remain dependent on political actors' willingness to refrain from manipulating and controllinginformation; and information may play a growing role in influencing stakeholders' actions and decisions.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1:
INFORMATION QUALITY   **23**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong
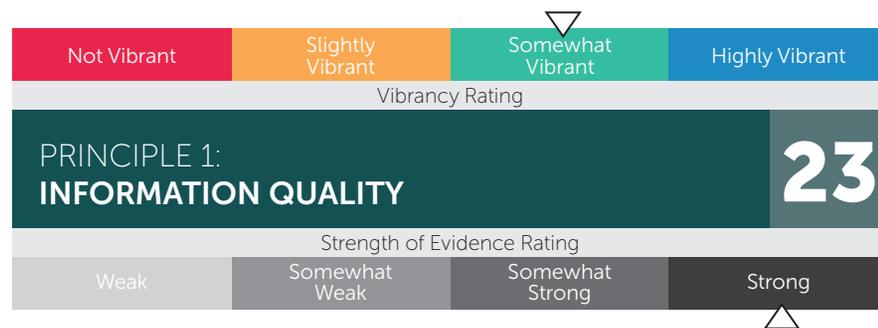
Citizens of North Macedonia have access to quality content. However, the quality is spread unevenly between the mainstream media and those online newspapers that adhere to standards of professional journalism versus those online media—especially social networks and social media—where the quality of the content is much lower. Indicator 4, which looks at inclusivity and diversity, was the highest scored indicator in this principle with a score of 26, while the lowest was Indicator 5 (sufficient resources), with an average score of 18.

Indicator 1: There is quality information on a variety of topics available.

There is a variety of quality content in North Macedonia. The broadcasting sector, in particular, almost uniformly adheres to the inform-entertain-educate model modeled after public service broadcasting. However, except for the public broadcasting service, Macedonian Radio Television (MRT), which is obligated to provide diverse content on a variety of topics, content diversity is an issue for commercial broadcasting outlets.

Financial constraints have had a negative impact on the quality of content produced. Outlets have much smaller editorial offices and cannot afford developed networks of local correspondents. As a result, local reporting has suffered. "Only when there are local elections [do] we get a chance to learn more about what's going on in the municipalities," said Liljana Pecova-Ilievska from the IMPETUS Center for Internet,

Development, and Good Governance.

Smaller newsrooms mean that journalists are asked to cover many tasks on many different topics and rarely have a chance to specialize. Specialized reporting has suffered due to the lack of ability to offer in-house, on-the-job training.

Online media are now largely providing diverse and niche information to smaller audiences with different interests and needs, and some provide more-than-decent local reporting. "The internet has expanded the possibilities for different people with different interests, and their communities, to produce specialist reporters to cover those subjects," said Bojan Šaševski from RadioMOF, a news-site dedicated to reporting on issues important to youth. Even with its reputation of low-quality content, the internet offers some of the highest-quality news and information content—especially regarding those investigative reporting websites that operate as nonprofits and are funded exclusively by foreign donors.

Commercial broadcasters focus their attention on news and current affairs political talk-shows as a much cheaper option to fill their daytime and prime-time slots. Talk shows, debate, interview, and opinion programs are expected to provide the context, but panelists noted that often information is published with no effort by the media and content producers to put the information in the appropriate context. Public figures frequently complain that their statements have been taken out of context. "We do everything we can to double-check and verify, [but] you have the online portals, who will take a statement, turn it into a bombastic, sensationalist headline, and create the illusion of a problem," said Nazim Rashidi from TV 21, a national Albanian-language cable television channel.

The media generally act as a watchdog over the government, and the government refrains from putting economic or political pressure on media that criticize it, which is a significant change compared to the reign of previous authoritarian regime. The media mostly maintain independent editorial policies. International news tends to come from foreign media and wire services, but panelists highlighted that copyright

NORTH MACEDONIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

abuses arising international media content is a problem. Panelists note that even national or local political reporting features limited original content. "The media rely far more on reproduction and republishing of material from other sources. Often, especially online, we witness only the so-called 'copy-paste' approach. Sometimes even misspelling or grammatical and syntactical mistakes are copied without correction",," said Biljana Bejkova, executive director of Info-center, a CSO that specializes in public relations for the civil sector.

For entertainment, outlets mostly rely on imported drama, usually cheap Turkish or old American and European productions.

Indicator 2: The norm for information is that content is based on facts.

The extent to which information offered to the public is properly sourced, fact-checked, and objective is a matter of debate. Statistics available from the self-regulatory body Council of Media Ethics (SEMM) show that violations of Article 1—on the obligation to publish correct and verified information—and Article 13—on the distinction between "facts and opinions, news, and comments"—are the most common grounds for citizen complaints.

There are frequent accusations of peddling of false information or disinformation across political or ideological lines, especially on social networks. It is unclear how much of the government's public-relations and propaganda efforts are based on misinformation, although when the government does engage in such behavior, it is promptly and properly covered by the press.

The almost total absence of prepublication fact-checking remains an issue because few media can afford such an investment, although there are several postpublication fact-checking and debunking operations. The Metamorphosis Foundation's website, Vistinomer.mk, also includes analysis of spin by political actors and serves as Facebook's fact-checking partner for North Macedonia. "Often, the material they publish contains ideologically or politically biased positions and analysis," said Sead Džigal, a lecturer at International Balkan University, a blogger, and an online media researcher.

Traditional media try to avoid publication of false information or misinformation, but it is difficult due to understaffed editorial offices and the 24-hour news cycle. "Quality is sacrificed to the speed of creation of a product that ultimately has very little quality and is the cause of most violations of ethical codes," said Dimitar Micev, owner and manager of TV Kanal VIS, a regional television station based in Strumica. There is a growing practice among traditional media to correct or remove published information that was later proven to be misleading—something that is absent in the social network profiles of the media.

Responsibility for abuses of the freedom of information lies primarily with the unregulated internet. The situation is especially serious on social networks where a lot of misinformation—especially regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and pro-/anti-vaccination views—is shared and distributed among non-professional content creators (usually adapting material from foreign sources) and the public.

Indicator 3: The norm for information is that content is not intended to harm.

Public discourse and public debate are overflowing with insulting, provocative, and outrageous statements. North Macedonia legislates hate speech on various grounds—such as incitement to hatred, violence and discrimination--as well as racist and xenophobic expressions in the Criminal Code. The audiovisual regulator also has power to sanction such content in the broadcasting programs. lists hate speech as a freedom of expression limitation.

> **" Only when there are local elections [do] we get a chance to learn more about what's going on in the municipalities," said Pecova-Ilievska.**

The presence of hate speech in the media is a hotly contested issue. Accusations of hate speech, which covers all sorts of offensive,

provocative or outrageous language, are often motivated by a strong disagreement between individual's ideology or political views. Some panelists brought up the issue of the difficulty in defining hate speech and the practice of treating every type of speech that may offend someone as a prosecutable defense. Professional media are vigilant and condemn cases of hate speech and other unacceptable speech, including mal-information. This has been evident regarding pandemic-related issues and the behavior of political actors. For example, there was the prominent case of an activist from the leading party of Albanians, DUI, who commented after the opposition's announcement that they had created a new majority in the Parliament (which ultimately did not materialize), that she "kept her war-boots in the attic," effectively threatening a war if DUI is left out of government. All media immediately condemned such language, and DUI was pressured to denounce such statements as unacceptable.

Professional content producers do not engage in hate speech and mal-information, according to the panelists. However, they agreed that it is hard to expect outlets to invest in staff who will moderate comments and discussions on their profiles on social networks—primarily because no one can afford it. Snežana Trpevska, a media law expert from the RESIS Institute, said, "There is much more disinformation and hate speech on social media than [in] the professional media. The way the issue is addressed differs, too."

Little legal action has been seen on alleged hate speech. Public prosecutors have taken the position held by most countries—for an incident to be prosecutable, there must be an explicit call for violence or discrimination against a person or group. In light of the current dispute with Bulgaria and its resistance to North Macedonia starting negotiations for EU membership, panelists noted that there were serious instances of hate-speech exchanges between the two countries.

There is little actual evidence to show that foreign actors are involved in spreading mal-information in North Macedonia. However, there are several websites that willingly spread foreign black propaganda against Euro-Atlantic institutions. Private citizens are the main distributors of such information, primarily on social networks.

Indicator 4: The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.

North Macedonians have access to content and media in multiple languages. MRT is widely known, as it produces and airs programs in nine languages. In addition to Macedonian and Albanian, the two official languages in the country, commercial broadcasters also air programs in Romani, Serbian, Bosnian, and Turkish. Print media, dailies and periodicals are published in Macedonian and Albanian, and online, the public has access to content in multiple languages and formats.

Mainstream media tend to maintain strong liberal and centrist positions and keep more ardent ideologies at a safe distance. The internet offers all possible political and ideological positions. Mainstream media do make an effort to present the views of political parties, both in the government and the opposition; however, they depend on a limited group of pundits and analysts to discuss issues. "Look at the political debate and panel shows on TV. There is a need to invite new people to discuss new issues of interest to the public", said Šaševski.

LGBTQ groups are largely absent from mainstream media, apart from reports on physical attacks on LBGTQ persons and other such incidents. Similar treatment is given to people with disabilities and other vulnerable groups. North Macedonia's public broadcasting service offers regular programming for people with disabilities, but it rarely invites representatives from this and other vulnerable groups to discuss issues other than their socio-economic status. The situation for vulnerable groups in smaller local communities is even worse. "Pluralism is most under threat at the local level. Various vulnerable groups and CSOs active on the local level complain that [they] have almost no

> " **Quality is sacrificed to the speed of creation of a product that ultimately has very little quality and is the cause of most violations of ethical codes," said Micev.**

access to commercial media," said Trpevska. However, vulnerable and marginalized groups have found that the internet is an alternative channel through which they can communicate their views.

Panelists noted that there is a need to make editorial offices more diverse and representative of society. Women represent a significant majority of all reporters but are seriously underrepresented as media owners, managers, and senior editorial staff. Ethnicity remains the main focus of diversity efforts, with a handful of editorial offices having token representation of reporters from other ethnic groups. "We have never had a member of [another] ethnicity as editor in chief of a Macedonian language media [outlet]. That is something we need to work on in the future. Such a person would offer a new perspective, a different view on the phenomena in society", said Rashidi.

Panelists differed on whether self-regulation results in professional consequences for those who violate ethical rules and standards of journalistic profession or who use harmful language and mal-information, as well as false facts, unchecked, and unverified information. Panelists believed that content providers do care what kind of assessment their actions and content will get from the self-regulatory body, SEMM. They also noted that the ProMedia Register of Professional Online Media has played a positive role in introducing more ethical and more professional conduct by the online media, especially since Register membership is voluntary.

Some panelists disagreed, however, noting that many members of the professional media who do not observe professional standards and ethics just do not because there are no actual consequences. "I don't see any consequences suffered by the media that deviate from ethical rules or standards of professional reporting. Some of them actually managed to turn it into a primitive business model to attract audiences through coopting social network users that will bring more readers," said Dzigal.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

North Macedonia's media market has never been especially lucrative. The emergence of new digital technologies has further undermined

media's already-low sustainability. While 2021 saw increased paid political advertising related to local elections, in general all print and broadcast media try to survive on a total, but unofficial, estimated advertising budget of around €30–35 million ($33 million - $38.4 million, according to advertising industry insiders). While digital media's share of the total advertising spending grows, all estimates indicate that global technology companies control at least 50 percent of the digital advertising spending in the country.

Given this environment, mainstream and traditional media have been hit hardest, and their ability to invest in high-end production and program offerings have declined, leaving them to focus on cheaper daytime television formats, political talk shows, and newscasts. Few media have the financial means to adequately staff their newsrooms, and most reporters are overworked and underpaid. For example, after a tragic traffic accident in Bulgaria that killed 45 citizens of North Macedonia, the public commented how inadequate the coverage of Macedonian media was in comparison to their Bulgarian counterparts.

The media continue to rely on sales of advertising time and space as their main business model. Media owned by big companies benefit from internal cross-subsidies and enjoy greater financial freedom. The government runs a subsidy program for print media that covers 50 percent of their printing and distribution costs. Many online media established by experienced journalists have chosen the nonprofit model and rely exclusively on foreign donors for their funding.

Government advertising was abolished in December 2018, but media pressure for the government to start advertising again is growing. Some panelists viewed this as a mistake that deprives the media of a significant share of available advertising, but others cited past abuses and advise caution and strict criteria for budget allocations. "We know what happened in the past and how the previous government was able to abuse public funds to 'purchase' the favor of the media," said Trpevska.

Panelists highlighted efforts by local media to expand their revenue generating activities. "Local media are actively engaging in efforts to

identify new models of funding and revenue generation—subscription models; charging fees for live-streaming of cultural, sports, and other events; and others," said Pecova-Ilievska. She also noted the British Council's regional program "Media for All," which works with local media to improve sustainability.

Journalism has never been a high-paying profession, and the situation is made worse by the ongoing crisis of the media sector. The job is underpaid, job security is low, and journalists are overworked. An Association of Journalists' survey shows that "over 50 percent of the polled journalists seriously think about leaving the profession for good," said Džigal.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2: MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS	26

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong
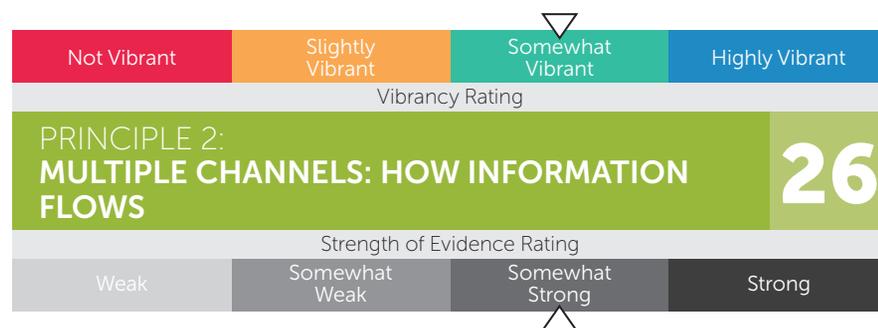
People in North Macedonia have the right to create and consume information and have the necessary channels for access and distribution of information available. There are some generational and geographical differences in terms of how different groups access information. Major questions remain about the independence of information channels, however.

This principle's overall average score is 26—the highest of all four principles. Panelists scored the VIBE indicator on independence of information channels the lowest (21), and the indicator assessing adequate access to information channels was scored the highest, with an average score of 30.

Indicator 6: People have rights to create, share, and consume information.

Freedom of speech and freedom of the press are guaranteed by the constitution (Article 16) and relevant international treaties ratified by North Macedonia. The government regulates broadcasting with its 2013 Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (amended in December 2018), and some aspects of the work and operation of print media are regulated by the same law. The laws are implemented impartially and uniformly. The internet remains completely unregulated, and some panelists suggested that something needs to be done about that, considering the growing importance of online media, including social networks and search engines, as source of news for the general public.

There are no attempts of censorship by the government—a huge improvement from the previous authoritarian regime—and no attempts to pressure information and communication technology providers to censor content; filtering is used only for foreign betting/gambling sites. Political parties and the opposition rely more on their internet "bot armies" and social networks to intimidate or attack any reporting or commentary that is not to their liking. There are growing numbers of journalists—especially women—who report incidents of threats and abuse on social networks. Some risks for journalists cannot be fully eliminated without seriously undermining the freedom of the press. However, reports from the Association of Journalists show that the number of physical/verbal attacks on press members continues to drop, with five reported cases in 2021, compared with 14 in 2010.

After several years of falling numbers of civil defamation actions against journalists, 2021 saw a "surge" with three new cases. The Levica (Left) political party and its president are suing reporters of A1on.mk on charges of failure to publish a reply and unauthorized use of personal communication. Criminal charges for disclosure of state secrets against journalists Goran Momiroski and Dragan Milosavljević, who discussed alleged corruption and abuses in the National Intelligence Agency in an expose in their late-night talk show on the pro-opposition Alfa TV, are more worrisome. The Association of Journalists has demanded that all charges be dropped, advising state institutions to "use the self-

regulatory instruments that are available to them to seek recourse in cases where they view the conduct of journalists as unethical."

Panelists expressed concerns that attempts to pressure journalists to give up reporting on some issues may continue. Most of these attempts rely on economic pressure as the media sector has gone through a prolonged period of economic pressures.

Indicator 7: People have adequate access to channels of information.

North Macedonia has a well-developed information and communication technology infrastructure. Internet penetration is well over 80 percent, with decent and affordable broadband services. There is a difference between urban and rural areas—citizens in rural areas have far fewer options in terms of internet service or cable providers than those in major urban areas. Mobile services and devices are also well developed, with more than 1 mobile phone per person on average (according to the State Statistical Office).

> **The citizens often are uninformed, that is true. But, many of them lack the knowledge and skills to seek and use government's data and information. Higher levels of digital literacy would remedy that,"** said Šaševski.

A large majority of citizens choose to bundle services, where a flat monthly fee covers telephone service, cable television, and internet connection. Although these costs are not insignificant, such services are adapted to the population's purchasing power.

In addition to the urban-rural divide, there is also a generation gap, with young people increasingly relying on their mobile devices as their main contact point. Older citizens remain loyal to traditional live television due to a lack of access to devices or an unwillingness to adopt new habits. "Some vulnerable groups in society, especially the elderly, lack proper access to new technologies, and some lack the skills to use new technologies for regular information," said Trpevska.

Financial concerns also define media access in terms of actual distribution platforms. With increasing costs of living and low salaries, the majority of citizens have little disposable income to spend on media content. The decision of the education authorities to move classes online during the pandemic's most serious phaseshas shown that a significant number of children have no access to an internet connection.

Print media have seen huge drops in circulation due to a number of reasons—offering outdated information, providing their content online free of charge, changing habits of the media consumers, and so on. Due to easily available and affordable technical solutions, more producers of content are moving online, including new ventures by print media into video and forms of online television. There have been no complaints about violations of the net neutrality principle (guaranteed by law) by information and communication technology providers.

Some problems may be evident in smaller urban and rural areas where only a single provider may offer bundled services—or at least cable television and internet—at affordable prices. This can be especially problematic in cases of service disruptions because it is more difficult to transfer to alternative information sources, especially for the older population.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

The 2011 Law on Free Access to Public Information has long been considered one of the best freedom of information laws in Europe. A 2019 amendment to the law changed the nature of the government body that reviews complaints about violations of freedom of information rights to the Commission for Protection of the Right to Free Access to Public Information.

The current government has adopted a policy of radical transparency since it took office in 2017 and has established an online Open Data

portal for publication of all government documents. Some institutions have been less than vigilant in terms of submitting their information to the portal, but it is regularly updated with new documents and information.

In addition, at different levels of government, there are legal obligations to hold public consultations on new legislation and budget forums to collect opinions of stakeholders and citizens in the process of subsequent yearly budget adoptions.

The Commission for Protection of Right to Free Access to Public Information seems to regularly engage in public campaigns to promote freedom of information awareness among citizens, although such campaigns seem to have a limited reach. "The citizens often are uninformed, that is true. But, many of them lack the knowledge and skills to seek and use government's data and information. Higher levels of digital literacy would remedy that," said Šaševski. While most freedom of information requests are submitted by CSOs and journalists, panelists observed that limited citizen engagement in requesting information might stem from skepticism: "I don't think citizens are afraid to ask for information. Rather, it is conformism and mistrust of institutions that play a role. They don't think they will get the information if they asked," said Trpevska. The old practice of institutions to wait for the last possible moment to respond with incomplete information or to fail to respond within the legally prescribed deadlines remains the most common cause for complaints received by the commission.

Journalists prefer to contact government officials or spokespersons when seeking information because freedom of information requests take too long to complete in the 24-hour news cycle. There are complaints that government spokespersons often choose to evade questions, provide incomplete answers, or demand more time to respond to journalists' questions. Journalists generally have a good rapport with the spokespersons since most of the people holding these positions are former colleagues. Panelists also noted that spokespersons often seem to give priority to their public relations role and to giving visibility to their respective institutions, at the expense of their duty to provide information to the public.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Government policy has always been that everybody is free to create information and to operate media outlets. However, many people have taken up that challenge, resulting in an overcrowded and oversaturated market.

> **I don't think citizens are afraid to ask for information. Rather, it is conformism and mistrust of institutions that play a role. They don't think they will get the information if they asked," said Trpevska.**

Licensing exists for broadcasting/audiovisual media services, live television, and video-on-demand services. In general, the regulatory body has recently treated all applications for licenses equally and impartially. Frequency allocation for audiovisual media services is tied to the process of license allocation to broadcast programs and follows the same rules. There are no licensing or comparable requirements for print and online media. However, print media need to register with the audiovisual regulator, while online media have to register their online domain name with an authorized registrar if they want to use the national extension (.mk).

Media monopolies—addressed in the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services—are restricted, effectively preventing consolidation of the market through mergers or takeovers. The law also prescribes rules for ownership transparency for broadcast and print media. There is no such statutory obligation for online media, but the self-regulatory body SEMM (the Media Ethics Council) has introduced a Register of Professional Online Media as a criteria for membership. SEMM has reacted in a timely manner to violations of ownership transparency for print media, issuing warnings and sanctioning media that have failed to meet these obligations. Panelists noted that in the past, transparency

of ownership provisions were too easily circumvented through proxy owners; there are still questions today about true ownership of a number of media outlets, primarily in online media. "Domain name registers may list the publisher, but it doesn't mean that another entity may be the actual owner," said Liljana Pecova Ilievska.

There are no monopolies over distribution channels for media, with the exception of digital terrestrial television broadcasting (DVB-T), where a single entity operates two multiplexes dedicated to commercial television.

After years of neglect and abuse, MRT is slowly getting back on its feet, doing everything it can to inform, educate, and entertain the public. "Its newscasts are neutral and objective. However, it lacks more investigative and critical journalism," said Trpevska.

Due to historical and practical reasons, MRT has focused mainly on ethnic/ethnolinguistic issues and broadcasts programs in nine languages. For other diverse groups and interests in society, its record is not as good. Some vulnerable and marginalized groups, especially persons with disabilities, are present in programs, but they are absent from MRT's decision-making.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Media owners and their interests are the biggest influence on media outlets' editorial policies. The most important channels are owned by businessmen with varied business portfolios, and they use their channels to support other business ventures and attack the competition. "As the saying goes, 'Tie your horse where the boss told you.' In my view, it totally applies to the media in this country and their independence," said Urim Hasipi, a journalist from Tetovo and correspondent for several national and local Albanian language media. However, other panelists had a somewhat different opinion. "In my experience, those who want to influence the reporting or public opinion, especially the corporate sector, now bypass ownership or managerial structures and go straight to the journalists," said Micev.

It is common for one person to hold the positions of both general manager and editor-in-chief in online media and some national broadcasts. Journalists in smaller, local media sell advertising to supplement their extremely low salaries. Insiders from the advertising industry say that major advertisers, especially multinational companies working in North Macedonia, follow a "spread the wealth" approach in their media-buying plans. Panelists pointed out that big companies are rarely subject of interest to the media out of fear that they will not look favorably on any reporting on their operations. Panelists also noted that editorial policies may influence local companies' media-buying decisions, especially regarding politics. Even media that rely on international donors may have to adapt their editorial policies to their donors' interests.

Government advertising is legally prohibited in all types of media. However, there is subsidized political advertising during campaign seasons. Political parties distribute their shares of the pot to those media with friendly editorial policies.

The public broadcasting service has been historically underfinanced. Since the abolition of the broadcasting fee, MRT receives 60 cents on the dollar from the budget. However, government neglect also means that it does not meddle in MRT's editorial decisions—a huge improvement over previous governments. The government has granted special allocations to cover the reporting costs of the 2021 Olympics and the European Football Championship.

Panelists noted that the audiovisual regulatory body has spent last several years as a caretaker body. The changes to the audiovisual media services legislation in 2018 prescribe that new members of its steering body, the Council of AVMS, shall be elected, the first public call for candidates failed and a new one has not been announced. In fact, three years after the changes to the Law, the old Council is still in place, as acting body, although the term in office of its current members has expired. Panelists voiced concerns about the role politics plays in the appointment of the members. "The appointment of new members depends on political actors, and it undermines its (the audiovisual regulator AVMS's) independence," said Trpevska.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant ▽	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 3: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT	21

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong △	Strong
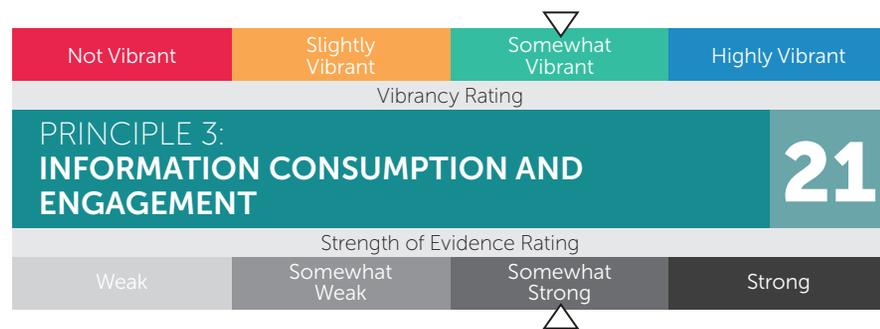
Content creators and citizens rely on whatever protection and privacy is provided by their service providers, and many do not have the willingness or capacity to use advanced tools and services that are available. Low levels of media and digital literacy certainly do not help, and community media remain an underdeveloped sector. Some positive movement is seen online, where different communities self-organize around websites.

The VIBE indicator on audience engagement was the lowest score of 18, while the indicator on community media received this principle's highest score (25).

Indicator 11: People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.

North Macedonia has good legislation on data and privacy protection that is in line with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation. There is no case law so far to draw any conclusions on this, except for past experiences with subpar implementation of legislation.

There have been two cases of serious violations of privacy and personal data. The first was the renewed operation of the "Public Room" group on the Telegram chat service, with members sharing lewd photos, phone numbers, and other personal information of young women and girls, some of whom might be minors. The other, almost identical in method,

> 66 **At least the government has announced that media literacy will be introduced in the official curriculum [but] nothing has been implemented so far," said Trpevska.**

targeted women from the Roma community in Skopje. The government has responded to demands of CSOs to introduce much stricter provisions for online harassment and stalking in the criminal code.

Dimitar Apasiev, the leader of Levica political party, sued the news site A1on.mk for unauthorized publication of personal communication, but panelists agreed that there was no actual violation of privacy. "Politicians have the right to privacy, but if journalists investigate corruption, violations of rights, or similar public-interest matters, it easily trumps privacy," said Trpevska.

There have been several incidents of hacking attacks: hacking of the government of North Macedonia's website in March; the two distributed denial-of-service attacks on State Statistical Office systems during the 2021 census; and other attacks on the national COVID-19 pass system and a government minister's official Twitter profile. "Security standards are very low, even with government institutions," said Džigal.

Training may be limited, but digital security tools are available to citizens and content producers. A professional or nonprofessional content producer's financial capabilities may restrict his or her willingness to invest in digital security tools. Most rely on the security measures applied by internet service providers. "We face no legal or other obstacles to improve the security of our website, but we can't afford it," said Ljupčo Murgoski, owner and editor-in-chief of *Zenit,* a local weekly newspaper in Prilep.

Digital literacy is at a low level. "It is not just the generational gap. Young people have superficial literacy. They know how to use Facebook and the social networks, but they lack so many other skills," said Džigal. Similarly, other than specialists in advertising and marketing industries, few people have an in-depth understanding of social-network and search-engine algorithms, targeted advertising, or the ways in which commodified personal data are used. Even among journalists, knowledge about these issues is incomplete.

Indicator 12: People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.

Media literacy has long been the focus of the public, media community, civil society sector, and the government. "At least the government has announced that media literacy will be introduced in the official curriculum [but] nothing has been implemented so far," said Trpevska. The audiovisual regulator AVMS has legal obligations to promote and develop media literacy and has continued to organize the annual "Media Literacy Days." The 2021 event was held online due to pandemic restrictions.

Foreign donors have focused their grant-giving operations on media-literacy-related projects. One such project, the YouThink program funded by USAID and implemented by IREX, is a media literacy curriculum in the official education system. Several CSOs organize media literacy trainings, usually for youth of high-school age, but there are no adult media literacy efforts currently. "There are no trainings or education programs for anybody older that high-school age. We are left to our own devices," said Lazar Sandev, a lawyer who specializes in freedom of expression cases.

Although there are several fact-checking and debunking sites, the size of their audience is considered quite small. More prepublication fact-checking is needed in the sector.

Media literacy levels among the population are not at healthy levels. The *Media Literacy Index 2021,* prepared by the Open Society Institute—Sofia, ranks North Macedonia last in terms of media literacy and resilience to fake news. There are, of course, dissenting views throughout society, that argue people are well aware of the disinformation, can discern high- from low-quality news and information, and make conscious choices about who and what to trust and believe. "I don't think the situation is actually that bad. There is a modicum of healthy

skepticism in the citizens . . . but if they don't trust the media, the citizens will easily turn to alternative sources of information," said Džigal.

Indicator 13: People engage productively with the information that is available to them.

Journalists and civil society activists can freely exercise their freedom of expression in the media, online, and in social networks. The current government is more open and prepared to take criticism without attempts at retribution for those who criticize with its policies and actions.

Citizens have much greater freedom to exercise their freedom of expression and join the debate on any issue, especially on social networks. Some panelists disagreed, however. "I don't know what exactly is happening, but to me it seems that it is more difficult now to make a simple vox pop, even on simple, communal issues. Before, [citizens] were 'fighting' to get in front of the microphone or the camera. Now they run away as if they are afraid to express their views. On social networks, they hide behind assumed identities, and they present their views," Murgoski said.

> " **Yes, freedom of expression may be—and is—abused. But we need law enforcement and the legal system to prosecute and sanction [only] the most extreme instances. Prosecuting every instance of hateful or offensive speech can take us in an unwanted direction,"** said Trpevska.

Panelists reiterated the view that there are complaints of too much freedom of expression. "There is freedom of expression, but the impunity for obvious cases of hate-speech shows that freedom of expression enjoys too much protection," said Sandev. Some panelists countered that it might be dangerous to overregulate social media speech. "Yes, freedom of expression may be—and is—abused. But we need law enforcement and the legal system to prosecute and sanction [only] the most extreme instances. Prosecuting every instance of hateful or offensive speech can take us in an unwanted direction," said Trpevska.

There are different digital platforms for public discussion. Town hall

meetings are relatively rare and are usually organized as part of election campaigns. Governments at all levels are legally required to organize public discussions on any proposed new legislation and budgeting process. The primary instruments used by the government and state institutions include digital and internet-based communications: e-mail, online forms, and the ENER.gov.mk platform used for national legislation, etc. Such events are adequately moderated.

Mainstream media, especially DVB-T broadcasters, also offer opportunities for citizens to voice their problems and give their views on a variety of subjects in the form of daytime television call-in shows. Depending on the broadcast, the hosts of such shows try to be neutral and impartial, although there are exceptions, and all intervene in cases of inappropriate or offensive speech. The primary concern is political representation—government versus opposition—and then ethnic representation, while other groups or interests in society are generally an afterthought.

Digital communication, especially in social networks, is the main problem. In a polarized society, discussion is little more than visceral insults, invectives, and inappropriate speech on the verge of prosecutable hate speech. Most panelists believed that moderation is nonexistent, but "even on the internet, there are rules of engagement, and communities that are involved in online discussions quickly react to those who violate those rules," said Šaševski.

Indicator 14: Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs.

Macedonian media do not invest much in audience research to identify audience needs, interests, or opinions. "Commercial media don't treat the audience as…citizens, but as consumers, and are not interested in their needs. Even the public-service broadcaster fails to do audience research, in spite of the clear legal obligation to do [so]," said Trpevska.

National terrestrial television broadcasters are at an advantage because of their membership in the Joint Industry Committee; having access to ratings enables them to make conclusions about the preferences

of their audience. There is anecdotal evidence that some of them also commission their own audience research and analysis, but panelists noted that the data is not well organized and not useful.

Panelists noted that online media rely almost exclusively on Google Analytics, although they seem to be interested only in the number of clicks and visits, without delving into the more detailed demographic data of their audience. Few media owners are interested or willing to invest in specialist staff for audience analysis.

Print media, and by extension some online media, occasionally publish letters from their readers, mostly under the "right to reply or denial provisions" of the media law. Letters to the editor and similar departments have long disappeared from print media.

Apart from a short-lived attempt by *Sloboden pečat* newspaper several years ago, there is no practice to appoint a readers' editor or ombudsman within editorial offices. All media delegate complaints from the audience to the self-regulation body. In addition, mainstream media have disabled comments to their online articles because of their inability to properly monitor discussions. They do allow comments to articles on their social network accounts, but moderation is not organized. It is left to reporters to react to any comments, should they notice language or a comment that violates decency rules or moves into hate-speech. Another issue raised by the panelists was the fact that, in many online media, sometimes the authorship of articles cannot even be determined because no byline is published.

Professional networks and personal contacts allow the media, CSOs, and government institutions to organize exchanges of information, regular briefings, and meetings.

Indicator 15: Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

Formally, community media in North Macedonia, in regulatory sense, exist only in the broadcasting sector, specifically in the form of nonprofit radio stations. Currently, there are four nonprofit radio stations—three

student radio stations associated with state universities and Radio Maria, a community station in Strumica, a Catholic community in the southeast. Panelists believe that the opportunity to establish a community or nonprofit radio station is underused due to a lack of adequate policies to promote community media as a viable option.

There is a common misconception to view local commercial radio and television as community media. Some panelists insist that this type of media needs to function as some sort of hybrid of commercial and community media. "When I entered the radio business, I made a conscious decision that I should open myself to the local Macedonian community in Gostivar (the local population is predominantly Albanian, and Macedonians are the minority on the local level), just as the Turkish-language radio in Gostivar does for the Turkish community. In addition to our commercial activities, we do a lot, using local volunteers, to promote Macedonian culture and language in the area," said Zoran Madžoski from Radio G, a local radio station.

Online sources of information—primarily websites of CSOs working in smaller communities or with vulnerable and marginalized groups—practically operate as community media. Such websites offer quality information and content designed to fit the needs of their specific community and are actively involved in the fight against disinformation and other forms of unacceptable, inappropriate, and offensive speech and reporting.

There has been a trend in recent years for investigative journalists to go nonprofit and rely on donor funding to sustain their operations. The sustainability of this model is questionable in view of the shifting focus and priorities of the donor community and of the almost-nonexistent culture of charitable giving. It is worth noting that such nonprofit investigative reporting and CSO-run community media commonly win top international and local prizes for best investigative reporting.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant ▽	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION	22

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong △
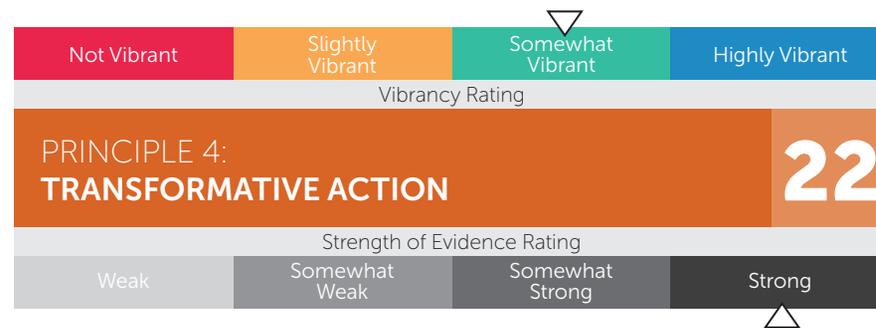
Traditional and online media in North Macedonia perform their role of reporting news and information, and they serve as forums for discussion of political, economic and ideological issues pertinent to the society. Individuals have quality information at their disposal to inform their decisions, especially at the ballot box, although content and information providers face stiff competition from the well-entrenched views of the citizens. The government and CSOs also have all the information they need to design their policies and actions to improve the lives of the citizens, although those policies and actions are ultimately under the decisive influence of political and ideological considerations.

The indicator examining civil society's use of quality information scored the highest at 27, while the indicator looking at individuals' use of quality information scored the lowest at 19.

Indicator 16: Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.

There are no media officially affiliated with individual political parties; however, in the country's highly polarized society, it is evident that many media have their favorites, and it is difficult to remain nonpartisan in this climate. That is especially true on the internet, although there are media that have been established to provide quality journalism online. "In short, there are nonpartisan sources of news, but they will be politicized, and their political affiliation [is evident] the moment an article is posted on [the media outlets'] social networks. In reality, all media outlets are

labeled as close to one or another political party," said Micev.

There are concerns about the audience sizes that impartial and nonpartisan media command, especially in such an overcrowded media market. Most panelists believed that citizens choose the media they will trust, and political affiliations play a huge role. Also, panelists noted that people like to discuss and comment on politics. "I don't know if that was spontaneous, or political parties issued orders to their activists, but in my experience, people like to read across political or ideological lines. During the local elections, there was huge engagement with everything we published that covered the campaigns, on all sides," said Madžoski.

The June 2021 poll commissioned by the International Republican Institute shows that most people still rely on television, with over 80 percent listing it as the most-used news source of news, followed by internet sources and social media with 37 percent. Print and radio shares are constantly dropping (2 percent and 4 percent, respectively). The poll also showed that 33 percent of the persons polled listed family members and friends as their most used source of news, while 47 percent said internet was their most used and main source of news.

Leading national broadcasters make great efforts, particularly in their political talk shows, to ensure representation of all sides of the political spectrum. Political activists seem very eager to engage in discussion on current affairs and political issues, and mainstream broadcast media have responded with daily call-in shows that allow everybody to present their views and opinions. In a polarized society, any discussion often needs intervention by show hosts to maintain a modicum of decency.

Online, and especially on social networks, most discussion of current affairs and political events and developments is restricted to echo chambers. There are people, usually political activists, who make it their task to follow the media supporting the opposing side, and they freely engage in online "skirmishes" with opponents, defending the actions of their preferred political actor or attacking the actions of the other side. "We have a new situation where disinformation is 'debunked' by counter-disinformation offered by political opponents. 'Bot armies' of political parties combat disinformation, real or alleged, of the opponents with counter-disinformation of their own," said Džigal.

Indicator 17: Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.

Depending on their sources of news and information, citizens will quickly claim that views and decisions—including those involved in voting or on issues related to health and well-being—have been based on quality information.

Information quality is an issue. "During the pandemic, in particular, we didn't have a consistently credible story line. These measures are valid, then other measures are valid. The media, as a whole, presented [citizens with] positions of official institutions [and] of some online healers as if their validity is the same," said Pecova-Ilievska.

Whether information is determined as qualitative sometimes depends on whether citizens agree or disagree with the information or perceived credentials of the person presenting the information. The recent public opinion survey conducted by the Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" shows that huge segments of the population are inclined toward conspiracy theories and "alternative facts." For instance, 72 percent of the persons polled believe that the world is governed by a handful of powerful families; 65 percent take it for granted that the coronavirus was created in a lab; 57 percent believe that mainstream media disseminate lies; and so on. The survey also shows huge mistrust of state institutions, government, political parties, and politics in general.

> **In short, there are nonpartisan sources of news, but they will be politicized, and their political affiliation [is evident] the moment an article is posted on [the media outlets'] social networks. In reality, all media outlets are labeled as close to one or another political party," said Micev.**

"The inclination toward conspiracy theories demonstrates existence of a huge potential to use the electoral body for a confrontational political process. Conspiracy theories suggest a worldview according to which politics cannot be a democratic process but a result of the work of secretive groups that control historical developments," Societas Civilis says in the report's introduction.

This information shows "the lack of trust in the media. . . . Certain skepticism and caution are useful and necessary, [but] where is the line between such skepticism and caution and the irrational tendency to believe things that were scientifically proven to be wrong?" asked Trpevska.

Indicator 18: Civil society uses quality information to improve their communities.

CSOs are a bright spot in the country's otherwise murky public information system, and they are known for using reliable information when explaining their mission or vision or when they publicly present activities. Whether they work in the field of media, human rights, or environmental protection or with vulnerable and marginalized groups, CSOs are the first to step forward in defense of the freedom of expression and information and in the fight against fake news and misinformation, often countering with truthful fact-checked data and information.

CSOs themselves stand behind much of the high-quality investigative journalism available in the country since several investigative reporting operations are actually set up as nongovernmental organizations or nonprofits and rely on donor funding; specialized investigative reporting has very limited (if any) access to advertising money. CSOs also serve as trusted and relevant sources of information, and so content producers use them to secure the best possible coverage in areas in which they have no specialty knowledge

and to counter the narratives of political leadership.

Civic participation in policy creation is legislated and mandatory for all types of legislation and in adoption of both national and municipal budgets. There is the common governmental practice to declare bills "European flag" legislation, meaning that the bills are necessary for accession to the European Union and therefore need to be passed in an urgent and time-sensitive manner, thus avoiding proper public consultations and prolonged debate in the parliament. There are common complaints that public consultations on new legislation are often conducted formally to show that it was done, while comments and recommendations presented by the citizens or CSOs representing different interests are outright ignored.

The proposed Council for Media Reforms that the Ministry of Information Society and Administration announced in summer 2021 invited CSOs to nominate members of the council to inform and ensure that media reforms will be conducted with full participation of the stakeholders. However, no further movement on the initiative was seen in 2021, probably due to the local elections and the subsequent political crisis following the resignation of former Prime Minister Zaev.

Indicator 19: Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.

Panelists note that national and local government institutions use a variety of instruments to engage with the public. In addition to traditional instruments—such as press conferences, media appearances, press releases, and government websites—the national government and the majority of local governments have invested in news production capacities. They produce high-quality video, audio, and photographic content that they offer to the media as a ready-to-use product. Many media—especially local-level broadcasters that are cash-strapped and understaffed—actually welcome such materials.

> **We have a new situation where disinformation is 'debunked' by counter-disinformation offered by political opponents. 'Bot armies' of political parties combat disinformation, real or alleged, of the opponents with counter-disin-formation of their own," said Džigal.**

"In Prilep . . . we had five spokespersons . . . in the local municipal administration. . . . They would rarely call a press conference. Rather, they would produce the video [and] the text, and they would distribute them among the media," Murgoski said.

In spite of such robust efforts, results are not always satisfactory. "I do hear from journalists that they have asked questions from the institutions and were never given an answer. No formal instrument will help with that," said Sandev.

In the political scene, all sides rely on spin and tested public relations and propaganda techniques in public discourse. Accusations of the other side using false facts and misinformation are quite common. "The question is: Is the glass half empty or half full? I would say here that . . . if we get only part of the information, or half-truths, it means that an effort at misinformation is under way," said Madžoski.

Fact-checking and debunking organizations do find that the opposition engages more in political spin. However, panelists repeated their suspicions about the possible bias of fact checkers in favor of the government, whose liberal policies the checkers seem to share.

The government is also inconsistent in engagement with civil society, doing so only when necessary. One example is the initiative to create a Council for Media Reforms, with CSO representatives participating in the design and drafting legislative and policy solutions from the very beginning. As noted above, there has been little movement on forming this council since the government the CSOs to nominate members of the future council.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

The government has repeatedly pledged its dedication to the fight against corruption. Government officials react promptly to any allegations with promises of action to investigate and sanction those responsible, but only if there is enough pressure from media and civil society. However, panelists pointed out that there is some discrepancy

between the government's pledges and its actions: "When journalists publish information about corruption, the government takes a defensive stance," said Pecova-Ilievska.

A case in point is the events surrounding the resignations of then minister of health, Venko Filipče, and his deputy minister, Ilir Hasana, one day after a catastrophic fire in the Tetovo COVID-19 hospital that killed 14 people. After a prolonged wait, the prime minister decided not to accept these resignations, saying that there was no reason to seek political or moral responsibility. In any case, the general perception is that only rarely do corruption cases end in court and the perpetrators adequately sanctioned.

Does reporting corruption have an impact? Some panelists believed that the impact is low, supported by the fact that new corruption cases are constantly exposed. Others believed that there is some significant impact, depending on individual cases. "The reporting of the Investigative Reporting Lab on abuses of heating oil and pollution has shaken the government quite a bit," commented Trpevska. Similar views were held regarding the government's reaction to reported human or civil rights violations. However, panelists said that, with the emergence of the internet and social networks, it is impossible to hide such violations from the public.

Panelists were divided on quality information contributing to free and fair elections at the national or local levels. The fact is that elections are always events of special interest for content producers, especially the news media. The permanent debate about the rules and circumstances of national, local, or presidential elections and the increased public attention and reporting on any incidents and other developments during the campaign and on ballot day contribute to improved democratic standards. "I am certain that quality reporting [has] contributed to the fact that the last local elections were free and fair," said Madžoski.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

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The following participant did not attend the panel discussion, but submitted a questionnaire and was interviewed:

Urim Hasipi, journalist, *KOHA* daily newspaper, Skopje

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