
Political agendas continue to permeate the media—a trend that became even more overt last year. Religious and social values buttress journalists' self-censorship. Ethical challenges pervade the mainstream media.



GEORGIA

The parliamentary elections were the main theme in Georgia's political and media discourses in 2016. The ruling Georgian Dream Party won the majority of seats in parliament, followed by the United National Movement (UNM), and, shocking Georgian elites, the Alliance of Georgian Patriots. In addition, the country's two largest telecommunication companies, Magticom and Caucasus Online, merged. Reflecting these developments, the state of media, having enjoyed relative freedom and progress during the past few years, became increasingly shaky. Obiektivi TV, notorious for spreading hate speech and phobic narratives, was in the background of these developments, largely determining the Alliance of Georgian Patriot's successes in the elections. The year ended with the announcement of a merger of three television stations: Imedi, Maestro TV, and Georgian Dream Station (GDS).

The panel members lambasted the Georgian National Communications Commission (GNCC) for imposing only vague sanctions on broadcasters in the pre-election period. The political battle for the seats of the two members on the board of trustees of the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB) fizzled out, and after nearly three years of deadlock, the parliament elected the missing board members nominated by the opposition, UNM.

Audience measurement of Georgia's television market is split between ABG Nielsen's licensee TVMRGE and Kantar Media's licensee Tri Media Intelligence. Conflicting data from the two groups, however, left prospective media advertisers confused. Continuous legal battles and accompanying uncertainty over ownership prevented the largest player on the market, Rustavi 2 TV, from attracting advertising money.

Many of the previous year's challenges persisted or even worsened in 2016. Political agendas continue to permeate the media—a trend that became even more overt last year. Religious and social values buttress journalists' self-censorship. Ethical challenges pervade the mainstream media. News outlets' editorial independence is undermined because of their suspicious contracts with the government, with some outlets' news saturated with Kremlin propaganda.

On the positive side, the constitutional court ruled that legislation allowing a security agency to have direct, unrestricted access to telecom operators is unconstitutional, and international donors' efforts continue to favorably impact the field of journalism and youth media education.

Against the backdrop of all these issues, the overall country score slipped slightly from 2.42 last year to 2.34. The bulk of this loss in score is a result of lower scores for Objective 3, Plurality of News, and Objective 4, Business Management. While most objective scores remained squarely in the "near sustainability" score range, Business Management's further fall placed it, worryingly, in the middle of the "unsustainable, mixed system" score range.

GEORGIA at a glance

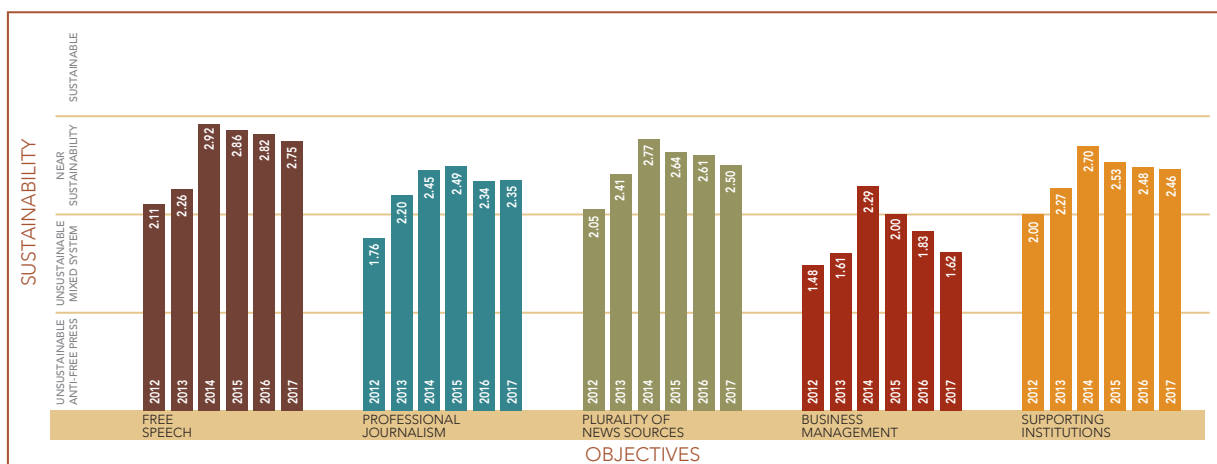
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 4,928,052 (July 2016 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **Capital city:** Tbilisi
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Georgian 86.8%, Azeri 6.3%, Armenian 4.5%, other 2.3% (includes Russian, Ossetian, Yazidis, Ukrainian, Kist, Greek) (2014 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **Religion (% of population):** Orthodox (official) 83.4%, Muslim 10.7%, Armenian Apostolic 2.9%, other 1.2% (includes Catholic, Jehovah's Witness, Yazidi, Protestant, Jewish), none 0.5%, unspecified/no answer 1.2% (2014 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **Languages (% of population):** Georgian (official) 87.6%, Azeri 6.2%, Armenian 3.9%, Russian 1.2%, other 1% (2014 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **GNI (2015-Atlas):** \$15.30 million (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- > **GNI per capita (2015-PPP):** \$9,430 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2017)
- > **Literacy rate:** 99.8%; male 99.8%, female 99.7 % (2015 est., CIA World Factbook)
- > **President or top authority:** President Giorgi Margvelashvili (since October 27, 2013)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active media outlets:** Print: 313 newspapers (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2015); Television: 41 satellite, 54 digital terrestrial and 76 cable channels; Radio Stations: 76 (Georgian National Communications Commission, 2015)
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** *Rezonansi* (4,000–5,000 daily), *Kviris Palitra* (55,000 weekly) (individual newspaper claims)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** Rustavi 2 (4.94%), Imedi (3.89%), Comedy Channel (1.09%), Maestro (1.03%), Chanel 1 (0.66%) (TV MR GE, 2015)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in the media sector:** Television: approximately \$30 million; Radio: \$4.5 million (Georgian National Communication Commission, GNCC analytical portal, 2015)
- > **News agencies:** info 9, Black Sea Press, Iveroni, NovostiGruzia, Sarke, Interpressnews, Iprinda, ItarTass, Kavkazpress, Media News, Prime Time News, Pirveli, Georgian Business Consulting News, Georgian HotNews, GeoNews, Expressnews, World Sport, ambebi.ge, Business Press News, Droni.ge, epn.ge, Aianews.ge, Kakheti Information Center, Primetimenews.ge, Kvemo Kartli Information Center, Mtkheta-Tianeti Information Center, for.ge, Frontnews, civil.ge, agenda.ge, economic.ge (www.yellowpages.ge)
- > **Internet subscribers:** 2.23 million (July 2015 est., CIA World Factbook)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: GEORGIA



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2017: OVERALL AVERAGE SCORES



CHANGE SINCE 2016

▲ (increase greater than .10) □ (little or no change) ▼ (decrease greater than .10)

Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0–1): Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1–2): Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2–3): Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3–4): Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

Scores for all years may be found online at <https://www.irex.org/msi>

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Georgia Objective Score: 2.75

The slight decline of this objective from 2.82 to 2.75 can be attributed to the obscure media regulatory framework in the pre-election period, the inability of the court and the state to ensure the functioning of free media throughout the election year, the ownership dispute over Rustavi 2, and turmoil within Maestro TV.

Panelists still agree that media legislation in Georgia is one of the best in the region and complies with international standards. "The standards are high and freedom of speech and expression are secured. There is the law on broadcasting, which is good enough, and the legal changes implemented in the past few years are not intended to limit or control the media's freedom," Zviad Koridze, an independent media expert, said. Natia Kapanadze, the director of Adjara TV and a practicing media lawyer with the Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA), said that what matters is the implementation of these laws, noting that some religious and social norms may hamper proper implementation of these laws.

Panel members who represent broadcasters complained about the provisions in the election code pertaining to media regulation in the pre-election period. Nino Jangirashvili, a director of Kavkasia TV, said that despite the general legislation securing freedom of expression most of the time, pre-election regulations are full of complications. "One article in the election code contradicts the other... I have to sit at GNCC and wait for

LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS PROTECT AND PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION.

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

explanations since I don't want to get sanctioned." Established in 2000, GNCC is the regulatory authority of the broadcast media and electronic communication field under Georgian law.

The pre-election period saw contentious decisions by GNCC in which the commission took "selective and inconsistent" approaches against several broadcasters for violating the procedures of publishing opinion polls in the run-up to the elections.¹ According to the Media Development Foundation's (MDF) report, the GNCC imposed fines on several television stations, including Rustavi 2 and Tabula, as well as two regional broadcasters, Trialeti and Argo. All those outlets were critical of the government. Meanwhile, GPB, GDS, and Obiektivi received only administrative warnings.

Natia Kuprashvili, executive director of the Georgian Association of Regional Television Broadcasters said that the regulations about broadcasting the pre-election opinion polls are so obscure that many regional channels abstained from broadcasting on-the-street interviews just because they feared sanctions amid confusing standards. "Some TV companies were so afraid that many TV channels stopped their news programs."

The policy brief prepared under the framework of the Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF) project called "Monitoring Implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement by Coalition of Civil Society Organizations" revealed that the Georgian government, despite its obligations to strengthen the capacity and independence of regulatory authorities, has proposed no specific activities to strength the GNCC.

Kuprashvili is concerned about the unequal treatment of national regional broadcasters under the current laws. "I think the legislation should become more lenient with regional broadcasters when it comes to authorship rights, advertising, and some other aspects. This matters a lot, especially in the pre-election period. Putting strict regulations on small regional broadcasters means exerting strong financial pressure on them."

Secret recordings of private lives and their subsequent release is a lingering issue for Georgians. Earlier this year, several government and opposition politicians, as well as one journalist, Inga Grigolia, were blackmailed with the release of secretly recorded videos of their private lives. Calling the event a case of "terror," Grigolia said on live television that she was not afraid and would not be silenced. To protest the surveillance, civil society restored the campaign "It Affects You Too" after a small break.² Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili condemned the case as a "blow to the state" and "blackmail of the entire society." He vowed that those who released the film would be "punished in an exemplary manner," Civil.ge reported.

¹ Practice of Imposing Administrative Sanctions on the Coverage of Public Opinion Polls in the Pre-election Period http://mediameter.ge/sites/default/files/practice_of_imposing_administrative_sanctions_eng.pdf

² Secret Surveillance in Georgia: 2015 – 2016 <https://idfi.ge/ge/regulating-secret-surveillance-in-georgia>

Soon after these developments, the constitutional court ruled the sections in the law on electronic communication, which allow security services to have direct and unrestricted access to telecom operators, unconstitutional. The lawsuit was lodged in 2015 by the public defender's office.

Earlier in June, the Tbilisi Court of Appeals upheld the judgment of the Tbilisi City Court in the case of Rustavi 2 TV, in which the court ruled 100 percent of the stake in Rustavi 2 was the property of Kibar Khalvashi, a fugitive from ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili's government. Just prior to finalization of the 2017 MSI, the Supreme Court of Georgia, the country's highest, upheld this decision. Khalvashi alleges Rustavi 2 was forcefully taken from him. Panel members say the Rustavi 2 events indicate a political struggle, not one of ownership.

Nino Danelia, journalism professor from Ilia State University and independent media expert, said that the court ruling in the Rustavi 2 case was unfair, and she speculated that political interests were behind the process, citing a few reasons for suspicion: one judge was trained only in criminal law, not administrative law, and refused to recuse herself; another judge, who chaired the three-judge panel, was given a permanent seat in the court soon after the indictment in the Rustavi 2 case was announced.

In the beginning of 2016, Tbilisi-based Maestro TV, known for a history of disputes among its owners and journalists, found itself involved in a battle between shareholders, resulting in several court disputes, the redistribution of shares, and the firing of a top manager. The former singer Giorgi Gachechiladze, known by his stage name Utsnobi, and a staunch activist against the Saakashvili government, gained a controlling stake (55 percent) of Maestro TV. Media activists and NGOs expressed concern in a statement that the case was politically motivated and felt such turmoil in the television company leading up to the election was suspicious. "The case of Maestro intensifies the fears of civil society that the government wants to establish control over the media prior to elections. In the summer of 2015, similar events occurred around ownership of the TV company Rustavi 2. The private dispute there also bore political undertones," the statement reads.³ A couple of years ago, the mass departure of journalists from the station and statements by the channel's top management about the need to pursue values other than typically Western ones raised concerns among media professionals and the public.

Digital switchover continues to be one of Georgia's most successful achievements, despite the technological challenges it poses to broadcasters, some panelists say. In 2016, GNCC made changes to the Law on Electronic Communications and defined the access criteria to multiplexes for broadcasters. These amendments stipulate that those broadcasters with high-quality

³ <http://www.transparency.ge/en/post/general-announcement/statement-ngos-tv-company-maestro>

broadcasting or programming geared toward the general public will be given priority to access multiplexes.

Another amendment in the law on broadcasting required that broadcasting through open satellites be in the Georgian language. Until 2016, lenient legislation enabled any person of any nationality to broadcast in Georgia. Kuprashvili said this would attract foreign citizens whose agenda was to reach out to audiences other than Georgian audiences. "There are numerous requests from Russia, China, and Middle Eastern countries to broadcast through open satellites. The language limitation was done for the purpose of security. Only public broadcasters and small regional and community broadcasters are exempt from this requirement," Kuprashvili further explained.

Panelists say pressure on journalists is now more subtle. "Beating up a journalist in the street is a visible felony; pressuring a journalist covertly is a big crime," Tamar Kintsurashvili, executive director of MDF, said, citing cases of secret surveillance, threats toward journalists, closing of television programs, and dismissals of journalists by some television stations. According to a report released by Transparency International, a few months before the elections, journalist Nana Lezhava replaced Maia Tabagari as the head of the news service at Imedi TV. The executive director of Maestro TV dismissed Giorgi Isakadze, host of several programs (*Business Morning*, *Business Contact*, and *Analytics*), citing the intention to outsource his jobs. Isakadze reported that disagreement about salaries was ultimately the reason for his dismissal. Contracts for staff members of *Business Contact* and *Business Morning* were also suspended. In July, the programs *Business Contact*, *Business Morning*, and *Analytics* were removed from Maestro. Currently, all three programs air on TV Pirveli. Transparency International and some NGOs note the rights of journalists, stating, "Private companies are free to make their own decisions about their staff; however, the directorate of the channel and its owners bear the responsibility to ensure the editorial independence and professional freedom of its journalists. Such actions demonstrate that the owners and leadership of the channel do not acknowledge these responsibilities."

Monitoring conducted by MDF on Election Day, October 8, and the next day, October 9, revealed three instances in which journalists were prevented from carrying out their work. On Election Day, the journalists of GDS, Rustavi 2, and Iberia were assaulted at the electoral district in Kutaisi, a city in western Georgia. According to the source in the report, the first deputy governor led a group of aggressors. The attackers verbally abused the journalists and damaged cameras. For panel members, investigations are difficult to conduct. Gela Mtvilishvili, the editor of Kakheti Information Center, said such cases are rarely discussed under Article 154 of the Criminal Code, which criminalizes acts that prevent journalists from doing their jobs. Instead, if investigated, they are primarily addressed by

other provisions in the Criminal Code about physical assaults or the threat of violence in order to circumvent being classified as attacks on free speech.

There was a breakthrough in the filling of two vacant board seats for the GPB, which has been an ongoing problem since 2013. The parliament elected two members nominated by the opposition party, UNM. Additionally, the director of GPB, Giorgi Baratashvili, resigned. Panel members said that his resignation coincided with the political cycle of the parliamentary elections. On November 21, a member of the board of trustees, Ketevan Mskhiladze, announced that Baratashvili resigned because he had other “job offers,” but provided no additional details. Most panel members were doubtful and speculated that the release of pre-election polls from pro-government leaning Maestro TV and GDS, which GPB cooperated in conducting, cast doubt on his impartiality. The results of the polls diverged considerably from the ones released by the Central Election Commission and put “the credibility and reputation of the GPB at risk,” according to Transparency International.

Nata Dzvelishvili, executive director of Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics (GCJE), said, “Baratashvili has fought for these exit polls, and he was determined to execute them, despite the resistance from the civil society organizations. All their arguments were unacceptable to him, and he also mentioned that he got tired and was planning to leave for quite some time. Nevertheless, his decision to resign at the end of the elections raises suspicion.” Koridze added, “It seems to me that his resignation can be related to certain political dimensions.”

Ia Mamaladze, the publisher of *Guria News*, said the coverage of the 2016 parliamentary elections on GPB was politically charged, and media experts also speculated about the government’s interference in its editorial independence.

On a positive note, GPB started a structural reorganization at the end of 2015, hoping to update various management units and transitioning the newsroom into a more multimedia-based facility. Also, a study carried out by Transparency International found that professional freedom for GPB journalists has been gradually improving. According to GPB employees, unlike previous years, they have not heard about cases of interference in the process of preparing content.

Elections of the director for the Adjara Public Broadcaster, based in Batumi, were transparent, panel members noted. Mamuka Andguladze, a joint officer from the Council of Europe, said, “Elections in Adjara Public Broadcaster are remarkable because the person elected as the director is not linked with any political party. The chances have increased that the new director and the team will make something happen. It is one thing that she has potential and another thing when considering to what extent she will be allowed to do what she intends to.” Kapanadze

credited this election to the relentless work of civil society members.

In Georgia, neither slander nor libel are criminal offenses; if either is proved, a civil award for damages is applied. Occasionally, some defamation cases end up in court. In 2016, the court ruled in favor of Mamuka Khazaradze, president of one of the largest private banks in Georgia, TBC Bank, against the Georgian tabloid *Asaval Dasavali*. The newspaper will have to pay GEL 6,000 (approximately \$2,500) to the bank for continuing to spread defamatory allegations since 2015 despite a previous legal intervention.

Public institutions frequently withhold public information under the guise of personal data protection and privacy rights, and this remained true in 2016. The Georgian Administrative Code regulates citizens’ access to public information and obligates a public institution to release requested information no later than 10 days following the request. Mtvlishvili said that sometimes state agencies refuse to release public information, claiming they lack sufficient human resources to search and process large amounts of data, or they cite the protection of privacy. Nestan Tsetskhladze, editor of the online newspaper *Netgazeti.ge*, recalled that the Ministry of Interior responded to her publication’s request, which was lodged in 2013, in 2016. The request concerned the salary bonuses of the Ministry of Interior staff members. “We submitted a complaint in court against the non-release of the public documents, and it took us three years to resolve the case. The information released in 2016 is of very little value,” Tsetskhladze said. She also mentioned the difficulty journalists have with access to court rulings. “The institution, which is responsible for ensuring fair decisions on such cases, is transgressing itself,” Tsetskhladze added.

In 2016, the Institute for Development of Freedom of Information submitted 7,430 information requests to 294 public institutions. Of the requests, 73.94 percent were completed—a significant fall from last year’s 86 percent. The Ministry of Justice was named as the most closed institution in 2016. Dzvelishvili believes that one of the major drawbacks in 2016 for this indicator has been the stagnation in the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act, which was expected to be carried out in 2016.

Access to foreign sources of information is free for the Georgian media and is not prohibited by any regulation. After sex tapes were released online, YouTube was blocked from some of the country’s largest Internet service providers—a move that worries panelists. “It can turn into a habit,” Koridze warned.

There are no restrictions applied by the government to the journalism profession in terms of entering university. “Even though prospective students are not restricted in any way to choose journalism as a profession, still, it is not among those

fields that are supported and encouraged nationally, like sociology or economics,” Nino Zhizhilashvili, a talk show host at TV 1, said.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Georgia Objective Score: 2.35

Fairness, balance, and ethics in the Georgian media fall short of the panel’s expectations. Panel members said that the overall quality of reporting is still poor despite improvements that the Georgian media has seen in the past few years. Contributing factors include political affiliations of the media outlets, lack of credible sources, and low professional standards.

“This was too obvious in the run-up to the elections. The anchors of the political talk shows and the journalists were unprepared and had difficulty leading and moderating the respondents; the journalists struggled with probing and putting forth counterarguments when it was expected. Instead, the representatives of the political parties were given the freedom to say whatever they had on their agendas. Sometimes, the pro-Russian and anti-Western politicians were providing information about NATO and the EU that was false,” Dzvelishvili said, adding that such cases prove that Georgian media is not immune from spreading false news if journalists lack professional competencies.

The *Study and Research on Election Media Coverage for 2016 Parliamentary Elections in Georgia*, carried out by the GCJE revealed instances of unbalanced reporting on all television channels as well as stories based on a single source. According to the report, some stories were broadcast without double-checking the sources.

Kintsurashvili said it is easy for some political forces to instrumentalize the Georgian media because of the low professionalism and insufficient training of journalists. She added that sometimes one can find a high-quality product with balanced and objective reporting in the regional media outlets.

Georgian media is plagued with sensationalism, plagiarism, and hate speech. Political talk shows of TV Pirveli, TV Maestro, and Iberia aired programs where political opponents swore at each other and used crude language, and in one instance, opponents engaged in a violent brawl. In most cases, the journalists attempted to defuse the tension but they did not stop broadcasting until the last moment. Dzvelishvili claims, “This was done on purpose to attract the viewers with the scandalous material.” *Asavali Dasavali*, *Alia*, *Sakartvelos Respublika*, *geoworld.ge*, and *Obieqtivi TV* are among the outlets using hate speech and language.

On a positive note, panelists say the GJEC is contributing to curbing the ill practices of journalists. In 2016, an underage person filed a complaint to the GJEC regarding an article titled “Black Georgians” in the magazine *Horoscope+*. The complainant felt the title of the story promoted discrimination against black people. In 2016, the Georgian Association of Regional Broadcasters (GARB) initiated a shared platform where an interested party can post a complaint or share a concern and receive open feedback. Rustavi 2 developed a similar platform on its website.

In March 2016, a Georgian news outlet reposted a secretly recorded sex tape from YouTube that allegedly featured an opposition politician. In addition to posting it openly on its website, the news outlet also identified the person on the tape, causing an outcry from civil society organizations and the Georgian media. The news outlet was forced to fire one of its editors and to apologize for breaching ethical standards for reporting.

There are a handful of online and print publications that provide in-depth and highly professional reporting. They include the magazine *Liberali*; newspapers *Netgazeti.ge*, *Batumelebi*, *Tabula.ge*; and radio service *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. *Tabula TV* closed in 2016 because of insufficient funding.

Most panelists agree that Georgian journalists grapple with self-censorship. Ivanishvili added that the journalists and editors in almost every mainstream media outlet practice self-censorship out of fear of offending those in political and religious power. Zhizhilashvili said that there is immense censorship and self-censorship at *Imedi TV* and *Maestro TV*. “I know for sure that the journalists were receiving the lists of potential guests in the pre-election period. This reminds me of the times in 2007 when I was working at *Mze TV*,” she said. According to

JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

- > Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- > Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- > Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- > Journalists cover key events and issues.
- > Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

panelists, Georgian journalists self-censor when reporting on religious themes or issues pertaining to the Georgian Orthodox Church. Tsetskhladze recalled a case that occurred during the elections when the leader of the Georgian Orthodox Church voted to stop using the electoral stain used on voters' hands—a security feature that prevents double voting. Tsetskhladze said that Netgazeti.ge reported the story and posted a photo. She said that TV 1 also released the video and attributed the story to Netgazeti.ge. “For me, this is a clear case of self-censorship. The television station was afraid to claim authorship of the story and pointed at Netgazeti.ge,” she said.

Still, the panelists generally agreed that Georgian media report on key events, even if some outlets neglect to cover stories, other outlets will be there to report them. Additionally, Dzvelishvili and Kintsurashvili said the Internet and social media fill in the gap when necessary.

Pay for journalists remains low in Georgia, although the pay varies between sectors and regions. Kuprashvili noted that some media outlets pay suspiciously high salaries to some journalists, raising questions about the intentions of the media outlets. Hatia Jinjikhadze, media support program manager with OSGF, and Ivanishvili disagreed and said that there cannot be a direct correlation between a journalist's salary and corruption. On average, print and online media, which are largely funded by donors, pay around \$200 to \$300 per month for each staffer. The salaries are much lower for regional outlets. The salaries for national broadcasters range between \$500 to \$3,000, sometimes higher, depending on the position and the years of work experience.

Higher salaries for broadcasters leaves smaller media with less experienced entry-level journalists. “Because the broadcasters pay better salaries, online media risk losing their staff,” Mtvilishvili complained. Dzvelishvili added that during pre-election times, the pay for some broadcast outlets increased, causing an outflow of journalists from smaller to larger media organizations and from regional to national media outlets.

Entertainment takes a more or less equal share of airtime for private and public broadcasters. Kuprashvili argued that the increase of general broadcasters owing to the ease of access permitted by the changes in the law on broadcasting will similarly increase providers of hard news, with about 60 percent of broadcasters airing news.

Most panelists agreed that the digital switchover in 2015 caused serious technical challenges for most media, including the large and relatively wealthy Rustavi 2. Kuprashvili said that regional broadcasters are in deplorable conditions and cannot keep up with the technological requirements imposed by the new digital

Jangirashvili said that the Internet pressures journalism to provide more information in a very limited time. “The audience wants to see and read it all instantly; they don’t want to wait for a story unless it is something big. The news has become more about speed and less about depth or quality.”

order. Jangirashvili argued that technological developments have simplified production, transmission, and distribution of the media content, thus outweighing the technological challenges caused by the digital switchover.

When speaking about the quality of niche reporting and programming, the panel said that although some media outlets provide in-depth coverage of politics, economics, health, and other pressing topics, which is increasing in popularity, there are still serious problems. Zhizhilashvili explained, “The media outlets are reluctant to spend money on it because there is very small interest from the side of the viewers. Also, those media outlets are selective when choosing the topics to cover, and those topics do not fall under the interest of the journalists.” Jangirashvili said that the Internet pressures journalism to provide more information in a very limited time. “The audience wants to see and read it all instantly; they don’t want to wait for a story unless it is something big. The news has become more about speed and less about depth or quality.” Ivanishvili believes that the web offers a platform where investigative reporting can easily be transferred to become more accessible for changing audiences. Still, for more than a decade, a small studio, Monitor (monitori.ge), has been producing high-quality investigative content. TV Kavkasia airs its programs.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

Georgia Objective Score: 2.50

Panelists agreed that the Georgian media landscape is pluralistic and different types of media offer multiple viewpoints. Some panel members observed that the media is also prone to polarization when reporting on certain topics such as elections; political slant in media and economic hurdles further intensify polarization, they added. This polarization is a main reason why Objective 3 declined somewhat from 2.61 to 2.50.

Jangirashvili said that the political affiliation of the Georgian media channels became more apparent in 2016. “Media outlets emerged as real political players,” Jangirashvili claimed. The

MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE AND OBJECTIVE NEWS.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- > Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- > Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- > A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.

attention the Obiektivi TV gave to the party it is affiliated with—the ultra-nationalistic Alliance of Patriots—had a huge effect on election outcomes in the October parliamentary elections. Obiektivi TV, known for spreading xenophobic, homophobic, and anti-Western sentiments, and reportedly reliant on Russian funding, helped the party to clear the threshold during the elections. Another television company linked with the Alliance of Patriots is Iberia, Jangirashvili said. Television channels Imedi, Maestro, GDS, and GPB are distinctly pro-government, and Rustavi 2 remains linked with the UNM.

In early 2016, Transparency International released a study calling funding of regional broadcasters “suspicious.” According to the report, in 2015 and 2016, different Georgian municipalities signed contracts with a local television station worth almost GEL 1 million (approximately \$400,000) on the provision of services such as the acquisition of airtime and the production of programs and news items. These agreements contradict the law on broadcasting. “This raises doubts about the independence and impartiality of the TV stations,” the report says. Kuprashvili said monitoring the activities of regional broadcasters did not reveal a breach of law, and the role played by the municipalities seems conspicuous because of the decline in other funding sources such as advertising or grants.

No laws restrict Georgians' access to domestic or international media. According to the Caucasus Resource Research Center (CRRC), 77 percent of the population chooses television as a primary source of information on politics and current affairs, 12 percent choose television as their secondary source. In the same report, 23 percent of those interviewed said they receive news about politics and current affairs from foreign television channels. The most frequently named foreign channels were Russian Channel One, RTR, Russia 1, Russia 24, and Euronews broadcasts in both English and Russian.

Several panel members said the economic hardships, coupled with low Internet coverage in remote parts of Georgia, hinder the population's access to news sources. Nino Narimanishvili an editor at Samkhretis Karibche, cautioned that the population in the Armenian-speaking Javakheti region has limited access to information and especially to the Georgian language channels. Kuprashvili further added that because of GNCC policy and Georgian legislation, regional outlets fail to meet the needs of their target minority populations. About 52 percent of ethnic minorities interviewed by the CRRC study reported receiving news from foreign channels. “There is no single local multiplex in Samtskhe-Javakheti region. We [GAR] tried to address this issue in 2016 by synchronizing and translating 6 and 8 o'clock news programs,” Kuprashvili added.

The level of Internet penetration in the country is less than 50 percent, according to the GNCC analytical portal, and the availability of fiber-optic Internet is scarce beyond the capital and major urban areas. Facebook is the most popular social media platform in the country, with approximately two million registered users, according to Internet World Stats. The countrywide Internet expansion and broadband development project, which started in 2015 and is funded by the Bidzina Ivanishvili-owned Cartu Foundation, is underway and expected to be completed by 2020.

Panelists disagreed about the quality of the GPB programming. Some felt GPB's pre-election coverage was more or less balanced and reflected a diversity of viewpoints of the Georgian political spectrum. “We could observe a plethora of political viewpoints presented on the channel in the run-up to the elections. Many different politicians were able to talk and share their agendas with the public,” Dzvelishvili said. Still, there was a lack of analysis and debates on GPB, Dzvelishvili added. “There were only the presentations of the candidates' agendas.” Most panel members named the social and political program *InterVIEW* on GPB, anchored by Salome Asatiani, a journalist at Radio Free Europe Prague, as the best television program broadcast in the period preceding parliamentary elections.

Channels fail to ensure internal pluralism, which is central to public broadcasting. Andguladze said this prevents the channel from filling the gaps left from private broadcasters. Kuprashvili claimed that GPB's programming is gradually improving, creating several new educational, informational, and musical programs. “There are several things they have been struggling with; this is about ordering of programs as well as bringing them to the audience,” Kuprashvili said.

The GPB became embroiled in a scandal after its first channel aired an election campaign advertisement by the Centrist political party depicting Russian tanks and the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, while promising “Russian pensions” and the legalization of Russian military bases in Georgia.

The advertisement caused an outcry among Georgian media activists, experts, and civil society organizations, and broadcasters subsequently took it off the air. Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili responded to the decision to remove the advertisement by releasing a statement: “We all need to be particularly vigilant and careful during the pre-election period given the increasing wave of propaganda against state interests.”

Some panel members said that GBP was compelled by the law to air the advertisement, as the election law restricts the broadcasters’ ability to monitor the content of political and social advertisements. Jangirashvili labeled the advertisement as unconstitutional and anti-state, saying there is an exception to the election law that allows a broadcaster to prevent the airing of advertisements that contain anti-constitutional and anti-state propaganda.

The independence of news outlets as well as their efficacy has been compromised in recent year, and panelists question their ability to remain impartial. Kintsurashvili said news outlets such as IPN.ge, PIA.ge, and some others are subsidized by different government agencies and sometimes are even contracted by political parties.

Zhizhilashvili added that several news outlets are even ready to air and promote certain content if they are paid for it, even if the content is not newsworthy. She further explained that some broadcasters pay news outlets to quote and circulate the content they broadcast. Jangirashvili added that this service has existed for many years and is efficiently used by some media companies who try to “artificially increase their visibility.”

Koridze recalled the case of IPN.ge. After news outlets reposted the sex tape from YouTube, several government ministries, such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Defense, as well as the President’s Administration, suspended their contracts for three days. These contracts procure the reporting services from a news outlet for all public service events, activities, and appearances. Ultimately, the Ministry of Justice kept IPN.ge’s contract suspended, and the news outlet “retaliated” by ignoring developments in the Ministry of Justice. IPN.ge justified itself by claiming that it isn’t notified about upcoming events at the Ministry of Justice. “The problem here is the following: I won’t report about you unless you pay me,” Koridze notes.

Some outlets also carry pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives. Narimanishvili and Kintsurashvili noted that in 2015 and 2016, the government subsidized news outlets such as Newspress, Sputnik (owned by the Russian government), Obieqtivi TV and Radio, and others.

Most broadcast media produce their own news, although some regional media suffering from a shortage of both financial and

human resources rely on GARB to provide them with coverage of national news to complement their own local coverage. Mtvilishvili says that 70 percent of the content in the Kakheti Information Center, an online media portal, is original coverage, while community radios produce 50 to 60 percent original material.

The law on broadcasters mandates that media outlets report and update information on their owners. Koridze, who was one of the authors of this law, noted that when amending the law and making the information about ownership mandatory for the media outlets, they failed to include financial transparency. Koridze explained that the ownership and financial transparency of a broadcaster is significant, as it would allow the public to learn who the real owners of the company are. “Nowadays, the information about the owner has become conventional... It is important that the information about all the sources of funding are also transparent and that the owners declare their company’s assets,” he said.

Kuprashvili summed up the seventh indicator of a broad spectrum of social interests in the media by stating that 2016 saw no significant improvements. “Since we have not seen changes in GPB, it means we don’t have any positive changes when it comes to reporting on the themes germane to minority groups. We don’t see the programs featuring a minority community. GARB plans to prepare such content, which will be posted on the website Samkhretis Karibche,” she said. Narimanishvili said there are hardly any bloggers among the minority communities.

Jinjikhadze noted some exceptions, mentioning Radio Marneuli, which serves an area populated predominantly by Azerbaijanis. Jinjikhadze said that the radio, with its bold coverage of different topics, is indicative of the progress achieved with the support of various local and international donors.

Narimanishvili, who works in the heavily Armenian Javakheti region, noted that her publication successfully cooperates with the local community radio station NORI. The radio station prepares daily Armenian translations of the content produced by Samkhretis Karibche, which is accessed by the local Armenians and Armenian-speaking Meskhetian communities. In 2016, Radio Samkhretis Karibche began airing news both in Georgian and Armenian. Narimanishvili did observe that the only time the minority communities appear in news is when something tragic occurs. Such an approach, she says, annoys minority communities and alienates them.

Panel members said that although news coverage and information about the local and national issues is present in the Georgian media, international issues are frequently left unattended. Ivanishvili said the Georgian media lacks global vision. “Georgian media has difficulty seeing and recognizing global context, and the impact international events have on our

daily lives. For example, something that happens in Armenia is related to us; the same is true about Turkey and Syria and Russia,” Ivanishvili said. A couple of years ago, Netgazeti.ge started a section on the South Caucasus region with daily updates of the events from the three Caucasus countries. Panelists noted that this is the only source that systematically reports on regional events.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Georgia Objective Score: 1.62

The score of Objective 4 dropped moderately from 1.83 to 1.62. Panelists regarded financial instability and the consolidation of ownership as major challenges of the Georgian media market in 2016. A fierce economic crisis, the split of the media market between two television audience measurers, and restrictions imposed by the law on advertising further deepened instability and facilitated the market’s downturn.

According to GNCC data, the television advertising market shrank to \$19,561,115 (January to September) in 2016—an approximately 20 to 30 percent fall compared to the previous year.⁴ “Comparison of 2015 and 2016 shows that Rustavi 2, the leader on the market, experienced a decline of 4 percent in 2016, and Imedi’s revenues dropped by 1.5 percent,” said Kintsurashvili.

In 2016, television media outlets had to operate in the market where two television audience measurers (TAMs) were present: ABG Nielsen’s licensee TVMRGE and Kantar Media’s licensee Tri Media Intelligence. According to Jangirashvili, Rustavi 2, Comedy Channel, Marao, TV Pirveli, and Kavkasia stayed with TVMRGE, while Imedi TV, Maestro, and GDS contracted with Tri Media Intelligence. The two TAMs provided conflicting ratings, confusing prospective advertisers and, said panelists, playing a significant role in the market’s decline.

The financial stability of the largest player of the Georgian media market, Rustavi 2 TV, was also affected by additional circumstances in 2016: endless court trials and the uncertainty over the channel’s ownership. “Rustavi 2 is a key player in the market, and advertisers were uncertain about placing ads there... Many cut their budgets. The year was very unstable for Rustavi 2; nobody knew what the court decision would be. This affected the sales,” said Jangirashvili.

The panelists agreed that available sources of revenue are not enough to support all current media. “Media is not profitable and [instead] brings political dividends,” said Kintsurashvili. “Tabula TV, which was closed at the end of the year, showcases how unstable the market is... It was closed because it could

⁴ <http://bpi.ge/index.php/in-2016-georgias-advertising-market-fell-by-20-30/?lang=en>

not support itself. The market failed to sustain it, and political interest was also insufficient to support the channel,” said Jangirashvili.

Jangirashvili tried to sort television outlets through their financing sources. Commenting on the union of Imedi TV, Maestro, and GDS, she noted, “An entire year of sales showed that it was not only a financial decision. Political talk shows were canceled one after another on Maestro TV, and the relatively well-known journalists of the channel, whose dismissals can make noise, were invited to Imedi TV, silently and quietly, meaning that these two channels are integrated by political will and for commercial reasons.” The three television channels eventually merged at the end of the year, highlighting the overall trend of ownership consolidation in several industries.

Besides the union of Imedi TV, Maestro, and GDS—marked as a pro-governmental grouping—Jangirashvili listed the channels supported by Georgian political parties or owners: Obiektivi TV and Iberia TV. “Obiektivi entirely depends on the Alliance of Patriots party’s subsidies, and Iberia TV depends on the owner’s support,” said Jangirashvili. There are also media outlets financed by, and a part of, Palitra TV and Music Box. The revenue source of the newspaper *Asavali Dasavali* is not known at all. “Ninety to 95 percent of its revenues come from unknown sources because it has no advertising at all,” Koridze said.

The panelists decried the malpractice of payments for coverage. “It is the kind of practice—and the product was coined by IPN.ge—that is offered to governmental bodies and businesses in exchange for money,” said Tsetskhladze. “Let’s say you are a political party that paid a GEL 500 subscription fee. When your party’s PR people schedule a charity event, the media is obliged to cover it because money has been paid,” explained Zura Vardiashvili, editor of *Liberali Magazine*. According to

INDEPENDENT MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED BUSINESSES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- > Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- > Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- > Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- > Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- > Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

Mediachecker.ge, 90 percent of IPN's content is created for subscribers, meaning it is promotional material, yet is not clearly marked as is required.

As stated in the prior section, television audience measurement practices changed for the worse in 2016. A second international measurer, Tri Media Intelligence, Kantar Media's licensee, entered the market, thus splitting television outlets into two groups. "It is weird. We have excess with two measurers of TV audiences but do not have online and print media measurements. Both TV audience measurement panels cover the same cities and miss many regions. Regional TV outlets are not covered at all," said Kuprashvili.

The panelists said that in the absence of valid research data, businesses, especially international ones, find it difficult to make advertising decisions. Some of the panelists noted that international businesses cut their advertising budgets not only because of the currency crisis but also because of the lack of trust in audience survey data.

Many panelists felt attempts to survey radio failed. "There have been several efforts to measure radio audiences, but now very few stations maintain the initiative," Kuprashvili said. In 2013, Market Intelligence Caucasus (MIC), a licensee of TNS, with the support from USAID [through an IREX-implemented project – ed.], launched a radio audience research project. MIC foresaw problems with the sustainability of the survey in 2016 as market players, radios, and advertisers displayed little interest in purchasing survey data and thus providing funding.⁵

No substantial advances were witnessed in online media surveys, according to the panelists. Many websites use Google Analytics, which is neither sufficient for effective marketing nor trusted by the advertisers to facilitate sales increases. "A lack of money is what prevents the online media market from inviting international measurers," Tsetskhladze said.

The print media market also lacks a trustworthy measurer. Publications' circulation data is not easily accessible and is difficult to verify. Limited officially verified data is made available by some print publications, mostly on an individual basis.

Some panelists expressed concern about the possible monopolization of the advertising market. "It's unstable... and triggered discussions about the possible joint sales of Rustavi 2 and its affiliated channels [Comedy TV and Marao] on the one hand and Imedi TV and its affiliates [Maestro TV and GDS] on the other," Jangirashvili said. Nika Gvaramia, general director of Rustavi 2 neither confirms nor denies the possibility. "Toward the end of the year, we could return to the situation we had in 2008, when there was only one sales house—General Media—

"Rustavi 2 is a key player in the market, and advertisers were uncertain about placing ads there... Many cut their budgets. The year was very unstable for Rustavi 2; nobody knew what the court decision would be. This affected the sales," said Jangirashvili.

and when small players had no chance to survive," Jangirashvili further noted.

The panelists feel monopolization of the media market will eventually affect editorial policy. Kuprashvili said, "I am absolutely sure that after a while it will be reflected in editorial policy." "The road we have passed after 2013 circles and drives us back to 2012," Jangirashvili warned, remarking about a possible return to the situation when media was controlled by the ruling party. As such, panelists regard the financial stability of the media market as the biggest concern and challenge. "If we look at the current picture, we will see how fragile media pluralism, freedom, and diversity are—all those things that make us so proud and happy. And all of those things can disappear overnight," said Jangirashvili.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Georgia Objective Score: 2.46

The Trade Union of Mass Media Workers was set up in 2010 but, failing to meet its purpose, dissolved shortly thereafter. A small number of professional associations, together with the civil society groups, work to promote the interests of individual journalists and media outlets. The list of active media organizations has not changed much from the past years and includes the Media Advocacy Coalition (established in 2011), GYLA, Transparency International, GARB, GCJE, and Media Club, and Association of Georgian Regional Media. At the end of 2016, the Georgian Trade Unions Confederation established the Georgian Media Trade Union, which the founders say will focus on safeguarding the interests of those working in media organizations.

GARB represents 21 television and radio broadcasters from different regions in Georgia. Established in 2005, the association plays a crucial role in lobbying for the interests of journalists and regional media outlets, in addition to fundraising and producing content.

Some panel members have observed a growing solidarity among media representatives. "Whether we like our media

⁵ http://www.transparency.ge/sites/default/files/post_attachments/advertising-market-report-2016-eng.pdf

organizations or not, it is obvious that when a journalist has a problem, the professionals in our field show unity when it is needed," Kuprashvili said. Kintsurashvili noted that the NGO sector helped Rustavi 2 in its recent court saga regarding ownership. She also mentioned the role that Transparency International played by responding immediately to threats against the independent media and free speech, and alerting the public to government attempts to interfere and influence the media process.

GCJE is among those organizations that helped the Georgian media to evolve and improve in quality. As a union of journalists, GCJE aims to promote the values of integrity and accountability among the Georgian media and to safeguard professional and ethical standards for journalism, bridging the gap left by the law. Among its core functions are to accept and consider complaints of ethical misconduct submitted against journalists or media outlets and to strengthen media's self-regulatory capacities. Dzvelishvili said GCJE's functions and activities have broadened and subsequently transformed the charter into a multipurpose organization that takes on the role of both educator and monitor. "It has become a kind of a hybrid organization addressing the needs of the Georgian media landscape," Dzvelishvili added. Since 2010, GCJE has employed monitors for both election and thematic monitoring efforts. In 2015, GCJE launched Media Checker (mediachecker.ge), a portal monitoring media performance. Another GCJE project, the Training Center for Liberalism (Libcenter.ge) promotes democratic ideas and values among Georgian youth.

Panelists worry that integrity is not enough to help journalists and that the current protections offered are insufficient. "It is very good that GCJE will spread the news about the violation of our rights, and it is also very important that the media coalition will vocally support us...but when it comes to real protection, there is no one. For years, the Georgian Young Lawyer's Association had a unique mechanism to protect journalists' rights. Now, when we need to prepare a formal complaint or a lawsuit, we have to look for a private lawyer, which is very expensive," Tsetskhladze said. She added that there is a shortage of media lawyers because many have changed legal specialties, and the GYLA, because of funding problems, will only take media cases on a limited and exceptional basis.

Many journalists seek help from friends who are attorneys to save costs, Kuprashvili said. She recalled that during the October 2016 elections, there were multiple court cases where GARB was constantly in need of legal assistance. "We asked GYLA, which had a team working on various legal cases related to the elections and also addressed Transparency International, because in most cases, we needed to prepare counterclaims or to lodge separate lawsuits. We received negative responses and nobody accompanied us to court. In the end, I was forced to ask Kapanadze to help us prepare and lodge an appeal," Kuprashvili

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- > Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

said, adding that she hopes GCJE will be able to take over this role in the future.

Kapanadze said there are professionals who would serve as the media's legal support. "This remains a gap for media supporting organizations," Kapanadze said. Jinjikhadze said that the donors, who's funding largely determines the existence of such services, should know about the difficulties the Georgian media is facing and adjust funding strategies to serve local priorities better.

Journalism schools in the capital offer a very different education when compared to schools in more remote regions. Regional journalism schools grapple with a lack of modern teaching and education methods, a lack of technological skills, and poor infrastructure. Vardiashvili added that although *Liberali* offers internship positions for students, they are often unprepared for the work. "It would take them at least six months and even a year to become skilled enough for us to offer them a job," he said.

Journalism schools at the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs (GIPA) and Caucasus University stand out among institutions producing a small number of highly skilled journalists. "GIPA has integrated technology-enhanced learning and changed the whole approach to teaching journalism," Kintsurashvili said. Jinjikhadze noted that in 2014–2015, T-Studio, a Georgian documentary company, shot educational documentaries with funding from OSGF. The documentaries aim to raise awareness about ethical journalism and professional standards among journalism students and have already been integrated in the curricula of several journalism schools.

The Caucasus School of Journalism and Media Management at GIPA is currently running a project aimed at teaching multimedia skills to the minority communities. Financed by the U.S. Embassy in Georgia, it targets the Armenian community in Javakheti

and the Azerbaijani community in Kvemo Kartli. Ivanishvili said trainees will acquire photo, video storytelling, and web skills, and they will use these competencies in their working lives.

There are numerous training courses offered to practicing journalists, although panelists disagreed about their value. Danelia said they are “all the same,” and Vardiashvili explained that the same journalists attend all of these trainings. “When it comes to me, I always try to send different journalists, but, unfortunately, not everyone does that,” Vardiashvili said. Dzvelishvili noted that when GCJE prepares trainings, it always asks media outlets about specific needs. Tsetskhladze said that she refuses to send her journalists to trainings funded by government agencies, while Mtvlishvili cautioned against what he called “a malpractice” by certain governmental groups and private companies that train journalists to report on certain topics. These trainings are mostly held in posh hotels outside the city and occur several times a year. “How can these journalists be critical and objective?” Mtvlishvili asked.

Kintsurashvili said the MDF is conducting research to assess the needs of regional media. Once the research is complete, MDF will share its findings with donors. “For example, I know that not every media outlet needs training in infographic or visual skills. We need to know what is actually needed in the market and make our trainings relevant,” she said.

Sources of media printing facilities are apolitical, but Mamaladze noted that they are both low quality and costly. Additionally, media distribution channels have lessened. Vardiashvili experiences difficulty trying to distribute *Liberali*'s hardcopy edition because of the high service cost charged by Elva Service. Launched in 2000 by Palitra Media Holding, Elva Service obtained authorization to distribute print publications from the Georgian Post in 2015. The company is the largest of its kind and works with at least 1,000 selling points throughout the country. In addition to its high price and market domination, Elva Service also takes the full weekend off—a problem for publications with weekend distributions. Some newspapers, such as *Rezonance*, Koridze said, have since ceased producing Saturday editions.

The panelists agreed that access to media became much more politicized in 2016 than in prior years. The government's role in the internetization of the country is pro forma and funded solely by the former prime minister Bidzina Ivanishvili. Koridze expressed concern about the implications for future freedoms and suspects a gloomy future for Internet freedom.

List of Panel Participants

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