ARMENIA

Vibrant
Information
Barometer
2 0 2 1

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE

23

In 2020, two events—COVID-19 and the war in Nagorno-Karabakh—dominated in Armenia. Both had consequences for media freedoms; however, the panelists agreed that although overall free speech did not suffer much, COVID-19 was an ordeal for the government and the economy.
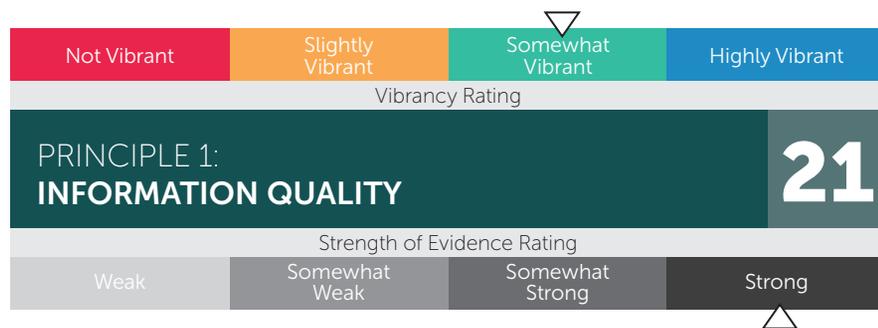
On September 27, 2020, the 1994 cease-fire was violated by a large-scale offensive of Azerbaijani forces. There were credible accounts of journalists being specifically targeted by Azerbaijan's high-precision weapons. Weapon remnants collected at the site by Human Rights Watch (HRW) corroborated the use of guided munitions. Despite wearing press credentials, a number of journalists were injured by the attacks.

According to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, there were widespread reports that Azerbaijan, with Turkey's assistance, relied on Syrian fighters—whose relatives were promised compensation and Turkish nationality—to shore up and sustain its military operations in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone, including on the frontline. They also expressed serious concern over videos that appear to show war crimes being committed.

The panelists agreed that misinformation, disinformation, mal-information, and hate speech have been abundant during the reporting year. The polarization of society is also at a very high degree. On the night of November 9, after 44 days of war, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan signed a trilateral cease-fire agreement—brokered by Russia—that stipulated (among other things) significant territorial concessions to Azerbaijan and the deployment of around 2,000 Russian peacekeepers along the border in Nagorno-Karabakh and along the Lachin corridor, the only road to Nagorno-Karabakh from Armenia.

Public unrest followed Pashinyan's abrupt and somewhat unexpected signing of the agreement that was largely regarded as capitulation. Government buildings, the parliament, and Pashinyan's residence were stormed by hundreds immediately following the announcement of the trilateral agreement. Citizens started calling for Pashinyan's resignation; however, he refused to step down. Pashinyan later broached and then equivocated on the possibility of snap elections; as a result, opposing forces united to promote a joint candidate, Vazgen Manukyan, to become the transitional prime minister to oversee fresh elections, claiming that current authorities would rig the elections to remain in power otherwise.

Panelists assessed that freedom of speech and other civil liberties were marred by COVID-19 restrictions, imposed by the government in a haphazard attempt to somehow control or regulate the information chaos. While the restrictions were later dismissed, the backlash during this relatively short period was lasting. Ignoring the arguments from a multitude of journalistic organizations, state-funded public television was again allowed to air commercial ads (originally banned in December 2014) - the government approved the amendment, and it was subsequently adopted by the National Assembly. Panelists agreed that the transparency of media ownership has not seen any significant progress and is still a major issue. Personal data protection legislation is still very weak. Cybersecurity, digital security and information security still need major improvements to address the existing and potential challenges. They also observed that while there is political will to promote media literacy, the efforts are not enough and the results—the speed with which they are achieved—are not inspiring. Finally, they believed that nonpartisan news and information sources are rather exceptions than a rule, and unfortunately independent voices usually do not enjoy big audiences.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 1: **INFORMATION QUALITY**	**21**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

This principle along with Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) tied for the lowest scores of this study. This is mostly due to the low scores on the indicators dealing with misinformation, disinformation, mal-information, and hate speech. Ironically, most of the panelists also agreed that the rise in hate speech is also partially due to the higher degree of free speech, allowing anyone anywhere to say anything he or she wants. Additionally, existing trends, such as a shrinking advertising revenue, are exacerbated by the global pandemic and challenge the media's general financial health.

There is adequate infrastructure to produce varied content through digital and broadcast media; however, print media are dwindling. Nonetheless, the quality of information has suffered. As Anahit Nahapetyan of *Artik News* observed, "A journalist doesn't bear any responsibility for presenting [his or her] views whatsoever, and this results in journalism being degraded and its credibility falling."

Training professional and nonprofessional content producers on how to create ethical, evidence-based, and coherent content is mainly limited to trainings by media organizations, such as the Media Initiatives Center, Journalists for the Future, and so on. There are journalism schools that focus mainly on future professional content producers and that try to keep abreast of new media, new technology, and new techniques and realities, but the panelists did not identify many of those.

Content producers that act in an ethical and accountable manner, respect facts, and strive to represent the truth are scarce. Edgar

Vardanyan, editor-in-chief at the Boon Foundation and a political analyst, said that "a significant part of journalists and media has just put them aside; there is no restriction whatsoever." Nelli Babayan, a reporter for Aravot.am, observed that the spread of misinformation doesn't usually result in professional ramifications. Samvel Martirosyan, an information technology (IT) security expert, added that in response to fake information, a journalist may receive great support from other colleagues and activists. "Objective, quality reporting doesn't get widespread support or praise. Seldom will you see a quality journalist's piece receive encouragement. They won't say, 'Wow, great job, what a great investigation,' . . . but if they do something silly, it suddenly gets best of praise and support," says Martirosyan.

There are no universally accepted and adhered to ethical standards among media professionals. Such criteria are regarded differently by other media representatives and professional and nonprofessional content producers, depending on their current business and political affiliations. Certain content that previously was considered hate speech now may be considered normal, and vice versa.

Journalists hold government officials accountable "by challenging them with all sorts of information claims," Vardanyan observed, "Much of the questioning is based on false or manipulative information, but even so, the journalistic community as a whole [has turned into] such an institution [today] that [it] keeps public officials vigilant."

"At least public officials are obliged to respond, and it's a quite new phenomenon," agreed Martirosyan, "You might not be satisfied with the response or the result, but at least a journalist's public status forces a public official to respond." However, often these words are taken out of context, exaggerated, or sometimes even fabricated. Government officials commonly say things that are explained in a totally different manner after being held accountable by journalists.

Overall, media content covers a variety of topics, including political and social issues. Specialized and thematic reporting also exists but on a smaller scale. Media covering national and international news can be easy to find. International news is mostly reproductions and translations

from other international news sources.

A majority of panelists agreed that—except for COVID-19 and the war—the government does not create or disseminate false or misleading information.

Owners, benefactors, and investors usually enjoy unlimited control over content and are often the initiators, authors, and sources of the content. "It often happens that a nonprofessional content producer, who, say, has 5,000 friends [on Facebook], goes live and speaks about things [they are] not an expert on, and it gets more shares than the content of a professional content producer, which is fact-based and/or expert-based," observed Hakobyan.

Fact-based, well-sourced, and objective content is possible, but the panelists agree it is quite rare. The news spectrum is rife with misinformation, disinformation, mal-information, and hate speech. This was true before COVID-19 and the war, and it was especially intense during those events, both within the country and externally. There are many content producers that intentionally create or disseminate false or misleading information. Many professional content producers intensively use nonprofessional content producers, in the form of Telegram channels,[1] Facebook, or YouTube. A news piece is published in Telegram and then picked up by professional content producers. Commonly, a piece from the same content producer can be true, semi-true, fake, or manipulative. A recent example is a publication in a Telegram channel about Pashinyan's wife, disclosing that a mansion in Dubai was gifted to her. A photo of the "title transfer" was included; in reality, the photo was a gas bill. But this information was picked up and republished by professional content creators.[2]

Information Quality Indicators

- There is quality information on a variety of topics available.

- The norm for information is that it is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.

- The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.

- The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.

- Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The panelists agreed that when it comes to foreign government disinformation, mal-information, and hate speech, neighboring Azerbaijan is unparalleled. For years, the country has spread disinformation, mal-information, and hate speech on a governmental level. Well before the war, Vagif Dargahli, the Azerbaijani Defense Ministry spokesman, threatened to bomb Armenia's Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant to cause harm to Armenia, according to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Additionally, the president of Azerbaijan has called BBC reporting fake news in response to a BBC reporter's evidence of numerous accounts of civilians being targeted by the Azerbaijani forces. And Armenian-language Facebook pages were created for the sole purpose of spreading disinformation and mal-information and were created to resemble real Armenian pages and media with the intent to mislead the Armenian population.[3]

Internally, hate speech has reached unprecedented peaks. Arman Tatoyan, Armenia's human-rights defender, has expressed serious concern about growing hate speech on social media that has reached alarming proportions in the country. Both pro-government and opposition factions accuse each other of employing troll factories; however, neither accepts their existence. Early in 2020, Henrik Hartenyan, a member of the Yerevan City Council, posted a screenshot of a girl's Facebook profile, clearly calling for harassment during an ongoing conflict between the Armenian prime minister and the head of

---

1 Telegram is an instant-messaging application similar to WhatsApp. Channels are a tool to broadcast one's public messages to large audiences and offer a unique opportunity to reach people directly; notifications are sent to users' phones with each post. Telegram channels can have an unlimited number of subscribers, and only admins have the right to post information.

2 "Ալիևների անշարժ գույքի փաթե՞թն է, թե՞ գազի անդորրագիրը. Աննա Հակոբյանին վերագրվող «գույքի» հետքերով [Is it Ali's real estate package or the gas receipt? In the footsteps of the 'property' attributed to Anna Hakobyan]," *fip* [Fact Investigation Platform], January 21, 2021, https://fip.am/14526.

3 Norayr Shoghikyan, "Azerbaijan waging informational war with FB account with 72 Likes—Aliyev's 'sponsored' fakes," ArmenPress.am, October 24, 2020, https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1032673.html.

the Constitutional Court. The post was followed by a backlash, public outrage, and condemnation from his fellow party members.

Suren Deheryan, of Journalists for the Future, observes, "Recently, we see that many information streams are increasingly based on opinion, which the professional media professionally turn into 'facts.' . . . If we [investigate] it, we'll realize that it's based on partial truth [that] is built on lies."

Information is created in the languages and formats in which people need it. Information exposes the majority of citizens to a wide range of ideologies and perspectives. There are no formal or informal restrictions, so if there is a need for a certain type of information, it will be included in the content.

Gender balance in the media sector remains skewed: women journalists tend to outnumber men, but media management is dominated by men. Moreover, marginalized groups not represented or underrepresented in the mainstream media have alternative methods and platforms for expressing their views, and these are not obstructed either formally or informally. However, society at large is resistant to receiving information, experiences, and viewpoints about genders other than those traditionally accepted in the country. These attempts have been booed by the public at large, such as a transgender Armenian woman who spoke at Armenia's parliament during a hearing on human rights. Information on the experiences and viewpoints of people of various ethnic and religious backgrounds is mostly unobstructed. A program on public television, "Side by Side," showcases the culture, traditions, and daily lives of ethnic religious minorities and other nationalities living in Armenia. Public Radio of Armenia airs programs in Assyrian, Greek, Kurdish, Russian, and Yezidi; it broadcasts daily programs in Russian, Greek, Turkish, Georgian, Assyrian, Arabic, Azerbaijani, Persian, Kurdish, and Yezidi.

COVID has had major impact on Armenia's economy because of the local lockdowns; however, international travel restrictions and disrupted global supply chains has impacted the overall operating environment hard, including the advertising market, resulting in major cuts and disruptions in most of the advertising revenue for media. Martirosyan, speaking of the current advertising market, said, "How many shows are left on TV? They mostly broadcast reruns. But of course, if you're a Telegram channel, it doesn't take a lot of expenses."

Sufficient financial resources are not always available to most editorially independent professional content producers. Those professionals with such resources are usually not editorially independent, as they are being funded by people who have set up these media with the sole purpose of serving their mostly political agendas. Those media that theoretically could produce quality information do not produce it because they are not watchdogs.
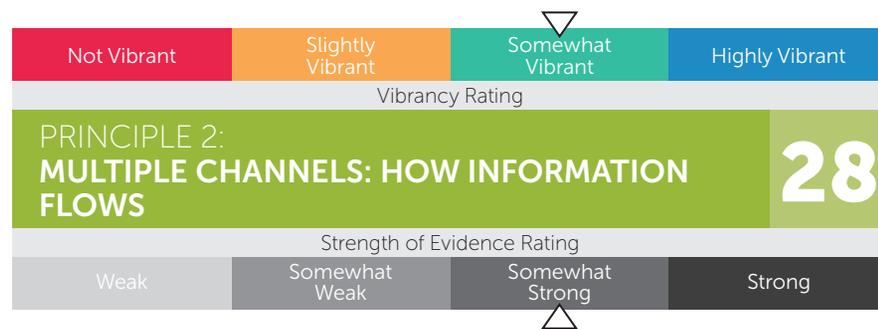
Vardanyan assumed that many outlets do not have sufficient resources because many journalists' goals today concern quantity; outlets cannot pay journalists well, and so while journalists could produce less—but higher-quality—content, quality has suffered. Many journalists are quite young, he adds, as there is not enough money in journalism.

Apart from shrinking, the advertising market is also transforming rapidly from the previously traditional channels to new and developing ones. While Armenia's advertising market has become less politicized since the 2018 revolution, it is still unusual for a business closely allied with the opposition to advertise in a media outlet aligned with the government and leading political coalitions (and vice-versa). The shifting advertising budgets from local media to external international companies, social media advertising, and influencer advertising is growing larger with each passing year. "Starting from late 2019, big advertising budgets [have] shifted toward influencer marketing, to Instagram bloggers, [and] to TikTok, and the media outlets have to survive somehow along with this," observed Martirosyan.

> 66 **A journalist doesn't bear any responsibility for presenting [his or her] views whatsoever, and this results in journalism being degraded and its credibility falling," said Nahapetyan.**

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2: **MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS**	**28**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

The panelists scored this principle the highest of all VIBE principles in this study. Other than COVID19 restrictions, the sub-indicators dealing with freedom of speech and the right to create, share, and consume information were assessed by the panelists as fairly liberal and having improved over previous Media Sustainability Index (MSI) studies of Armenia. Overall, the information and communication technology infrastructure is adequate for current needs. Access to information laws mostly conform to international standards and norms, and media are increasingly exercising their right to it; however, more, tighter, and faster collaboration is expected by the panelists. However, the sub-indicators dealing with the transparency in media ownership and ownership influence on editorial policy have not seen any improvement since the MSI.

People have an unobstructed right to create, share, and consume information, and legal protections for freedom of speech and freedom of the press exist. "The government doesn't censor the outlets, and in terms of enforcement, the situation isn't that bad either, but [the enforcement] is worse than the [quality] of laws," observed Vardanyan.

COVID-19 has caused the government to impose some restrictions on media and content producers.[4] On March 16, 2020, the Armenian government declared a state of emergency, and the police forced more than 20 media outlets to amend or delete information that officials thought might spread public panic. The strict rules prohibited publication of information about the COVID-19 outbreak in Armenia and abroad, including rates of infection and death. A State of Emergency Command decided if any published information violated these restrictions, with possible fines of over $1,000. These restrictions had real world consequences. The newspaper *Aravot* was obliged to amend an article on the concealment of coronavirus cases in Russia; another paper, *Hraparak,* was forced to retract a story about complaints by prisoners who were no longer being permitted to receive parcels from family members. Eleven Armenian-based journalism organizations issued a joint statement that read, "Since enforcing these provisions [on media restrictions], their implementation has been ineffective, disproportionate, [and] unreasonable and is not in the public interest."[5] Following backlash from Armenian journalistic organizations and the media—including international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and Reporters Without Borders—the restrictions were changed and eased nine days later. Martirosyan observed that it was the first time in Armenia that bloggers were also censored.

Vardanyan commented, "I don't think the government is actively attempting to erode freedom of speech and freedom of press through legal or extralegal means. I would say it's the other way around. One of the factors limiting free speech is the aggressive speech and policy of some [opposition] circles [that contain threats of violence]. This forces many people to exercise self-censorship—not to make sharp comments, criticism." He adds, "It's an exceptional situation where, [though] the government doesn't exercise censorship over media, some opposition circles [attacking differing opinions] prompt professional and nonprofessional content producers to self-censor." This same phenomenon was observed by the panelists in 2018, albeit with reference to pro-government supporters.

---

4   Council of Europe, "Emergency Restrictions Force Media to Suppress Independent Information on COVID-19," COE.int: Armenia, no. 32/2020, March 25, 2020, https://www.coe.int/en/web/media-freedom/detail-alert?p_p_id=sojdashboard_WAR_coesojportlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_col_id=column-3&p_p_col_count=7&_sojdashboard_WAR_coesojportlet_alertPK=64943676.

5   "Լրագրողական կազմակերպությունների հայտարարությունը արտակարգ դրության ժամանակ տեղեկատվության տարածումը կարգավորելու վերաբերյալ [Statement by news organizations on regulating the dissemination of information during a state of emergency]," Aravot.am, March 20, 2020, https://www.aravot.am/2020/03/20/1101255/.

The government does not pressure information and communications technology providers to censor media. Journalists are not imprisoned or killed for doing their jobs. However, at least two cases of violence against journalists were recorded during 2020: one on June 14 during a protest by the supporters of Gagik Tsarukyan, the leader of Prosperous Armenia Party, and another on June 16, also during a protest by Tsarukyan supporters. An internal investigation was launched, and the supporting evidence was sent to Special Investigative Service.

Information and communications technology infrastructure meets the information needs of most people. Telecommunications and Internet infrastructures extend to all geographic areas, both urban and rural; however, high-speed broadband and fiber-optic Internet can be a problem in distant areas. Alternatives do exist; all telecommunications providers offer 4G Internet, but it can be unstable or difficult to access in some rural areas or geographical locations.

Most citizens have the economic means to access most information channels, including radio and television. Free terrestrial broadcast of channels is available—15 channels broadcast in Yerevan (the capital), including one public, three Russian, and one Commonwealth of Independent States interstate channel(s), and eight channels have nationwide coverage, including one Russian and one public channel. There are 22 radio stations in the capital and four radio stations with nationwide coverage. Some local television and radio stations also exist in select cities outside of the capital. Digital or social media are also accessible to most—Internet connections start from AMD 3,000 ($6) per month, and some phone plans provide free access to select social media and messaging apps.

Right-to-information laws exist. They mostly conform to international standards and norms, and media are increasingly exercising their right to information. However, the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression (CPFE) recorded a total of 81 cases of violations of the right to receive

and disseminate information in the first three quarters of 2020.[6] In one example, Sona Amiryan, of Antifake.am, sent a request to the Civil Aviation Committee asking for information on the committee chair's salary and the bonuses received. The committee refused to provide the requested information, citing the Law on Personal Data Protection. The Freedom of Information Center of Armenia (FOICA) sent a new inquiry with the same questions and received a similar rejection, which FOICA deems groundless. As in previous years, the practice of delaying a response to journalists so that the topic loses its relevance is still employed by some state bodies.

"There is also the problem of 'state secret'—which, not being clearly defined, is often used to reject information [requests]. This problem will persist—people will seek information, and state entities and their representatives will [not] provide it, referring to the law; people will disagree, saying that it's not a state secret, and the argument will go on and on," said Vardanyan.

> " It's an exceptional situation where, [though] the government doesn't exercise censorship over media, some opposition circles [attacking differing opinions] prompt professional and nonprofessional content producers to self-censor," said Vardanyan.

Government information is mainly sought by professional content producers, less by nonprofessional content producers, and hardly ever by other representatives of the general public. Government entities have spokespeople or information offices; however, they still prefer to communicate through social media posts and live broadcasts rather than directly through press conferences with media representatives.

The Fact Investigation Platform (FIP) published a fact-check study[7] of

---

6   Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, "Quarterly Report of CPFE on Situation with Freedom of Expression and Violations of Rights of Journalists and Media in Armenia (July–September, 2020)," Khosq.am, October 15, 2020, https://khosq.am/en/reports/quarterly-report-of-cpfe-on-situation-with-freedom-of-expression-and-violations-of-rights-of-journalists-and-media-in-armenia-july-september-2020/#.

7   "«100 փաստ-3». Նիկոլ Փաշինյանի ճիշտ և սխալ պնդումները ['100 facts-3.' Nikol Pashinyan's right or wrong statements]," FIP.am, January 31, 2020, https://fip.am/10226.

Pashinyan's third volume of "100 Facts About New Armenia," which was presented during a meeting with journalists in January 2020. According to FIP, out of 100 facts, 66 were true, seven were mostly true, two were not true, 22 were still under the process of being checked, and three were impossible to check.

Transparency in media ownership is a pressing issue in Armenia, and a new law on mass media (or amendments and additions to it) was supposed to cover this issue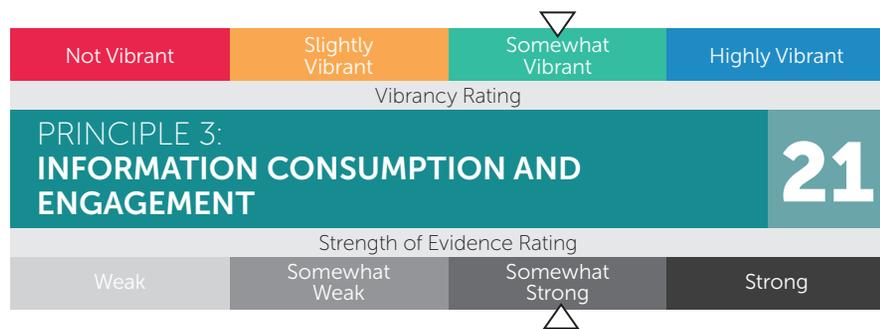; however, it was not adopted in 2020. The media and journalist associations have been calling for a new law on mass media, but despite their efforts, the process is slow.

People can freely establish media. Broadcast media are subject to licensing and spectrum allocation by the Commission on Television and Radio (NCTR), Armenia's regulatory body. Through competitions, the NCTR grants frequencies and licenses to television and radio. Half of its eight members were previously appointed by the president, and half were selected by the parliament. Currently, the number has been reduced to seven, and they are all selected by the parliament (where the My Step Alliance enjoys a majority of seats—83 out of 132). The panelists mostly agreed that licensing procedures are applied in a fair and apolitical manner. "If the committee were to make a politically dictated decision, it would deprive TV5 or ArmNews TV of the license and grant it to H2, which has comparatively milder opposition [to the government]," suggested Babayan. Armine Gevorgyan, a journalist with Armenian public radio, had expressed doubts, saying that some regional channels, which had been operating for years, were deprived of a license on unclear grounds. A private multiplex that would enable all regional outlets to stay on the air never became a reality.

Public-service media provide informative and educational news. The panelists noted that public media serve all members of the public in a nonpartisan manner. However, public radio does a better job of this than public television, which—although showing tremendous improvement in serving the public—still has a way to go to become truly public and free from any political influence. "Both the opposition and the authorities get upset with our news, which means we're doing the right thing," said Gevorgyan. As to why public radio is freer than public television, Martirosyan noted, "The minute public radio has as large an audience as public TV, it'll stop being as free."

The majority of media companies are influenced by their ownership. Owners exercise unlimited control over the content. The relatively independent media can be said to have more editorial independence; however, they are not immune to advertiser influence in the sense that they are highly unlikely to publish anything that might be critical of advertising clients—especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the advertising market has dwindled dramatically. The panelists noted that advertisers are very jealous and that professional content producers are very wary of publishing any negative content about them because any negative information might trigger advertisers to withdraw their advertising. The panelists could not remember any published critical content regarding most of the rich major advertisers in recent years. "Problems [with them] are sure to exist, but have we ever heard about any critical content about them?" questioned Babayan.

Through amendments to the Law on Television and Radio Broadcasting, state-funded public television is again allowed to air five minutes of commercial ads per hour (originally banned in December 2014). And although 10 journalistic organizations released a joint statement calling these changes unacceptable, as they would undermine advertising revenue for private media outlets, the government approved this amendment, and it was subsequently adopted by the National Assembly.

	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

This principle tied Principle 1 for the lowest score of all VIBE principles in the Armenia study. Indicators examining media literacy and media's engagement with audience needs were scored the lowest. While there is political will to promote media literacy along with basic digital and data literacy, these skillsets are still at quite a low level, and these subjects are not widely taught at schools and/or universities.

Martirosyan reminded the panelists that in June 2020, the data for COVID-19 infections were leaked: "This [was] due to the lack of legislative regulations, because every 'janitor, doorkeeper' had access to this data; they were sending these data to each other through emails." He said that after the leak, his [IT security] company was invited to conduct a training on IT security and hygiene for those who had access to data for COVID-19—infected patients. "Do you know how many people were supposed to come? Around 4,500 people. Just two hundred people showed up—nominally it was deemed that the training was conducted and [Tigran] Avinyan's decree executed [Avinyan was, at the time, the head of the commandant's office and was in charge of designing and implementing COVID-19 prevention and management measures, rules, and regulations]," explained Martirosyan.

According to Martirosyan, personal data protection legislation is very weak—mainly because the fines, if at all provisioned, are insignificant,

> **My impression is that the majority of media outlets do not look at the needs of the audience. They're more interested in what they want to convince the audience of, in what they want to dictate to the audience," said Vardanyan.**

and no one has ever been fined in the past six years. Martirosyan's organization has worked with media outlets and other professional content producers to instruct them in digital security training and tools and in digital hygiene practices and to ensure these practices are strong and their websites are digitally secure.

However, not all media outlets are willing to cooperate and to give access to their digital data. "When we offer help, some think we are sent by the government, some think we're sent by the NSS [National Security Service], others think we're sent by the opposition to install 'bugs.' We have a situation when we have ultimate paranoia and negligence at the same time," summed up Martirosyan. However, he mentioned that there is progress that is unfortunately based on negative experience. Digital tools are available to help media outlets prevent distributed denial-of-service (DDOS) attacks.

Basic digital and data literacy skills are at quite a low level. Since these skills are not widely taught at schools or universities, most learn through self-education. A very small part of the population is aware of the algorithms driving social media, the mechanics of advertisement targeting, and other ways in which personal information is used to target users. Marine Gasparyan suggested that perhaps the younger generation is better aware of digital realities. However, Martirosyan disagreed, saying, "One of the myths is that the younger generation has better knowledge of digital tools, hygiene, etc. They think that if a preteen knows how to use YouTube, [they have] great digital knowledge and know how everything works [on the Internet]. In the same way, the [majority of] youth [are] digitally illiterate. It's just [that] they are more comfortable with digital and new technology," he added.

There is political will to promote media literacy, but there is a long way to go. "At the moment, I'm in a working group that is developing informatics lesson criteria. So, we'll have it in about 10 years," Martirosyan sarcastically said. "It's terribly slow, terribly bureaucratized,

[and] our educational system will never make its way through like this. First, the criteria need to be developed, then the programs, then the textbooks—you can figure out how much time it's going to take, can't you?" he added. Schools include civics and media and information literacy, but these are optional courses not in the core curricula, and the materials are mostly developed and provided by media development nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Fact-checking tools or websites are not widely used by people; most even are not aware of their existence. Two websites are available: one is FIP.am, set up by the Union of Informed Citizens with the support of Open Society Foundations Armenia (OSIA), and the other is InfoCheck.am, set up by the government.

Vardanyan brought up the example of Detector.am, of which he is editor-in-chief. Detector.am is implemented by the Boon Foundation and funded by OSIA and Black Sea Trust. It is not a classic fact-checking website, but it is rather aimed at more in-depth analysis of manipulation, mal-information, misinformation, disinformation, and populism. "The website has a lot of traffic, but the problem is, the majority of readers are looking for things other than analysis. They're not developing skills from our articles but are more looking for sensational news," says Vardanyan. "In this respect, I'm pessimistic. I don't think the majority of the population can benefit from these resources. On the other hand, it can help some segments of the population—intellectual, active people, university or high school students for one—to become more [media] literate," he added.

Journalists and civil society activists extensively use their freedom of speech and right to information, but there are times when it is not always easily accessible. As discussed earlier, CPFE noted 81 violations of the right to receive information in January–September 2020. As for the general population, although they use their freedom-of-speech rights, they usually do not exercise the right to information. "The population isn't aware of the possibility to apply for information. For example, how many people—ordinary citizens outside of media, of the NGO community—do you know that are aware of e-Request.am?"[8]

---

8   e-Request.am is a unified portal for online requests, including information requests.

Information Consumption and Engagement Indicators

- People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.

- People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.

- People engage productively with the information that is available to them.

- Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs.

- Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

[from the population]."

Martirosyan observed. Public debate is mostly on Facebook, and it is seldom civilized, intellectual, or fact-based.

Deheryan noted that there is progress and that people are applying to ombudsmen more than before. However; the panelists agreed that, in general, people refrain from reporting misinformation, mal-information, or hate speech to public councils or ombudsmen, Deheryan recorded progress: "Compared to previous years, people today turn to the Ombudsman more than before, which means that the human-rights defender's office, in particular, has gained more trust [from the population]."

The situation with qualitative and quantitative research has not changed much, compared with information reflected in the previous Media Sustainability Index studies of Armenia. There are outlets that conduct research to understand their potential audience's needs and interests, but such research is mostly conducted in-house rather than through a third party. Nonetheless, these types of situations are not in the majority. In general, other content producers, both professional and nonprofessional, draw their understanding of their audience's needs mainly from social interaction and engagement—"likes," comments, shares, views, and other interactive forms of feedback with their content. Nevertheless, this cannot always yield precise conclusions. "Google Analytics is one of the tools; however, if it shows that a specific story was read so many times, does it mean that people were really interested in the topic, or [did] the title just hook their attention? But because the advertisers look at traffic statistics, we also have to develop the topics that were previously highly read," observes Babayan.

"My impression is that the majority of media outlets do not look at the needs of the audience. They're more interested in what they want to convince the audience of, in what they want to dictate to the audience," said Vardanyan. "That's basically why they don't conduct research," agreed Melik Baghdasaryan, owner of Photolure. Vardanyan also added that a priori, the content producers think that content of a sensational nature is sure to draw many readers; hence, the headings quite often do not match the content of the article.
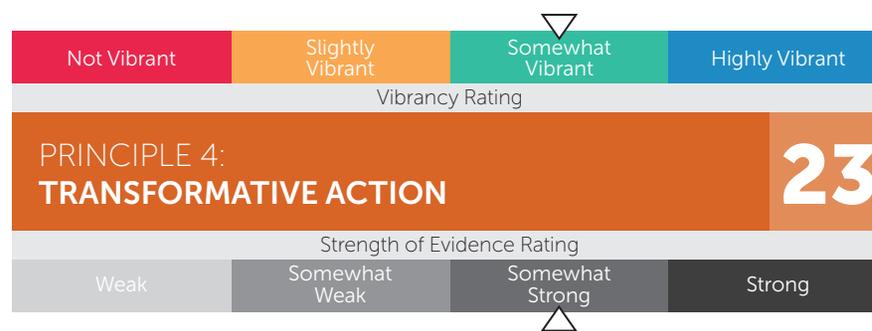
The media have open processes or audiences to provide feedback through letters to the editor or online comment sections. However, these are mostly located not on their websites but on their Facebook pages. Even if they have a comments section on their websites, such a section is seldom used; again, the media's corresponding Facebook pages are where the most comments are. Most media outlets and digital platforms rarely moderate comments on their social media presences, and so the comments can be very obscene, filthy, and abusive—full of hate speech, derogatory language, and expletives. These comments are posted both by pro-government users, supporters of the current authorities, and their "haters."

Transparency in authorship is a usual feature of many reputable media outlets; however, there is a vast array of online media that do not mention any authorship at all. "I often come across advertising content in media which isn't labeled accordingly, and I think this is also a sign of a non-transparency of a media organization," observed Babayan. Regarding networking together for productive information-sharing, Baghdasaryan said that "as a rule, they don't share information; they compete."

The panelists agreed that community media do not exist in Armenia or are minimal; additionally, Armenian law does not have any special provisions for community media. Hakobyan mentioned the example of Yerit TV.[9] The outlet's Facebook page was created in August 2020, and it describes itself as "a variety of beginning journalists. We've realized that we have a lot to say from the youth's perspective. We're going to bring up

---

9   Yerit TV [Youth TV], Facebook page, undated, https://www.facebook.com/yerittv/.

issues of pertinence and interest to the youth. Here you can come across anything but news and rumors."

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION	23

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Nonpartisan news and information sources in Armenia exist, but they are very few. As with previous trends in Armenia, the primary mission of the majority of outlets is serving the agenda of their owners with political interests, rather than to provide objective and impartial reporting. Public debate occurs usually through digital forms such as social media platforms, but these are often just mutual badmouthing and not productive exchanges of differing views. Populism and demagogy usually shape people's views on political or social issues instead of quality information.

Very few nonpartisan news and information sources exist. Of these, many do not have extensive audiences. "Editorial independence is also interconnected with a media outlet's audience, and the bigger the audience, the less [of a] chance [it has] of staying independent," observed Deheryan. He added: "These media with smaller audiences enjoy a higher degree of credibility, provide plurality, and enable you to get information without stress, without looking for tricks and manipulations." Babayan commented, "In any case, we [all] have [identified] our own credible sources of information whenever we want to get trustworthy pieces of information. [There] are not many, but they do exist."

The mission of these outlets is pursuing essentially other goals rather than objective, nonpartisan reporting in order to service the agenda of their founders or stakeholders. As a result, there is more of a motivation

to set up media—from broadcast to Telegram channels—rather than pursuing objective coverage. "Because misinformation is also abundant, one needs to be very media literate to identify these sources," said Gayane Mkrtchyan, a reporter for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting.

"Society has become a victim amid the different camps of journalists," said Deheryan, implying that many journalists are activists and so support their own stance rather than cover events objectively. Vardanyan agreed: "We have always talked about a vast majority of media being hyperpolitical; they are mere tools in the media war, and they are used to destroy their opponents."

"You don't want to read the outlets that you know will have mostly misinformation; you want to limit your reading to one or two consistently nonpartisan sources," agreed Vardanyan. He added, "We—the experts—often don't follow information hygiene because we open Facebook and find all sorts of things there and don't realize where we read information, and that eventually has its influence on us."

> **" Editorial independence is also interconnected with a media outlet's audience, and the bigger the audience, the less [of a] chance [it has] of staying independent," said Deheryan.**

People exchange information with others who have different viewpoints through digital and social media platforms and hardly ever through the comments sections of web-based media. These discussions, however, are seldom a civilized intellectual exchange of opinions but are rather exchanges of hatred, insults, and expletives. This is due to huge volumes of fake users who can be found in all camps. A few of the panelists assumed that the opposition employs fake users who "support" the current authorities in an overtly silly or abusive manner to discredit them. "To the best of my knowledge, troll factories were first set up in Armenia in 2012, before the elections, by an opposition party," explained Martirosyan. And there are not just two camps—pro-government and opposition—but several.

Martirosyan maintained that opposition fakes are easy to track down. "When an opposition figure signs up for Twitter and suddenly gets 200

likes in a matter of minutes, it's pretty straightforward [that the accounts are fake]." Martirosyan concluded that it is difficult to uncover fakes that support the government. "Here we have a problem because in reality there is a huge volume of government supporters of [an] unclear nature, and the majority of these are not bots. [It is difficult to identify] which part of those is steered [by the government or its proxies] and which part are real people just using fake profiles [to conceal their true identities] to support the ruling coalition."

Because media literacy is at quite a low level, people's views on political or social issues are not often shaped by quality information but rather by misinformation, populism, and demagogy. "Because the majority of people deal with poor- rather than good-quality information, we can assume that public opinion is shaped more by misinformation. After some time, people have the opportunity to adjust their views; you can't fool people for long in Armenia. Eventually they come to learn the truth," said Vardanyan.

Fact-based health and safety recommendations are also a problem. Mixed messages from the government undermined trust and created an atmosphere of COVID-19 agnosticism. The absence of clear policy left the population to figure out their own "truths." Mask use is a good example: originally the official message was that masks do not really help, but later on, the official order changed to wearing masks inside and outside, and violators faced fines.

Overall, civil-society organizations (CSOs) rely on quality news and information when explaining their objectives. They share quality information with the public, and they do not disseminate misinformation or mal-information. CSOs also actively reduce the spread of misinformation by providing fact-checking tools and resources. Media outlets engage with CSOs to cover socially important issues. Civic participation in key discussions—such as policy formation and legislative change—is frequent; however, such input is not always integrated in the legislation.

"As a representative of the NGO sector, as a journalist, I have participated in many discussions in governmental or parliamentary working groups on policy formation and legislative change. The platforms were in place and functioning, and they were accepting recommendations and suggestions. On the [Television and Radio Broadcasting] media law we made more than 10 suggestions, out of which seven were accepted and incorporated," said Deheryan.

Since the 2018 revolution, the government started using a new way to engage with society, bypassing the press conferences and media by becoming content creators through live streaming on Facebook and YouTube. Presently, however, the press conferences are back, although at a lesser volume, and streaming has also been reduced, perhaps due to the press conferences.

Arevhat Amiryan, of Vorotan.am, said, "[The government] bases their decisions on their opinions." Hakobyan agrees: "Or they don't explain their decisions at all." Gasparyan added that "the government creates facts and bases their decisions on these 'facts.'" Babayan explained, "In the case of appointments and discharges, no explanation is given. [It is understood] that the prime minister doesn't discharge the minister of education, science, culture, and sport based on what is written in media—it's usually a political decision."

The panelists also noted that the information coming from official sources was quite confusing at times, with Gevorgyan stating, "First, at a press conference, the health minister says that it's not dangerous and that he's going to send his child to school, and then 10 minutes after the press conference the prime minister goes live saying the schools will be shut down starting the next day because COVID-19 is dangerous. I, being more or less [media] literate, can figure things out [about what's going on], but it is so confusing for [others], and don't tell me it was because of lack of information."

"Due to COVID-19, the government 'taught' us a new format of getting information through one single channel—the Armenian Unified Infocenter. To tell you the truth, for me, as a media representative, the coordinated information coming from one channel doesn't seem

Transformative Action Indicators

- Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.
- Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.
- Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.
- Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.
- Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

trustworthy by its essence because it's a uniformed, coordinated, preplanned stream of information for the public," observed Deheryan. Martirosyan added, "The government communication channels in Armenia are shaped quite strangely in a sense that for one official it might be Facebook; for another, it's press releases; for the third, it's spokespeople. So public perceptions of a government official's trustworthiness depend on the person's political views, on the government official's personality, and on the type of channels of communication employed by the official."

The panelists could not remember many cases of corruption that were revealed by the media in 2020; most were revealed by law enforcement bodies. The panelists also could not verify that the existence of quality information has prevented or lowered the incidence or severity of corruption.

"Whatever and whenever issues are covered in media about human rights, this-or-that government representative is sure to respond, [to] comment within a certain period of time. The question is whether these responses please us in terms of quality, but a response is sure to follow," Vardanyan maintained.

Speaking of civil liberty violations, Vardanyan suggested that the government is excessively soft in its reaction with respect to some unlawful occurrences due to fears of accusations of being a dictatorship. "You see an evident violation of law, but the government reaction to the violation is very soft; people might accuse [the prime minister], saying

[that] in addition to being a traitor, [he is] also a dictator [regarding losing the war in Nagorno-Karabakh and the prime minister being called a 'traitor' by some representatives of the extra-parliamentary opposition]," Vardanyan explained.

Many panelists note that the many civil liberties limitations imposed by the government were due to COVID-19. There were strict rules prohibiting publishing any information about the virus outbreak in Armenia and abroad that might spread panic. One reporter, Marine Kharatyan, was ordered by the police to delete a Facebook post she wrote about a large factory that was requiring employees to come to work regardless of whether they were running a fever. Filmmaker Tigran Khzmalyan was ordered by the police to remove a Facebook post citing a Euronews article on how the dead were buried at night in Bergamo, Italy. A doctor, Artavazd Sahakyan, was ordered by the police to remove a Facebook post asking the government to do more to enforce "social distancing" because Yerevan streets were still crowded despite the state of emergency. Most complied with the requests.

Several environmental-rights defenders were detained for "not obeying police orders" during peaceful gatherings in Yerevan in support of the environmental protests in Amulsar, Vayots Dzor region against the construction of a gold mine by Lydian Armenia CJSC. These people were taken to various Yerevan police stations and released three hours later.[10]

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Suren Deheryan, chair, Journalists for the Future, Yerevan

Gayane Mkrtchyan, reporter, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Yerevan

Nelli Babayan, reporter, Aravot.am, Yerevan

Edgar Vardanyan, editor-in-chief, Boon Foundation; political analyst, Yerevan

Samvel Martirosyan, media expert; IT security expert, Yerevan

Marine Gasparyan, freelance journalist, Yerevan

Melik Baghdasaryan, owner, Photolure, Yerevan

Arevhat Amiryan, owner and editor-in-chief, Vorotan.am, Sisian

Tamara Hakobyan, host, Radio Marshall, Yerevan

Pap Hayrapetyan, editor-in-chief, *Sevan*, Sevan

Anahit Nahapetyan, owner and editor-in-chief, *Artik News,* Artik

Armine Gevorgyan, journalist, Public Radio of Armenia, Yerevan

MODERATOR AND AUTHOR

Artashes Parsadanyan, independent media consultant, Yerevan

10 "Armenia: Arbitrary arrest of several environmental rights defenders," FIDH.org, August 14, 2020, https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/armenia-arbitrary-arrest-of-several-enivrnmental-rights-defenders#:~:text=Ara%20Karagyozyan%2C%20who%20were%20participating,Nina%20Karapetyants%20and%20Mr.&text=The%20activists%20were%20placed%20under,were%20released%20within%20three%20hours.