

MONTENEGRO

Vibrant Information Barometer

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Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

21

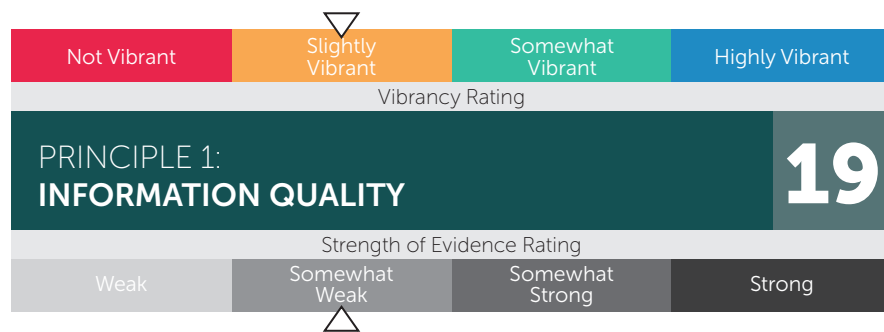
Fierce political instability and conflict between Montenegro's pro-Western government and opposition forces tied to the Serbian Orthodox Church—supported both financially and through the media by neighboring Serbia and Russia—hobbled hopes of improvement in Montenegro's media sector. Throughout the year, Serbia and Russia lobbed propaganda targeting Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic leanings and efforts to legally protect Montenegrin cultural and religious heritage. As a result, the then-ruling Montenegrin coalition suffered a narrow defeat in the August 2020 parliamentary elections: 41 parliamentary seats went to the opposition and 40 to the ruling coalition at the time—the first defeat in 30 years for the Democratic Party of Socialists. The new government, backed by forces under the influence of Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić and the minority populist-civic party, formed in December 2020.

Alongside political conflicts and the change in government, the COVID-19 pandemic hit Montenegro hard, causing serious health and economic impacts. According to the Public Health Institute (www.ijzcg.me), by the end of 2020, 805 Montenegrins had died and 61,659 had been infected (10 percent of the population). The pandemic also set off a huge economic downturn, driving the unemployment rate to rise to 20 percent.

A slew of negative influences and poor practices keep Montenegro's media sector stuck in a vicious circle, plagued by the same problems year after year. Online journalism has completely sidelined print media, which continues to see its circulation decline, in contrast to the ever-soaring influence of social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.). Furthermore, the chronic problem of political bias very

much persists in a media sector dominated by political and commercial interests. That, in turn, threatens professional standards and information quality, inhibits media literacy, and erodes media freedom.

Taking into account the opinions and positions of panelists around the four VIBE principles, several striking conclusions emerge. First, information quality falls short of the professional standards and customary norms that support the free press in a democratic country, primarily due to: the political bias of media outlets' editorial teams, the prevalence of fake news on social networks, the malign influence of foreign governments (Serbia, Russia), biased interpretation of facts, and limited human resources that hinder quality reporting and the development of investigative journalism. Second, despite a fairly well-developed legislative framework, lagging enforcement and respect for professional standards drive self-censorship, undermining the media's credibility and freedom. Third, Internet usage is quite developed, without censorship, but faulty regulations enable its abuse. Media literacy, although an element of advanced education reform efforts, is marginalized, priming the population for political manipulation and information misuse. Fourth, there are key strengths, including media outlets in Montenegro that can be considered independent of political influences and a well-developed and influential civil society sector—although nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) often enjoy cozy relationships with political parties or government services and agencies.



The quality of information in Montenegro overall is mediocre, with a noticeable divide between the abundance and reliability of news—attributable to political interference and a shortage of resources. Media outlets generally possess adequate technological infrastructure for news production, as well as skilled journalists and other technical staff capable of providing professional information. The best-developed national media outlets show signs of potential for investigative journalism and specialized reporting as well. The biggest obstacle to improving the quality of information, the panelists felt, is the heavy political pressure on journalists and editors and the widespread misuse of media for political purposes. Media have a tendency, because of their editorial policies or business interests, to align their reporting with the interests of certain political parties and groups. The panelists saw significant increases, either through social networks or traditional media, of politically motivated fake or misleading news in the last year, which was marked by intense internal political conflicts surrounding parliamentary elections, as well as external attacks on Montenegro’s media that stirred malicious public discourse. Although information flows from different ideological channels, and the media community bears the hallmark of distinctly pluralistic features, it is not enough to overcome challenges, including financial limitations, political and business influences on media, limitations related to the quality of journalists, and the lack of professional and trade union solidarity among journalists—leaving a lot of space to improve the quality of reporting in Montenegro.

Although Montenegro is a small country, it has 130 registered electronic

and print media (1 media per 5,000 citizens), and Internet usage is free and without any limitations. Yet the sheer abundance of channels does not necessarily equate to quality, independent, coherent, ethical, fact-based reporting. Many Montenegrin media outlets and the country’s one private news agency (MINA) produce a steady stream of information of national or local importance, as well as international news. However, the panelists overwhelmingly agreed that despite the prolific flow of information, the quality is questionable. As Aneta Spaić, dean of the law faculty at the University of Montenegro, explained, “Based on statistics, we have quite a lot of registered—but far fewer active—media outlets. Established media companies in Montenegro are capable of producing quality journalism. However, the results are frequently mediocre and often flawed. ... In most cases, this is a result not of a lack of knowledge but rather editorial pressure on journalists—or they simply cave to self-censorship.” It seems that political influence is the media community’s major problem, thus compromising the key principles of professionalism and impartiality, Spaić noted, concluding, “Media pluralism and institutional media freedom are not sufficient guarantees of media professionalism, nor are they enough to forestall the chaotic, unregulated media scene we are witnessing on a daily basis.”

Still, for determined citizens, it is possible to obtain balanced news—it just takes effort. Duško Vuković, program manager with Media Centar, commented, “Montenegrin citizens can access information, based on which they can form a relatively objective picture on the state of play in their country and beyond, but they can access this information only by using several information sources—from traditional to online media and social networks. The only limits are budget and curiosity.”

Tanja Pavicevic, a journalist with the daily *Pobjeda*, noted that print dailies have less bandwidth to provide in-depth, quality reporting than they used to. “Ten years ago, there were three dailies (*Pobjeda*, *Vijesti*, and *DAN*) and a fourth one occasionally started and then shut down (*Publika*, *Republika*, *Dnevne Novine*). These dailies had enough staff, and their journalists were able to develop specializations and cover specific areas. At the time, despite all the limitations, journalists were producing professional articles.” Yet in recent years, editorial teams have changed their structure for the worse, she noted—at least for print media.

Marijana Bojanic, director of TV Vijesti, pointed out that it's partly a question of resources; the poor financial situation impacts the quality of reporting. "Producing quality material is a complex journalistic work, and, therefore, it is unrealistic to expect quality to rise in an increasingly poor financial environment."

Based on the panelists' opinions—along with the existing media infrastructure, the state of journalism education, compliance with the journalistic ethics, the range of available information, and the impact of editorial policies on quality of reporting—Montenegro's media has not succeeded in elevating the level of quality reporting on different social issues.

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.

Misinformation in Montenegro is significant; in fact, most of the panelists agree that misleading information in the media has increased, thanks mainly to uncontrolled misuse of social networks and the expansion of false or furtive media companies' web portals—particularly during election season. Traditional media rarely publish fake news, but they are prone to politicized or distorted interpretation of obvious facts. Furthermore, statements of government officials often escape serious journalistic scrutiny, making it hard to ascertain whether the government is disseminating

accurate or fake information. In this respect, Bojanic noted, "Fact-checking of officials' statements rarely happens, and when it does, it is done by a single journalist—i.e., a single media company. A huge number of short-staffed web portals fill in that empty space with numerous press releases, which do not serve to inform the citizens or to open public debate on important social issues. In effect, many of these

online media are just bulletin boards for government institutions. The situation is similar with other types of media. It is just that, by the nature of the business, it is not possible to set up a television station or print publication on a small budget, as you can with online outlets."

Montenegro has a lot of fake news and hate speech; according to Spaić, "Still, these issues are mainly detected on social networks and similar informal forums under the pretext of free speech; they are less frequent in traditional print and electronic media." Even when these things happen, they are perceived as somewhat of an exceptional incident. She also noted that statistics last year indicated that hate speech directed at the LGBT population mainly surfaced on social networks (circa 100 criminal charges per year), and these cases were most often prosecuted before misdemeanor courts, sanctioned with fines ranging from €200 to €600 (\$240 to \$725). She also notes that under Montenegro's criminal code, the only criminal offense related to disseminating fake news is under Article 398: "Causing panic and disorder by means of disseminating fake news."

Disinformation is a global issue, and it is obvious that Montenegro's institutional response is inadequate to cope with the volume of tough-to-trace fake news, placed mainly through social networks under fake profiles, using fake portals, or using portals that exploit legislative gaps and function more as political-propaganda hubs with hidden funding sources. (For example, Montenegro's Media Law does not require web portals to publish the name of the editor-in-chief and names of editorial team members as is the case for printed media.) Despite cases of police investigations and arrests of citizens due to hate speech and threats posted on social networks, journalists are rarely prosecuted. In this respect, Nikola Dragash, a journalist with the web portal Analitika, pointed out, "The arrest of the former editor-in-chief of FOS Media, after she published fake news at the beginning of last year, saying that Kosovo special police forces would assist Montenegrin police on Christmas Day, attracted a lot of public attention."

Samir Rastoder, editor-in-chief of Radio Petnjica gave another example, noting, "During the last year, we had more sources of news than ever—but also more fake news than ever. For the needs of electoral campaigns,

some unknown authors created temporary political-propaganda platforms that churned out fake news constantly.”

The panelists viewed fake news and hate speech differently but agreed both are very much present in Montenegro, disrupting professional journalistic standards and tipping the public discourse toward the interests of certain political groups. This trend has been on the increase since 2016, aimed primarily at undermining the country’s Euro-Atlantic orientation. The fact that platforms specialized for exposing disinformation and hate speech have detected and publicly exposed hundreds of fake news missives is just more evidence of the vast quantity of fake news flooding Montenegro. Leading platforms exposing fake news, fake Facebook and Twitter profiles, and hate speech include Raskrinkavanje.me, created by Center for Democratic Transition, a well-known NGO working alongside the International Fact-Checking Network, and the Digital-Forensic Center, working within the framework of the Atlantic Council of Montenegro.

Assessing the news market, Pavicevic said, “In Montenegro, we have the polarization of media, with pro-Montenegrin on one side, pro-Serbian media on the other. Editorial policies are defined by national affiliations and their support for, or critique of, the government. Media outlets won’t publish information that doesn’t suit them, forcing the reader or viewer to read all four dailies or watch at least two news shows to figure out what is happening. Professional media rarely publish fake news, but other media sometimes do, as we saw in the 2020 case of a prosecuted FOS Media journalist.”

Citing examples of propaganda, Vuković noted, “During 2020, we saw a drastic case of online media established for the sole purpose of harming individuals and certain political groups. I am talking about the web portal Udar, established on the eve of parliamentary elections in Montenegro, that was operational until Election Day. The portal denounced people from opposition parties or those close to them. No

government institutions initiated any kind of investigation in relation to this web portal, so it was never determined who created it and who was placing fake news.”

Many of the panelists agreed that news is comprehensive and diverse, irrespective of its flows or shortages. In this respect, it is important to mention legislative changes (Articles 17–23 of the Media Law) that introduced the Fund for Stimulation of Media Pluralism and Media Diversity. This fund will receive 0.09 percent of the annual Montenegrin budget, and 60 percent of funds will be earmarked for commercial and nonprofit media, with 40 percent for dailies, weeklies, and online publications. There is no doubt

that this fund will be of particular help to marginalized groups that are insufficiently represented in leading media.

The panelists noted that media content includes the views of all genders; they also had a consensus that there is enough diversity within the media sector to allow space and audience for various ethnic and religious groups. However, the main minority groups (Serbs, Bosniaks, and Albanians) are more visible in the media than others. The Montenegrin media sector does not exclude any ethnic or national community, although there are always complaints about insufficient public representation (e.g., Roma population, LGBT community). At the same time, the panelists did not note significant gender discrimination in media management structures, editorial offices, or among journalists; this also holds true for non-professional media content producers.

However, speaking of the wide spectrum of ideologies and positions, Dragash said, “In an ideologically deeply polarized country such as Montenegro, news media are not exposing citizens to a wide spectrum of ideologies or positions. Media mainly present those ideas advocated by the political option close to them.”

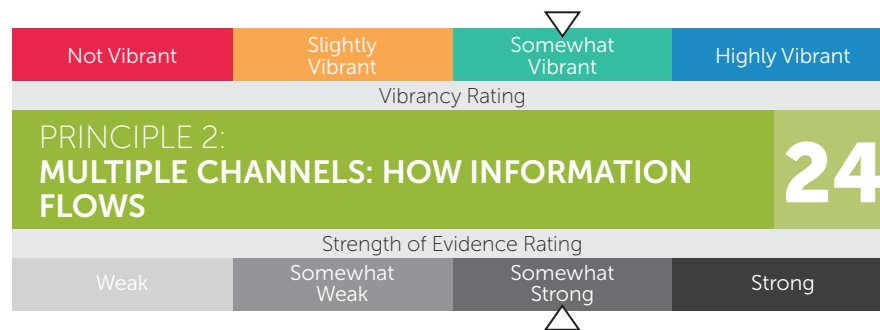
Media funding sources are limited, and most media rely on advertising revenue, investment by media owners, or assistance and budget

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funding from the government. In the current operating environment, the media sector has not identified significant alternative sources of funding, such as subscription-, crowdfunding-, or membership-based models. Revenues from local advertising remain with municipality media. At the same time, government funding to the media sector is provided according to published criteria, but there are strong objections to advertising contracts from state-owned and public institutions. Participants in the panel believed that advertising contracts with public institutions often favor pro-government media at the local and national level.

The panelists agreed there are serious issues with media resources. The media business is expensive, and while the adoption of the 2002 Media Law introduced certain incentives, at least when it comes to stimulating media pluralism, media companies, in principle, do not enjoy any special privileges compared to other businesses. The same applies to those employed by the media industry. Spaić noted that Chapter III, Articles 13–16 of the August 2020 Media Law, for the first time, prescribes the obligation to publish financial contributions allocated to media from public funds. “This obligation refers to three actors,” she said, “all public agencies from which the funds are discharged, the media receiving those funds, and the line ministry. The Montenegrin market is relatively small; according to rough estimates, it amounts to €9 million [\$10.1 million].” And, she added, “Clientelism is very much present in media advertising operations.”

Regarding the economic and social position of journalists, journalist Pavicevic said that the total monthly income of a media professional or even a journalist is hard to pinpoint because MONSTAT (Montenegrin Statistical Office) does not record that data. “The average monthly salary at the national level is €520 (\$630), and an OSCE survey has shown that journalists make, on average, €470 (\$570), which is less than the national average. Journalists simply cannot live on that. There is no system in place to reward the best journalists, and media owners do not invest in journalists’ training or in investigative journalism,” she explained.



The legislation regulating the status and operations of media in Montenegro is mainly aligned with international standards and the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. In 2020, the new Media Law and Law on National Public Service (pertaining to the state-owned, radio-television station) were adopted. These laws should provide financial support to the local media sector.

However, even after these new laws were adopted, unregulated areas of online journalism and operations of media through social networks remain. There is also ongoing public debate over the best model to ensure political neutrality in the work of the public service broadcaster (Montenegrin Radio-TV). As in previous years, the panelists reiterated that existing regulations are mostly acceptable, but the issue, as always, is their inconsistent enforcement. Courts in Montenegro are obliged to uphold the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, relying in the process on the European Court of Human Rights case law. However, the panelists felt that court practice often fails to produce appropriate results in terms of a balanced approach between free speech and media accountability. With respect to some solutions stemming from the new law, a few of the panelists pointed out that Article 30, paragraph 2 of the law is actually a step back because now journalists can be obliged, at the request of the state prosecutor, to reveal their source of information in three particular circumstances: for the sake of protecting national security, protection of territorial integrity, and protection of health.

When it comes to information technology, Montenegro has recorded strong technological development in recent years. Media digitalization

is complete, including the National Public Service Radio and Television of Montenegro; mobile telephone service is omnipresent, with four licensed operators; and the Internet is accessible in all urban and many rural areas in Montenegro. Regarding access to government-owned information, the panelists overwhelmingly felt that this area has room for improvement. As for media licenses, complaints persist regarding competition in the electronic media market (i.e., the panelists pointed to the especially problematic presence of foreign media through cable television in a way that, in their view, damages local television stations). Finally, the panelists believed that news channels are not perceived as independent; rather, editorial policies are politicized or dependent on media owners' commercial interests—doubtlessly jeopardizing professional standards and preventing media from acting in the public interest.

Montenegrin media are officially free, but fundamental practical issues persist, including political misuse of media and politicized editorial policies related to the National Public Service (Montenegrin Radio and TV) as underlined by the European Commission in its latest progress report on Montenegro.

Dusko Kovacevic, a freelance blogger, observed, “People definitely have the right to create, promote, and publicly disseminate information, especially in light of new and applied media. We don’t have a problem with the government or with political elites but rather self-censorship and journalists’ adulation of political and other power centers, as well as unprofessional work for the said power centers.”

When assessing legal protections for journalists, Vuković said, “Despite the opposition from the media community, in the

new Media Law the status of confidential sources of information has deteriorated. We have seen cases where data on confidential journalists’ sources haven’t been protected, and in two cases, mobile phones have been taken away from journalists. In the case of investigative journalist Vladimir Otashevich, the police took his phone in order to extract a recording of the journalist with the prime minister’s brother, and during the incident, police officers threatened the journalist. In the case of the editor in chief of web portal FOS Media, Angela Dzikanovich, police officers took her phone under the pretext that she has published information that had upset the public.”

Marko Vešovic, a journalist with the daily *DAN*, agreed, and said, “In practice, in recent months, we don’t see retaliation because of reporting and publishing information. Earlier, journalists were attacked because of their reporting, and in the case of *DAN* in 2004, the editor-in-chief was assassinated, and we also witnessed more than 70 attacks on media and journalists. The new Media Law is very restrictive regarding a journalist’s right to protect his/her source of information. However, in practice, things are going well recently; there are no attacks so far, and there are no restrictions in terms of using, creating, and disseminating information.”

Ivana Jabučanin, the editor of Radio Cetinje, a local public service, added, “We do have legal protection for journalists and free speech; however, in practice, this is not applied. Local media are exposed to enormous pressure because ruling political parties have the need to impact their editorial policies, and, based on my experience, I can say that existing protection mechanisms haven’t been implemented in practice. After the last parliamentary elections, our media faced blackmail and threats by the local authorities, which culminated in cutting us out of the local budget and depriving us of funds necessary for our operations.”

In connection to this, Miško Strugar, director, Radio Antena M, pointed out, “We do have a good legislative framework, and there are protection mechanisms, but there is also self-censorship, and, therefore, we have to empower journalists to resist pressures coming from the media owners, authorities, and from other power centers. However, the greatest

Multiple Channels Indicators

- People have rights to create, share, and consume information.
- People have adequate access to channels of information.
- There are appropriate channels for government information.
- There are diverse channels for information flow.
- Information channels are independent.

amount of self-censorship is related to information regarding the Serbian Orthodox Church because information producers, both professional and nonprofessional, are fearful that they might have problems if they write anything remotely critical about that religious community.”

Citizens generally enjoy adequate access to news channels and, thanks to different modes of communication, encounter no problems accessing relevant news channels. As Pavicevic noted, “In Montenegro, there are a number of media with both national and local coverage, and the means to distribute that news (television sets, radios, newspapers, mobile phones with applications) are accessible to everyone. Newspapers are sold at specific locations but also in common supermarkets, gas stations, etc. Every café and restaurant has newspapers on offer to their customers. In every café or restaurant, there are television sets. Furthermore, Montenegro has twice as many mobile phones compared to its population.”

An estimated 70% of the population has Internet access, Spaić said, adding that there are an estimated 47,835 cable Internet users and 30,638 ADSL connections as of January 2021, per the Agency for Electronic Communication and Postal Services.

For 16 years now, Montenegrin legislation has supported the right of free access to information. Currently, the 2012 Act on Free Access to Information regulates this area. This law enables access to government information, and it is based on principles of free access to information, transparency of government agencies, the public’s right to know, and equality; it is implemented in line with standards embedded in international human rights agreements and generally accepted rules of international law. Article 3 of the law allows everyone, local or foreign, to access information without the need to present reasons. However, Vuković noted, “The Freedom of Information Act gives greater power to those in possession of information of public interest than to the citizens and media seeking that information. Every government entity has the power to classify as confidential any document they wish, so it

turns out that many decisions that are of public interest were classified as confidential so that citizens and media wouldn’t have an insight in corruptive government practices.”

Regarding the Act on Free Access to Information, Spaić observed, “Changes in the law from 2017 relate to technical issues, such as reused information, machine-readable format, and open format for information disclosure. Information seekers are dissatisfied with the 2017 Freedom

“We do have legal protection for journalists and free speech; however, in practice, this is not applied,” said Jabučanin.

of Information Act, as it limits the space for ‘free access to information’ based on misinterpretation and abuse of the term ‘business secret.’ Unlike Croatia and Slovenia, which have passed laws on ‘business secrets,’ exhaustively listing all government bodies and institutions that

have the right to limit access to information and regulating strictly up to which point business secrets are to be protected, that step was never taken in Montenegro. This legislative gap was abused, making enforcement of the law in this area very problematic.”

State authorities generally have spokespersons, although the panelists noted that sometimes media cannot obtain information they request from the government. Spokespeople try to publish true information, but they are also selective, providing partial information to the public about controversial events or potential scandals. However, the panelists believed that the spokespersons of public institutions generally facilitate providing reliable information

Most of the panelists agree that there are no serious limitations regarding different channels for information flow, and they do not see this issue as problematic. The only sensitive point relates to transparency regarding ownership because there are no data on some media owners, especially for online journalism and web portals, which often do not even display a press imprint.

The 2010 Law on Electronic Media has been amended four times (twice in 2011 and two more subsequent changes in 2013 and 2016), regulates ownership concentration in broadcast media (radio

and television), and provides appropriate control mechanisms. The National Agency for Electronic Media is charged with enforcing this law, and so far, no cases have been challenged in court.

In Montenegro, there are plenty of media at the national and local level that are owned by various legal entities and individuals, so there is a lack of clear evidence of media monopolies. At the same time, in recent years there have been no cases of broadcasting frequencies being challenged in court, although there has been political and public controversy about the presence of electronic media operating in Montenegro that are owned by entities in other countries.

In general, everyone can establish a media under the same legal conditions, if they follow the proscribed procedures. Regarding public service media at the national and local municipality levels, the panelists' main concerns centered on political influence exerted on these media, which is directly related to their operations being funded from the state budget. There is a general public opinion that the ruling parties use budgetary power to interfere in the editorial policy of public service media.

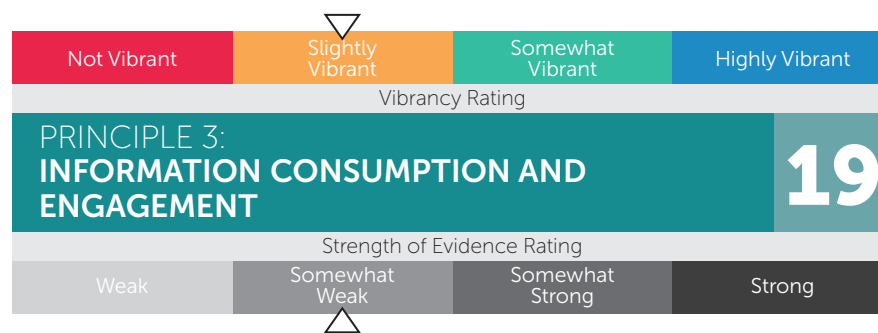
The panelists agreed that news channels can hardly be considered independent, as the political influence of their owners and advertisers is obvious. This is quite visible in private media and is also the subject of a long-term dispute regarding the National Public Service, with the government accused of exerting improper influence on its editorial policy. All these influences are reflected in the quality of reporting.

Media owners significantly influence the editorial policy of their media, and they are regularly engaged in the daily operations of their media outlets. The panelists also discussed that media outlets shy away from criticizing large advertisers, lest they lose critically needed revenue, which leads such media to turn a blind eye toward their funding sources. Concurrently, there is a general public opinion that media which have concluded advertising contracts with public authorities avoid criticizing-or are less critical of--state bodies and their officials.

Public service media are financed from state or municipal budgets. As a

result, the panelists generally believed that they are under the influence of the ruling parties. While it is generally believed that regulatory agencies that focus on issues such as issuing licenses and frequency allocations do not cause controversy, there are always objections regarding the influence of the governing policy on the work of regulators. Montenegro does not have state-owned media, and public service media are not privy to more government information than private media.

Emphasizing that Montenegro's media market is small—650,000 to support many media companies—Pavicevic concluded, "All media survive on advertising, and the number of advertisers is proportional to the size of the country. Bearing in mind that since the last global financial crisis [2008-2009], they are all cutting down on advertising expenses, and usually one advertiser opts for a single media, and not for many of them. It is rare that media publish critical information about their key advertisers."



The panelists generally agreed that despite the existence of privacy protection regulations for years now, Montenegro's online community cannot be considered sufficiently secure, limited by citizens' readiness to privately protect their communication channels. Additionally, media literacy remains weak, leaving many Montenegrins unable to read the news critically or distinguish fake news. Although Montenegro has free media, the citizens are not well-informed consumers and fail to exercise their freedom productively.

However, there are positive signs of growth. Citizens are distancing

themselves from hate speech and reporting it to the authorities more frequently. In addition, local media can be considered a strong point for Montenegro's media sector.

Montenegro's law protecting personal data, passed in 2008, has been altered three times and will undergo one more change to align with European law. In line with Article 4 of that law, protection of personal data is granted to every person regardless of citizenship, residence, race, skin color, gender, language, religion, political or other affiliations, nationality, social background, financial status, education, social status, or any other personal feature. The intention is clear: to grant Montenegrin citizens adequate privacy protection. Additionally, in special circumstances (related to business, tax dues, etc.), provisions of the Law on Electronic Identification and Electronic Signature are to be applied.

The Law on Personal Data Protection also regulates the Agency for Personal Data Protection, which is required to supervise private data protection. Most media strive to bolster their digital security, with major media outlets employing their own IT teams dedicated to protecting their digital products. When it comes to the general population, the younger generations increasingly appear to possess the knowledge and skills that provide them with adequate digital protection. Evidence for this is largely grounded in periodic public surveys conducted mainly by specialized non-governmental organizations.

Spaić described another concern related to the changes announced for the Personal Data Protection Law, which,

she explained, “will mean transposition of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which are already mandatory for us. Although GDPR provisions already apply to Montenegro (in terms of online providers of goods and services and EU citizens), so some institutions are already training their staff—administrators and data handlers—and in this respect, suspending work for changes in the law is simply bad news.”

Milan Jovanovic, director of the Digital Forensic Center, highlighted the need for a more comprehensive approach, adding, “Mitigating threats from DDoS attacks can be achieved only if we have protection strategies at several levels. This involves advanced attack prevention and threat management systems that combine firewall, VPN, content filtration, and balancing servers' load.”

Media literacy in Montenegro, as a product of organized government and education strategy and productive practices, is still in its infancy, reflecting negatively on the overall strength of critical analysis and media culture in Montenegro. Furthermore, poor media literacy, especially in an era of digital media, online journalism, and the expansion of social networks, opens the space for the manipulation of information and misleading reporting.

In Montenegrin schools, courses covering media literacy are optional and insufficiently used—depriving younger generations of media literacy fundamentals and critical thinking skills regarding press articles, news, and information. Spaić commented, “Some within the international community are organizing, on an ad-hoc basis with specifically targeted groups, trainings on different topics related to media literacy, but unfortunately, the importance of media literacy hasn't been recognized in Montenegro yet. It is extremely important to come up with a systemic response and identify media literacy as a necessity and the single most important tool in combating fake news.”

Vuković commented, “Media and IT literacy are more in the focus of the NGO sector rather than public education institutions. The government, so far, has shown little understanding of the issue, and media literacy has been marginalized. Although a designated working group developed a Strategy of IT and Media Literacy a few years ago, the government

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.

failed to adopt it.” Vešovic also emphasized the importance of improving the education system to boost the development of curricula promoting media literacy.

When it comes to citizens’ relationship to free speech and their use of available information, the panelists were divided. Montenegro has a lot of media and no restrictions in terms of accessing foreign news channels. Furthermore, the online community boosts opportunities for public debates, comments, and sharing of individual opinions. However, the panelists gave mediocre scores to the media culture and possibilities for productive public debate. Media platforms enable citizens to conduct constructive and democratic debates, but the dominance of politically charged, ideological voices hinder the development of a healthier media culture.

In rare cases, people are held accountable for their statements, and in recent periods, this relates exclusively to hate speech on social networks. Evaluating this indicator, Kovacevic noticed, “People productively and proactively participate in information processing, especially by posting comments on portals and even more intensively on social networks.”

Pavicevic added, “In Montenegro, citizens enjoy all the prerequisites for being well informed. Exchanging views and opinions is possible within family settings and with friends; citizens are able to write to newspapers, public institutions. Most Montenegrin citizens are on social networks, where they express their views and engage in debates on a daily basis. However, we almost have no organized social events, whether traditional or by means of digital platforms, offering opportunities to exchange opinions on the government or different policies.” Before the COVID-19 pandemic, she noted, ministries, NGOs, and international organizations used to offer such opportunities in the form of public debates and roundtables.

Media are aware of the need to survey their customers’ needs, and the panelists felt confident that editorial teams and media producers—

especially larger, more serious media—use survey results extensively to shape their editorial policies. The major obstacle for media is the lack of funds, which prevents most of them from running their own surveys—although there are exceptions (for example, the National Public Service Media periodically implements public opinion surveys, which are publicly available). Most, however, must rely heavily on surveys or data periodically published by NGOs (for example the Center for Democracy and Human Rights (CEDEM), one of the leading NGOs in Montenegro, specializes in such work).

According to the data from the Ministry of Culture and Electronic Media Agency in Montenegro, there are many media outlets in the country: 70 print media, out of which 50 are active; 83 active electronic media, out of which 38 are commercial radios; 2 radio and 3 television stations within the National Public Service; 14 local publicly owned radios; 2 nonprofit radios; 3 local public television stations; and 17 commercial television stations, out of which 4 have national coverage. It is obvious that all these media outlets are in fierce competition against each other, with poorly paid journalists and pressure to please commercial advertisers—and as a result, the general public’s needs often come second.

Most of the panelists agreed that community media represent a bright side of Montenegro’s media world. These media are less susceptible to fake news; although local public service media receive some political pressure, generally, the panelists agreed that communities have a high degree of confidence in their local media. They believed that community media meet the news, entertainment, and identity needs of the local population to a much greater extent than regional or national media. Jabučanin explained, “Local media, unlike those with national coverage, almost never contribute to the creation or dissemination of fake news but focus rather on the needs and interests of respective local communities.”

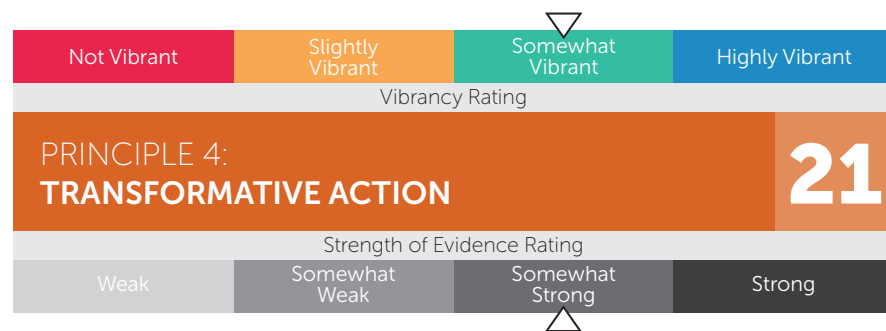
Bojanic agreed, noting, “Montenegrin citizens believe their local media.

“People productively and proactively participate in information processing, especially by posting comments on portals and even more intensively on social networks,” said Kovacevic.

The best proof of that is the fact that local radio stations rank higher than all the other media in their communities.”

Vešovic added, “I think that Montenegro has vibrant and strong local media that are very much visible. I think those media enjoy strong support from their communities. Also, local media do not disseminate fake news, at least not that I have seen recently.”

Community media appear to be much closer to citizens’ needs and interests and that is why they are viewed sympathetically and enjoy greater confidence. They are also “much more thorough in terms of reporting on local issues compared to their national counterparts,” Jovanovic said, citing examples such as the controversy surrounding the cutting down of cypress trees in Bar and citizens’ objections because of environmental reasons and the protest of parents against mandatory mask-wearing in schools along Montenegro’s coastline.



Media channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines. Information exchange across ideological lines, within the media sector, is ongoing, but the panelists generally feel that ideological orientation determines the audience for that specific media and thus the choice of television and radio stations citizens want to listen to, although the most ideologically biased groups tend to prefer print or online media.

Almost all major media companies present themselves as independent news sources, but the fact remains that media are recognized by the

public based on their editorial policies that favor certain political groups or ideological positions. On the other hand, there is not much media debate among different ideological views, although media do occasionally provide a platform for conflicting positions to exchange their views. However, this practice has not become customary, and, therefore, there is a dearth of constructive debate between conflicting political and ideological camps. The panelists felt that citizen use of quality information is not very high and that a large portion of the general public is susceptible to fake news, as the elections and the pandemic abundantly exposed. Montenegro has seen unusually strong activity of civil society organizations in the country for years now, with a number of active NGOs making valuable contributions to strengthen the public discourse and hold the government accountable.

Information producers and numerous distribution channels do not foster adequate information sharing across ideological lines. Media are dominantly politically and ideologically affiliated, and this fact limits quality public debates and the development of societally productive democratic diversities. On that point, Kovacevic said, “Ideological affiliation, not the truth, is a highway people are using to navigate through media landscape in order to see the ‘other side’ or other people’s views.”

Vuković reiterated, “Most of the media are not officially affiliated with political parties, although the majority of leading, as well as and other media, are recognized as in favor of certain parties, whether they are in power at the national or municipal level.”

Milica Babić, editor of the public service TV CG, commented, “There are independent sources of news and information, and they usually have political connotation. People are following the reporting of various media with different ideological views. However, if certain media are not ideologically close to them, people tend to reject everything they publish/post as a lie, despite presented evidence and proof.”

In this regard, Strugar said, “There are independent sources of news and information, but still very few that are not politically ‘colored.’ People do read/follow different media, of different ideological affiliations. As one of

the panelists said, once you had to read between the lines to find out the truth and now you have to read between newspapers.”

Citizens do not quality information in the best possible way, the panelists agreed, and large portions of the general public form their views based on fake news, which they absorb without question or critique.

This became obvious during the pandemic, when large swaths of the population, especially younger people, ignored health risks—and because of that, Montenegro is one of the worst-hit countries in Europe. That is why Spaić emphasized, “In emergency situations, people are prone to believe fake news, to act harmfully to themselves and others, neglecting health recommendations, and believing fake news.”

Babić added, “During March, April, and May, the then-government did the best it could for citizens to obtain the right information on the pandemic. It organized regular press conferences, and institutions’ representatives were at media disposal, and this meant that citizens had a feeling of safety and accountability of the government. However, since July, when the electoral campaign was in full swing, everything went from bad to worse. Politicians were giving irresponsible statements, media were peddling fake news, several information sources started disseminating fake news, and citizens started behaving irresponsibly.”

NGOs play an active role in society, and the strongest among them (for example, Center for Civic Education (CGO), Network for Affirmation of NGO Sector (MANS), CEDEM, Center for Democratic Transition (CDT), Institut Alternativa, Civic

Alliance, Human Rights Action, Media Center) are very much present in the public discourse. They have been recognized for their criticism of the government and poor political practices—and for their professional treatment of public policies, respectable public opinion surveys, media-sector analysis, and protection of human rights.

The panelists generally believe that NGOs, as the most active segment of civil society, share quality information aimed at improving the society. In addition, panelists are also of the opinion that the NGO sector has significantly contributed to strengthening progressive public policies, formed a proactive relationship toward Euro-Atlantic integrations, and improved the media environment overall; according to Babić, “NGOs are an important source of information and many of them are opening their own research centers in order to reach faster and more effectively their target audiences.”

Cooperation between the media and the NGO sector is traditionally strong as well. As Vešović commented, “Maybe more than in other countries in the region, in Montenegro, the media are actively engaged with civil society in order to cover each and every important issue. What is important, and what we see on the ground, is the strong coordination between journalists and civil society activities being established.” Some NGOs, including CDT and the platform Raskrinkavanje.me, actively expose fake news and support campaigns for the change of public policies with accurate data and reports.

There is a contrast between the positive contributions of these NGOs and what can be seen as the excessive, socially, and politically unacceptable position of the dominant religious community, the Serbian Orthodox Church, which actively disseminated propaganda and sought to advance its clerical-nationalistic perspective in the latest parliamentary elections. The church directly interfered in the formation of the new Montenegrin government, including the selection of the new prime minister.

The panelists believe that, for the development of public policies, the government does not use quality information enough. The former government was pretty much in conflict with leading NGOs and part of

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.

influential media. The current government, just two months after coming to power in December 2020, tried to incorporate a certain number of NGO leaders into the government anticorruption body (MANS, Institut Alternativa). Nevertheless, the government has been exposed to strong criticism from a number of influential media (for example, *Pobjeda*, Portal CDM, Portal Analitika, Radio Antena M, Portal Lucha) and in the meantime became a bad example of quality public relations. Ultimately, the panelists generally felt that the information produced by the media is neither supportive of quality public management nor do they contribute solid foundations for good democratic practices and democratic norms.

The panelists mainly disputed government practices in terms of using quality information, which is necessary to make good public policy decisions. The long-term practice of the former government was assessed negatively, and the initial practice of the new government has already been evaluated by the panelists as unacceptable as well. Both the former and the current governments have been recognized for the lack of productive communication with the media sector and the NGO sector as well. In addition, the current government has strong inclinations toward one religious community (Serbian Orthodox Church, whose seat is in another country—Serbia—and who is under the strong influence of the Serbian regime and Serbian President Vučić), thus discrediting the constitutional concept of secularism and inciting discriminatory behavior with respect to the orthodox population (the government is ignoring the social and legislative status of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church). When assessing the radically reduced relationship of the new government with the general public, Spaić said, “Tweets as the basic communication tool of the government is not a good message either to the local or international community. Absence of press conferences and answers to journalists’ questions is a very problematic practice of the new government.”

While information is plentiful in Montenegro, it is not leveraged to hold the government accountable or develop democratic norms. Panelists discussed that corruption scandals often are not fully prosecuted,

because everything depends on the actors involved in the corruption. Senior officials find it easier to avoid responsibility, while lower-ranking officials are more likely to be prosecuted. When media report on human rights violations, there is generally reaction from government bodies to take action. As a result, in spite of many examples of responsible government bodies reacting to media reports of corruption or human rights violations, the general position of the panelists was that overall institutional practice is below the threshold expected of a European Union candidate country.

Panelists agreed that quality information affects the prevention or reduction of human rights violations by national or local authorities. Quality information also contributes to the public exerting positive pressure on state bodies in the event of a violation of civil liberties. However, the panelists were divided on the issue that reliable and truthful information contributes to fair and free elections at the local and national levels. In this sense, objective media and media that publish

quality information often have significant influence on the choice of voters during election campaigns.

Taken as a whole, Kovacevic observed, “We don’t have a good governance or stable democratic norms, so even quality information has only limited impact.”

Vešovic added, “The former government was very much corrupted and criminalized, slow, ineffective, and on top of that the judiciary was quite servile to it. They were particularly resistant to serious electoral reforms. However, now we have a new government, so that may change...but it is still hard to predict. We shall see in six months what the new government brings.”

The panelists were critical of the way the government uses quality information in articulating good public policies, particularly with respect to the democratic practices of the executive power and with political elites sharing information that is in the general public’s interest.

“Ideological affiliation, not the truth, is a highway people are using to navigate through media landscape in order to see the ‘other side’ or other people’s views,” said Kovacevic.

LIST OF PANELISTS

Tanja Pavicevic, journalist, *Pobjeda*, Podgorica

Marko Vešovic, journalist, *DAN*, Podgorica

Marijana Bojanic, director, TV VIJESTI, Podgorica

Milica Babić, editor, TV CG, Podgorica

Duško Vuković, program manager, Media Centar, Podgorica

Nikola Dragash, journalist, Portal Analitika, Podgorica

Samir Rastoder, editor in chief, Radio Petnjica, Petnjica

Ivana Jabučanin, editor, Radio Cetinje, Cetinje

Miško Strugar, director, Radio Antena M, Podgorica

Dushan Kovacevic, freelance blogger, Podgorica

Milan Jovanovic, director, Digital Forensic Center, Podgorica

Aneta Spaić, dean, law faculty, University of Montenegro, Podgorica

MODERATOR

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This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.