



# Sustainable Independent Media Activity (SIMA) **VIBRANT INFORMATION BAROMETER (VIBE)**



## SOUTH SUDAN 2023

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# List of Acronyms

<b>AMDISS</b>	Association for Media Development in South Sudan
<b>BBC</b>	British Broadcasting Cooperation
<b>CRN</b>	Catholic Radio Network
<b>CSOs</b>	civil society organizations
<b>DDoS</b>	distributed denial-of-service
<b>DW</b>	Deutsche Welle
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>ICT</b>	information communication technology
<b>IOM</b>	International Organization for Migration
<b>IREX</b>	International Research and Exchanges Board
<b>MDI</b>	Media Development Institute
<b>MIL</b>	media and information literacy
<b>NCA</b>	National Communication Authority
<b>NGO</b>	nongovernmental organization
<b>NSS</b>	National Security Service
<b>ONAD</b>	Organization for Nonviolence and Development
<b>R-ARCSS</b>	Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan
<b>RFI</b>	Radio French International
<b>RSRTF</b>	Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience Trust Fund
<b>SIMA</b>	Sustainable Independent Media Activity
<b>SoE</b>	strength of evidence
<b>SSBC</b>	South Sudan Broadcasting Corporation
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children’s Fund
<b>UoJ</b>	University of Juba
<b>USAID</b>	U.S. Agency for International Development
<b>VIBE</b>	Vibrant Information Barometer
<b>VOA</b>	Voice of America
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization

# Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) Methodology and Meetings

The VIBE report is a yearly study designed to monitor the processes of information production, dissemination, consumption, and application. This report represents VIBE's first assessment of an African nation. Rooted in IREX's Vibrant Information Approach and codeveloped with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), VIBE's methodology offers a more comprehensive understanding of current information dynamics.

## Expert Panel Method

VIBE uses an expert panel model, gathering insights from locally curated industry professionals for panel discussions. During a two-day experts' meeting, the panelists examine the four principles of information vibrancy:



**Information Quality:** How information is produced by both professional and nonprofessional producers. This includes content quality, content diversity, and economic resources.



**Multiple Channels:** How information flows, that is transmitted or spread by both formal and informal information channels. This includes the legal framework for free speech, protection of journalists, and access to diverse channels and types of information.



**Information Consumption and Engagement:** How information is consumed by users. This includes looking at freedom of expression, media and information literacy, digital privacy and security, the relevance of information to consumers, and public trust in media and information.



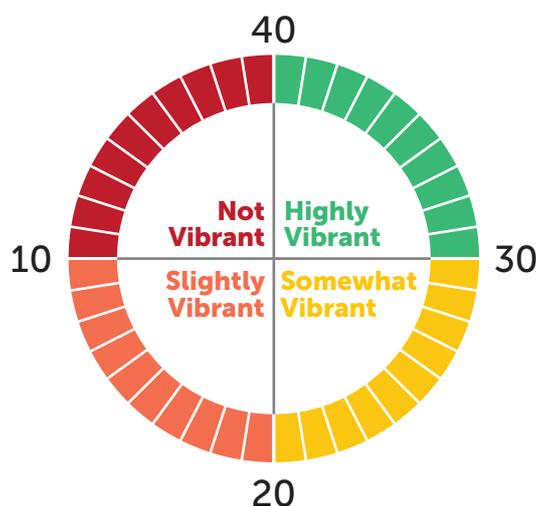
**Transformative Action:** How information drives behavior, that is, how information is used and put into action. This includes how governments, corporations, and civil society use information to inform decisions and actions; whether information is spread across ideological lines; and whether individuals or groups feel empowered to use information to enact change.

VIBE includes 20 indicators that capture the most crucial elements of these four principles. The VIBE methodology relies on information from country experts who complete a VIBE questionnaire, provide scores for the 20 indicators, and furnish evidence to justify their scores, then contribute to a panel discussion led by a moderator.

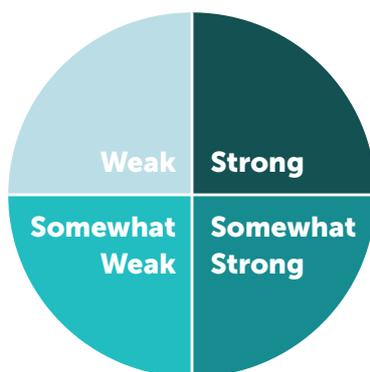
Scores from all 20 indicators are combined with narrative chapters for each country, forming the basis for a VIBE report published online each year. All scores are tracked and compared on a yearly basis with each new version of VIBE.

VIBE employs a 0–40 scale, enabling more detailed tracking of a country’s progression or regression across indicator, principle, and country-level scores.

The overall VIBE methodology scores for a country are:



Once panelists have completed questionnaires, provided evidence for their scores, and participated in the panel discussions, moderators assign a strength of evidence (SoE) rating to each indicator. The SoE aims to identify areas where further research is needed and increase transparency of the potential subjectivity of some indicators. For each expert-opinion indicator, the SIMA moderators assign an SoE rating: *weak*, *somewhat weak*, *somewhat strong*, or *strong*, based on the quality of evidence informing each indicator.



# SIMA-Organized VIBE Meetings for Discussions and Recommendations

## ● First VIBE Meeting, 26 and 27 April 2023

In South Sudan, the 10 senior media experts selected<sup>1</sup> represented various dimensions of the commercial and noncommercial media industry. The panelists provided technical and geographical representation and included members from civil society organizations (CSOs), international organizations, and diverse ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, and also brought fact-checking expertise. Special attention was given to gender representation in the panels.

The experts met for a two-day deliberation, during which the 10 panelists brought their knowledge and experience to discuss the four core principles of VIBE and its 20 indicators.

## ● Second VIBE Meeting, 20 September 2023

Once the first version of the VIBE report was drafted, and a list of programmatic recommendations was outlined based on the discussion, the SIMA team organized a larger meeting. Government representatives, a broader array of experts, and journalists were invited to present the findings and facilitate discussions regarding the recommendations. The objective was to ensure that all voices—from the media and CSOs to the government—contributed to discussions and endorsed the recommendations. This report combines the VIBE discussions from April 2023 with the reviews and suggestions discussed in the subsequent meeting, providing a snapshot of the media situation in South Sudan and specific recommendations for future media development activities.

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1 Given the operational environment in South Sudan, IREX is not publicizing the names and affiliations of its panel of experts as a security precaution. All of the quotes in the boxes are from the panelists.

# Introduction

The young nation of South Sudan declared its independence in 2011<sup>2</sup> following a prolonged struggle for self-determination. In 2018, the nation signed the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS)<sup>3</sup> to address the ongoing conflict and civil war that had plagued the country since 2013, including intercommunal conflict, ethnic divisions, a worsening humanitarian situation, and governance issues. The R-ARCSS's pace of implementation has led to an extension of the transitional period, postponing the election scheduled for 2023.

## Media Dynamics in South Sudan

South Sudan's media landscape is characterized by liveliness and dynamism, but it also faces significant challenges. It strives to establish free and fair journalistic practices within a turbulent political and social environment. While the country had the opportunity to enact internationally recognized media legislation, the enforcement of these laws remains inconsistent.



Image by United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

2 [South Sudan becomes an independent nation – BBC News.](#)

3 [South-Sudan-Peace-Agreement-September-2018.pdf \(pca-cpa.org\).](#)

The media face numerous obstacles that hinder their role as a democratic watchdog, promoter of accountability, and protector of human rights. These challenges include limited press freedom, violence targeting journalists, restricted fact-checking, and censorship. Throughout 2022, incidents of harassment, threats, and violence against journalists have created a climate of fear and self-censorship, impeding the work of both male and female journalists. This hostile environment not only hampers the media's ability to hold those in power accountable but also limits citizens' access to diverse, unbiased, accurate, and credible information.

Despite these challenges, South Sudanese journalists exhibit remarkable resilience. Operating in a nation grappling with a growing humanitarian crisis and persistent conflict, these media professionals often risk their lives to shed light on ground realities and internal political struggles.



*South Sudan has 53 functional radio stations across the country, 65 community radio stations, and 14 commercial broadcast stations, “which is more than others, [and] that number makes South Sudan competitive at the regional level. But the reality is some are functioning, others not, given that many lack equipment and funding.”*



## Information Accessibility and Diversity

South Sudan hosts a diverse spectrum of media outlets, including community, commercial, national, and public platforms. With most of the population residing in rural areas (79%), content predominantly reaches the suburban and urban population (21%)<sup>4</sup> in and around major towns, creating regional information imbalances. The nation's rich ethnic and linguistic diversity underscores the importance of providing content in local languages, particularly through local community media outlets, where radio stations play a key role.



*There is a significant gender imbalance within media outlets, with a lack of female journalists in the profession. But these imbalances are not only due to a lack of possibilities for female professionals but a combination of cultural, security, and access to coverage limitations.*



Unfortunately, poor communications infrastructure and natural geographical barriers hinder access to information for millions of citizens, particularly those from remote, marginalized, and transient communities. They are left without reliable information access or are at risk of consuming unverified information

<sup>4</sup> [Rural population \(% of total population\), South Sudan | Data \(worldbank.org\).](#)

from third parties. While radio and TV stations are prevalent across most of the nation, newspapers are primarily available in the capital, Juba. Currently, there are three functional TV stations: SSBC, KISS TV, and Juba Echo TV.

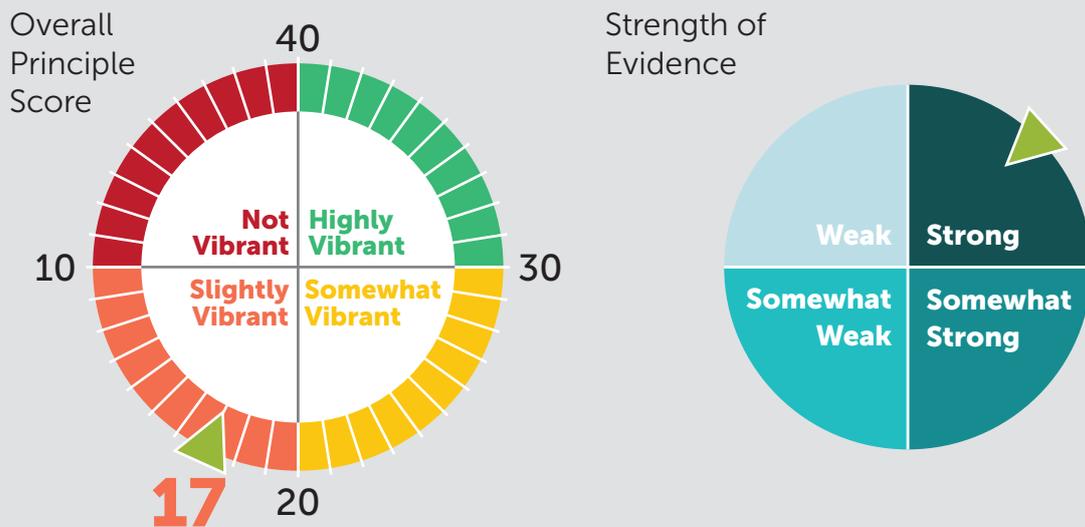
The financial sustainability of South Sudan's media is imperiled by its current reliance on substantial donor funding and a persistently challenging media market environment, a scenario anticipated to prevail into the foreseeable future.

The challenges of obtaining and distinguishing between fake and real information is difficult, particularly in social media where some of users knowingly or unknowingly share information that promotes hate speech. The capacity of journalists was also highlighted as an issue, with some operating without formal training, thereby affecting the production of quality content. However, this deficit also creates a good opportunity to train citizen journalists who have blogs and other social media pages.

## A Narrative of Hope amid Challenges

Despite these challenges, South Sudanese journalists—amid adversity, economic limitations, and a challenging context—are crafting a narrative that combines hope for a developing nation with the stark challenges it faces. Their courage underscores the critical role of a free press, particularly in emerging nations where governance and CSOs are still evolving, within a regional context marked by greater instability.

# Principle 1: Information Quality

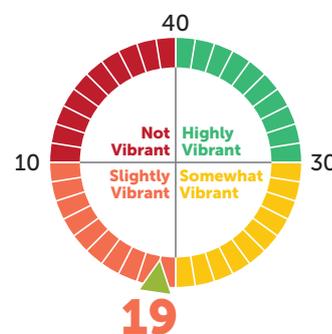


South Sudan’s media landscape is marked by discernible highs and lows, as underlined by the scores on varied indicators. Indicator 2, “*The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm. Malinformation and hate speech are minimal,*” received the principle’s highest score of 20, reflecting the general consensus among panelists regarding the adherence to ethical norms by professional journalists, despite notable incidents of government-induced malinformation and hate speech. On the contrary, Indicator 5, “*Content production is sufficiently resourced,*” languished at the opposite end of the spectrum with a score of 8, signaling the struggles encountered by media houses due to financial constrictions, political pressures, and a fragile economy. This dichotomy of scenarios points to a media environment where journalistic resolve persists amid pernicious financial and political pressures. Notably, despite financial shortcomings and episodic bursts of state-propagated malinformation and hate speech, there is a visible commitment among some media practitioners to uphold ethical journalism and minimize harmful content.



## Indicator 1:

There is quality information on a variety of topics available.



There are numerous challenges in South Sudan pertaining to the production and dissemination of high-quality information on a wide range of public interest topics.

While acknowledging the existence of content diversity within media outlets that encompasses political and social issues, panelists reached a consensus that certain subjects are considered off-limits. Authorities exert pressure on media organizations, resulting in some cases where newspapers are published with empty spaces due to prepublication censorship. The government actively monitors the coverage it gets and reacts promptly to any criticism. This limits the production of quality information since content that they disagree with is eliminated. This also prompts journalists to self-censor their work, thereby limiting access to information for the wider South Sudanese population, including those located in hard-to-reach areas.

In terms of content production, there are both professional and nonprofessional content producers, including journalists and bloggers. As one panelist observed, *“When we talk about media practitioners, they conduct interviews and undertake light investigations. However, due to resource constraints, we lack in-depth investigative journalists. In terms of quality, most editors maintain strict standards, emphasizing the presence of credible sources and gender representation. Unfortunately, unregulated outlets sometimes fabricate stories or employ incorrect and irrelevant photos and videos to contextualize content related to South Sudan.”*

The panelists extensively deliberated on the ethical and accountable practices of content producers. Some experts expressed the belief that journalists hesitate to hold national and local authorities accountable out of fear of repercussions. Nevertheless, despite the associated risks, certain journalists are making diligent efforts to fulfill their responsibilities *“even at the risk of being killed,”* in the words of one panelist.

The panelists underscored the limited number of institutions offering training for journalists, producers, and nonjournalist content creators (such as bloggers) in the country, constituting an additional challenge to the production of quality content and fact-based reporting.

Educational instruction for journalists is available at one institute that provides both practical and theoretical training: the Association for Media Development in South Sudan (AMDISS)<sup>5</sup> facilitates training through their Media Development Institute (MDI)<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, four universities in Juba offer various journalism education programs: the University of Juba,<sup>7</sup>



*Some government officials define journalists as ‘agents of (the) Western World.’ During one official meeting a government official said “our problem in this country are the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and journalists.*



5 [AMDISS Media.](#)

6 [Media Development – AMDISS Media.](#)

7 [University of Juba – Inventing the Future, Transforming the Society \(uoj.edu.ss\).](#)

Stafford University,<sup>8</sup> Destiny University,<sup>9</sup> and the Christian University.<sup>10</sup> In Wau, University of Bahr El-Ghazal<sup>11</sup> also offers journalism training. However, these educational institutions are not advanced in developing their journalism education programs.

Regarding editorial freedom and generating high-quality content, one panelist opined that *“most of the content produced is sponsored and influenced by the financial challenges that media houses face, which impacts their independence.”*

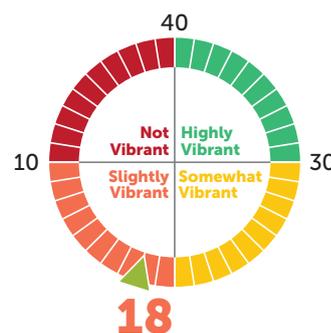
The panel discussions yielded a consensus among participants that the country lacks the necessary infrastructure to facilitate comprehensive media coverage across its entire territory. One panelist emphasized that *“the media landscape in the country is facing challenges arising from a dearth of skilled human resources, financial resources, and infrastructure, which limit the capacity to provide information to the public.”*

In rural areas, local community media (mostly community radio stations) predominantly focus on local or regional coverage based on the immediate needs of the community and in their local language.



## Indicator 2:

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



A panelist expressed that professional content producers and supervisors strive to adhere to facts and avoid creating false information, but *“the reality is that there wasn’t capacity to fact-check content and it’s not intentional.”* In addition, it is common that media houses broadcast and publish stories with one source of information *“until the other sources complained or react to the information.”* However, instances of misinformation often occur due to the rush to publish content. The panelists mentioned that besides lack of resources, journalists work in a climate of fear and intimidation that restricts investigative journalism. The act of holding leaders accountable, especially when it involves acquiring, checking, and disseminating information on politicians and government activities, can be a life-threatening pursuit for journalists.

8 [SchChat – School | Starford International University College South Sudan.](#)

9 [Destiny University College – Juba, South Sudan.](#)

10 [South Sudan Christian University Of Science And Technology – College & University at Unity \(vymaps.com\).](#)

11 University of Bahr El-Ghazal home page, <https://ubg.edu.ss/>.

According to the panelists, the government is seen as creating and disseminating false information, “*particularly, misinformation regarding opposition groups is released, and media entities are mandated to broadcast these without delving into the veracity or credibility of the content.*”

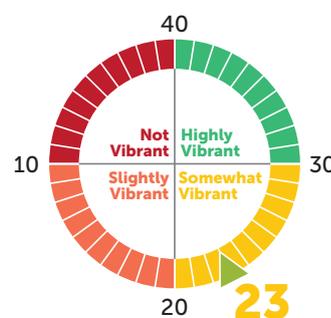
The online environment presents significant challenges. The panel discussions highlighted the risks associated with nonprofessional content producers, such as bloggers, who often create misleading content that is not fact-checked or produced by properly trained journalists. Bloggers have also faced detention for posting content deemed to violate personal privacy. As one panelist noted, “*On social media platforms like Facebook, there are pages that present themselves as media outlets, but their purpose is to spread falsehoods.*”

There are laws, along with a Code of Conduct and Ethics for Journalists, that guide professional content producers to avoid spreading factually incorrect information, but the enforcement of those laws seems disproportionately skewed.



### Indicator 3:

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



Despite the efforts of some journalists, a lack of verification and fact-checking practices persist throughout South Sudan. The panelists highlighted two main sources of concern: the national government and unverified information disseminated through social media by people who are not media professionals.

The panelists pointed out that the government sometimes engages in misinformation or hate speech. For example, they mentioned an exchange between the national minister and county officials following an incident in Kajo Keji,<sup>12</sup> where name-calling targeted specific communities or groups, such as youth, which was effectively hate speech. In addition, the panelists observed that other government officials also use the media to broadcast hate speech and transmit messages instigating violence against a particular ethnic group, a practice that may risk promoting mass violence.

*The government releases false information especially about the opposition groups and demands the media to spread it without questioning the fact or credibility.*

12 [Watchdog “Disturbed” by War of Words on Social Media Over Kajo-Keji Killings – South Sudan \(africa-press.net\)](https://africa-press.net/watchdog-disturbed-by-war-of-words-on-social-media-over-kajo-keji-killings-south-sudan/)

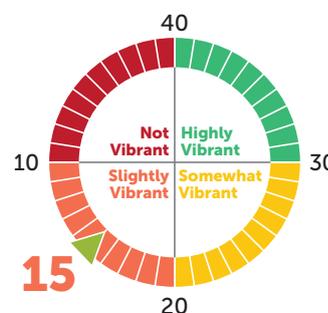
Addressing content quality, the panelists pinpointed a discernible distinction between the output of professional journalists and that of nonprofessional or citizen journalists. While the integral role of nonprofessional and community-driven journalism in amplifying local narratives and cementing community unity is recognized and encouraged, there exists a challenge related to the dissemination of false information and hate speech, particularly prevalent on social media platforms such as Facebook. Panelists raised concerns regarding some online bloggers who, despite perpetuating hate speech and misinformation, often evade accountability. The gravest of these occurrences, according to experts, were markedly evident amid the political tumult in 2016, and this issue persists to this day.

Establishing fact-checking desks poses challenges, with only one professional fact-checking organization currently operating in South Sudan.<sup>13</sup> The 2021 Code of Conduct and Ethics for Journalists<sup>14</sup> in South Sudan explicitly states that journalists and media outlets should refrain from publishing or broadcasting content intended to cause hostility or hatred toward individuals or specific groups based on race, nationality, ethnicity, or religion. However, the dissemination of this Code of Conduct remains limited among media professionals, and only a few media houses have editorial policies that encompass its implementation.

Another contributing factor to the spread of misinformation is the limited capacity among media professionals in South Sudan. Many foreign media practitioners have left the country, and numerous local journalists have left the profession due to the lack of funding for their work.



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



South Sudan boasts a diverse array of media outlets, encompassing community, commercial, national, and public media. Notably, community radio stations stand out as the predominant type of media, each firmly anchored in its locality, broadcasting culturally sensitive programs in local languages, and attuned to the variegated realities of the nation. Content creation, however, hinges on the availability and willingness of sources to participate, and the potential for

<sup>13</sup> [211CHECK](#).

<sup>14</sup> [Media Authority Code of Conduct for the Practice of Journalism in South Sudan 2021 | Library \(southsudanngoforum.org\)](#).

intimidation by authorities makes citizens wary of contributing to media programs, fearing threats or harassment for their expressed views. As a result, media content may not fully encapsulate all viewpoints.

Internet access is hindered by limited network availability and thus is not widely accessible. Thus, remote communities often find fewer opportunities to voice their opinions compared to the South Sudanese diaspora, who has access to platforms like Facebook and can communicate more readily.

Panel experts noted that only a handful of foreign media houses currently operate in the country and tend to engage only when major or compelling issues arise. According to one panelist, foreign media *“has deserted South Sudan and the few that are still working only come in when there is an interesting or big issue on South Sudan.”*

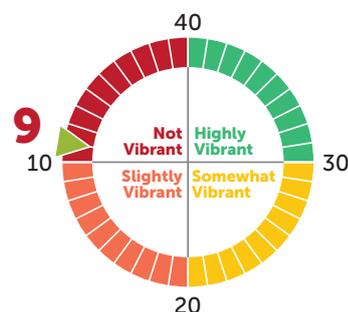
Concerning gender balance, the panel underscored a palpable deficit within the media ecosystem. Female journalists face barriers, including exclusion from certain events and potential harassment, impeding their reporting capabilities. As one panelist pointed out, *“While many media outlets endeavor to balance male and female journalistic representation, the number of female journalists in South Sudan is sparse. There’s an urgent need to advocate for journalism among women. Gender diversity in media remains minimal due to an absence of gender sensitization and policies.”*

Overall, efforts should be made to enhance gender representation and create an environment that encourages the active participation of all individuals. But gender limitations go beyond work opportunities. The limitations are a combination of culture, security, and access to news coverage.

*The harassment is particularly aggressive with female journalists.*



## Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.



One of the primary constraints on content production in South Sudan is the challenging financial situation faced by independent media houses, which leaves them highly dependent on donor sources. In addition, the deteriorating economic situation in South Sudan has further exacerbated the challenges faced by journalists, many of whom have been compelled to seek alternative employment

to sustain themselves. Consequently, a considerable number of journalists have left the profession.

The panelists expressed, *“Most independent media houses in South Sudan struggle with finances; political funding is (mostly) available for state broadcast.”* According to media experts, *“There’s almost no government financial support of the (independent) media, nor policy in place to back this.”*

About potential public advertising that could provide revenues to noncommercial media, the panelists stated, *“The government is presently failing to deliver services to the population; thus, it is not awarding any contracts or engaging in media campaigns to promote their public services through independent media.”*

The international donor community primarily supports independent nongovernmental media. Over the years, USAID;<sup>15</sup> the European Union;<sup>16</sup> the Swiss Cooperation program;<sup>17</sup> the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO);<sup>18</sup> the International Organization for Migration (IOM);<sup>19</sup> and the Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience Trust Fund (RSRTF) from the Swedish International Cooperation Agency,<sup>20</sup> among other donors and international NGOs, have invested heavily in several community radios.

Public funding, as referenced in the Media Authority Act,<sup>21</sup> applies to media outlets funded by national, state, and local governments. In this context, current public funding supports the South Sudan Broadcasting Corporation (SSBC)<sup>22</sup> and its affiliate, South Sudan Radio. At the state level, funding is allocated to support public broadcasters such as Equator Broadcasting radio and TV, along with South Sudan State radio stations in Yambio, Wau, Bor, Torit, and Rumbek.

In addition, there is support for public media from Asian states. For example, the Japanese Government<sup>23</sup> supported the institutional capacity development of the SSBC until 2019, and there is an ongoing media support initiative from the Chinese government<sup>24</sup> including constructing modern broadcasting facility for both the national radio and television.

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15 [South Sudan | U.S. Agency for International Development \(usaid.gov\)](https://www.usaid.gov/south-sudan).

16 [The European Union and South Sudan | EEAS \(europa.eu\)](https://eeas.europa.eu/south-sudan).

17 [Swiss Cooperation Programme South Sudan 2022-2025 \(admin.ch\)](https://www.admin.ch/south-sudan).

18 [South Sudan | UNESCO](https://www.unesco.org/south-sudan).

19 [IOM South Sudan](https://www.iom.int/south-sudan).

20 [South Sudan Reconciliation, Stabilization, and Resilience Trust Fund \(RSRTF\) | Openaid](https://www.openaid.org/south-sudan).

21 [Media Authority Act 2013.pdf \(southsudanngoforum.org\)](https://www.southsudanngoforum.org/media-authority-act-2013.pdf).

22 [The South Sudan Broadcasting Corporation Act, 2013 • Page 2 • ICT Policy Africa](https://www.ictpolicyafrica.org/south-sudan-broadcasting-corporation-act-2013).

23 [Complete the Project for Institutional Capacity Development of South Sudan Broadcasting Corporation \(SSBC\) | South Sudan | Countries & Regions | JICA](https://www.jica.go.jp/complete-the-project-for-institutional-capacity-development-of-south-sudan-broadcasting-corporation-ssbc-south-sudan-countries-regions).

24 [South Sudan hails progress on China aided television project – China.org.cn](https://www.china.org.cn/south-sudan-hails-progress-on-china-aided-television-project).

Local independent media outlets have struggled to generate their own revenue as the local market has shown limited interest in investing funds in advertising. The private sector in South Sudan is still young and underdeveloped, and the absence of substantial competition among companies undermines the justification for advertising expenditures.

In addition, during 2022, a significant portion of donor funding was allocated to address the increasing humanitarian emergencies<sup>25</sup> in South Sudan, where it is estimated that 9.4 million people are projected to need humanitarian assistance during 2023.

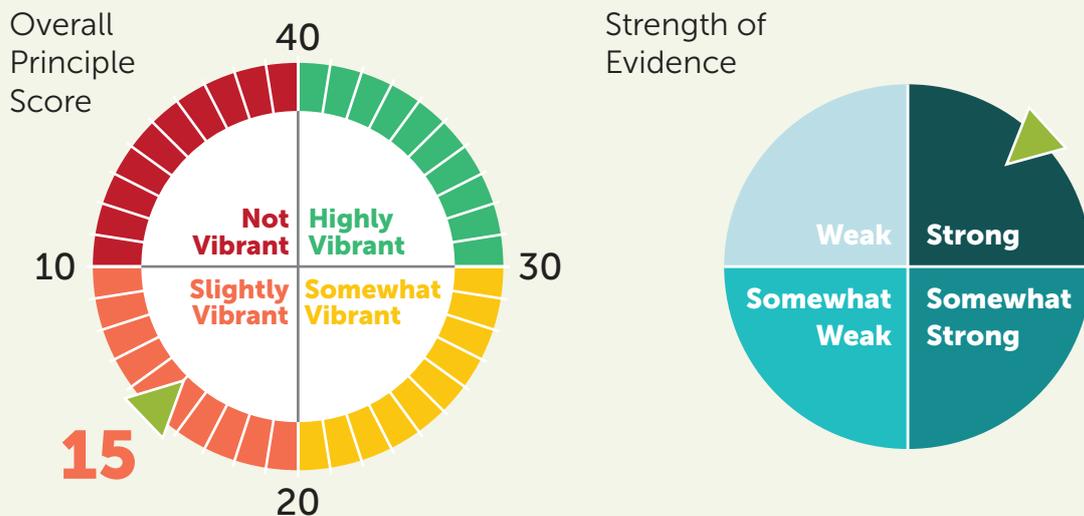
Despite the overall economic situation, according to a panelist *“people in the media are finding funding alternatives. These are run by professional and veteran journalists like radio Hot<sup>26</sup> in Juba, which even the government now follow and will support financially through advertisement because they know they can reach a lot of people. Sometimes they were being labeled as tabloids, but they are receiving financial support.”*

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25 [South Sudan | OCHA \(unocha.org\)](#).

26 [Hot in Juba](#).

## Principle 2: Multiple Channels: How Information Flows

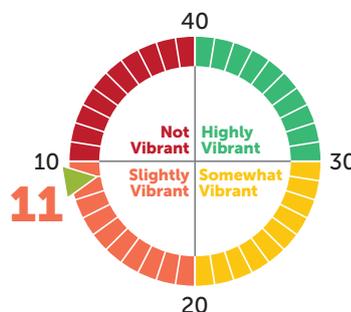


South Sudan’s media landscape reveals a stark reality: Despite the country’s legal framework for media, which complies with international standards and aims to safeguard information access and freedom of expression, actual practices fall significantly short. Under Principle 2, the indicator “Information channels are independent” scored the highest at 19, yet this score belies underlying issues with funding, ownership biases, and government meddling in media operations. Meanwhile, the indicators “People have the rights to create, share, and consume information” and “People have adequate access to channels of information” each scored a low 11, highlighting a spectrum of problems from governmental censorship to inevitable substantial infrastructural deficits. Ultimately, the difference between existing legal provisions and the lived experiences within the media sphere illuminates crucial areas needing improvement to genuinely bolster media freedom and information access in the nation.



### Indicator 6:

People have the rights to create, share, and consume information.



In South Sudan, there are established laws pertaining to freedom of expression and access to information. However, despite the existence of legal frameworks, the panelists noted that “the government has been using them to suppress the media.”

The Media Authority Act, the Code of Conduct for Journalists, and the Cybersecurity and Computer Misuse Provisional Order serve as guiding documents for media activities. However, according to the panelists, the government circumvents these laws to justify actions such as deploying National Security Officers at printing presses to censor publications and interfering in the planning of radio content.



*Freedom of expression in South Sudan is not even at 50%.*



The government's efforts to suppress and censor content manifest in the harassment, detention, and even torture of journalists. For example, journalists from the SSBC were recently arrested for capturing and disseminating a video that depicted the president in an embarrassing situation, which subsequently went viral. Although the journalists were eventually released, with some being forced into exile, such instances underscore the government's attempts to control the media and curb criticism of its policies and decisions.

The laws of South Sudan, including the Right of Access to Information Act of 2013, provide good guidelines and safeguards for accessing and disclosing information in the public interest. The purpose of this law is to operationalize the constitutional right of access to information, promote maximum disclosure of information in the public interest, establish effective mechanisms to secure that right, and provide for incidental matters. However, the country has witnessed numerous arrests, detention, threats to, and closures of media outlets, notably newspapers—such as *Juba Monitor*, *The Sudan Tribune*, *Destiny*, *Almugif* (an Arabic language publication), and *Agamalong*—and some radio stations, including Miraya Radio, Voice of America, the Radio Community, Radio Tamazuj, Eye Radio, Sudan Catholic Radio Network, Radio Jonglei, and SSBC.

The government security forces' interference in the work of the media has had a detrimental impact on the freedom of expression in the country, resulting in a significant shrinking of the civic space. Individual journalists and media workers often resort to self-censorship of their articles, editorials, and other content to avoid harassment, imprisonment, or pressure to reveal their sources.



*Rural areas are digitally dead. In some villages, people can go two to three months without sharing or accessing information.*

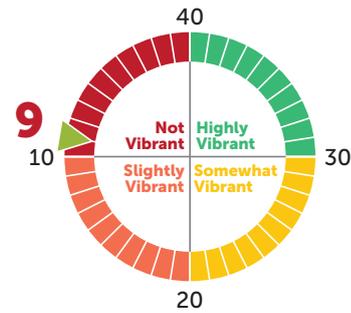


Additionally, one panelist highlighted the differential treatment of journalists based on gender, which hinders the ability of female journalists to perform their duties effectively. This unequal treatment leads to situations where female journalists are denied access to events and face obstacles in fulfilling their professional responsibilities, causing frustration.



## Indicator 7:

People have adequate access to channels of information.



The ICT sector in South Sudan faces significant challenges in infrastructure development, particularly in rural areas where access to information is severely limited. In suburban and urban areas there is much greater access to information via radio, TV, newspapers, and online platforms given the level of connectivity and the extent of the electrical grid. However, the overall access to information varies greatly between rural and urban regions, with certain areas lacking even basic telephone connectivity and internet access.

In areas where adequate infrastructure exists, citizens primarily rely on mobile phones, local or national newspapers, and radios to access information. The capital city, Juba, stands as an exception, as it hosts multiple competing media outlets and possesses a well-established mobile infrastructure.

One of the major obstacles facing the ICT infrastructure in South Sudan is the inadequate electricity grid, which is a consequence of continuous civil wars and lack of investment. Television access is estimated to be low, around 10–20%. Only 10.9% of the population has access to mobile phones.<sup>27</sup> The task of building this infrastructure is enormous, and the government has many competing priorities.

Given the context of underdeveloped infrastructure, internet penetration in South Sudan is low, reaching 10.9%<sup>28</sup> of the population, which is the lowest rate in the region. The growth of the ICT industry in the country has been slow. The panelists also noted the presence of cultural barriers that hinder the involvement of women and girls in ICT, along with high levels of illiteracy that further limit the availability of human resources for sector development.

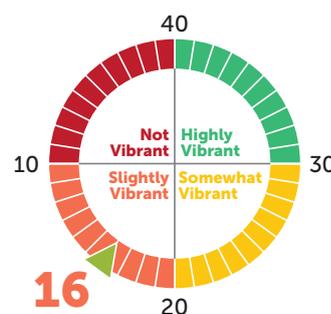
<sup>27</sup> [South Sudan – Media Landscapes.](#)

<sup>28</sup> [Digital 2022: South Sudan – DataReportal – Global Digital Insights.](#)



## Indicator 8:

There are appropriate channels for government information.



South Sudan has established a legal framework encompassing media and access to information laws that align with international standards. However, panel discussions highlighted that, despite the existence of these laws, their implementation has been highly challenging and inadequate. The institutions responsible for enforcing these laws suffer from underfunding and incomplete establishment. Furthermore, a significant obstacle arises from the lack of public awareness about these laws among the general population, as well as their misuse by the security sector.

Since gaining independence in 2011, South Sudan has enacted several laws pertaining to media and information access. These include the Transitional Constitution (2011),<sup>29</sup> which incorporates a bill of rights that guarantees access to information, the Media Authority Act (2013), the Access to Information Act (2013), the National Security Act (2014), the NGO Act (2016),<sup>30</sup> and various Media Authority regulations such as those on print media (2018),<sup>31</sup> broadcast media (2018),<sup>32</sup> and accreditation of journalists (2018).<sup>33</sup>

Some panelists perceived this array of media laws as merely “shelved but not implemented.” Experts unanimously agreed that there is a widespread lack of access to government information in South Sudan, which significantly affects media outlets and CSOs. As one expert articulated during the panels: “The information act provides mechanisms and processes for the media and members of the public to request government information through the Access to Information Commission.<sup>34</sup> While many government entities have media units and spokespersons, others do not. Media entities rely on these spokespersons and quote them as reliable sources of information.”

According to panel experts, there are sometimes challenges in obtaining information from the authorities; most ministries do not maintain active websites, further

29 [Transitional Constitution of the Republic of South Sudan, 2011 \(refworld.org\).](#)

30 [Non-Governmental Organisations Act 2016 | Library \(southsudanngoforum.org\).](#)

31 [Media Authority Regulations on Print Media 2018 | Library \(southsudanngoforum.org\).](#)

32 [Media Authority Regulations on Broadcasting Media 2018 | Library \(southsudanngoforum.org\).](#)

33 [Media Authority Regulations on Accreditation of Journalists 2018 | Library \(southsudanngoforum.org\).](#)

34 The Access to Information Act 2013 ([Right To Access To Information Act – ICNL](#)) established the Access to Information Commission, which guarantees access to information for every citizen. The institution is led by Commissioner Moyiga Nduru.

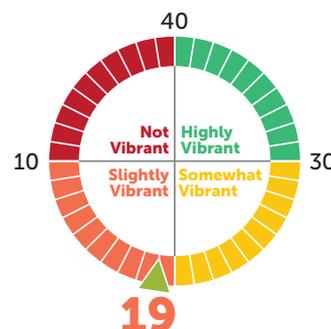
hindering access to information.

Government spokespeople often navigate a precarious environment, which frequently results in their comments being politically influenced or outright imposed. This uncertainty is not lost on the public, who often consider information released by spokespersons with skepticism due to its commonly one-sided position.



## Indicator 9:

There are diverse channels for information flow.



This indicator received a low score from the panelists, indicating a lack of public media presence. As one panelist pointed out, what exists in South Sudan is “*only a state-owned broadcasting corporation which always serves the government interest.*” The absence of public service media reflects the inadequate implementation of the South Sudan Broadcasting Act of 2013, which calls for the establishment of such services.

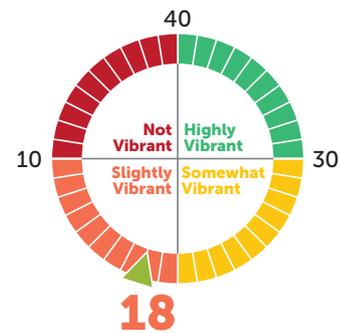
State-owned media primarily covers news and entertainment. According to an expert: “*The journalists here do not go with their individual affiliation, that’s the job of the politically appointed press secretaries, and they will cover or give information from anyone and to anyone.*”

While citizens have the freedom to establish media outlets, whether commercial or nonprofit community-based ones, the panelists highlighted that the application of laws in this regard is “selected and negotiated.” For instance, it is possible to apply for frequency licenses from the National Communication Authority (NCA),<sup>35</sup> but the costs associated with obtaining such licenses are often determined in a biased manner based on the wealth of the applicant. As one panelist explained, “*The NCA says it’s \$25,000 for a license, but if they know you have money, it becomes \$50,000.*”

35 [National Communication Authority \(NCA\).](#)



## Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.



Ownership and funding challenges significantly influence media organizations and content production in South Sudan. Media owners often exert pressure on editors to ensure that their content does not jeopardize their frequency license or their standing with the government. This close relationship between media ownership and funding agencies creates a situation where owners struggle to financially sustain their media houses.

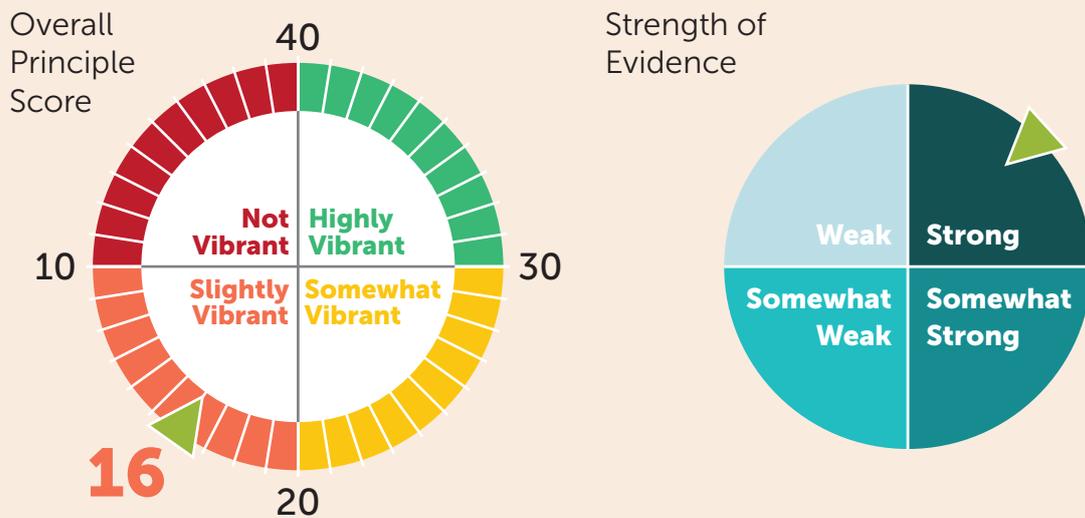
For commercial and community radio stations, sustainability is a key issue. According to the panelists, *“issues of funding constrain independence as the media outlets need funds from either the government or donor institutions.”*

On the one hand, commercial broadcasters rely on advertising revenue and, often, government funding. On the other hand, community media can access international donors (multilateral organizations, development agencies, and NGOs), private funding, and they may receive revenue from advertising. At the local level, there have been instances in which local leaders and government offices provide their community radio with support when possible.

Politicians frequently interfere with publicly funded media, further compromising media’s independence. A notable example is Singaita FM,<sup>36</sup> a radio station that was forcibly closed down in 2021. Government security personnel entered the studios while a program was on air and told everyone to leave the radio station, subsequently shutting it down. The reason cited for the closure was the alleged *“lack of collaboration of the station managers with the state authorities.”* The station was ultimately reopened within a few weeks after its management took measures to negotiate with authorities, with the support of AMDISS and others, and with the intervention of the community. Such incidents highlight the vulnerability of publicly funded media to external interference and control.

36 [Singaita FM – The Radio Community.](#)

# Principle 3: Information Consumption and Engagement

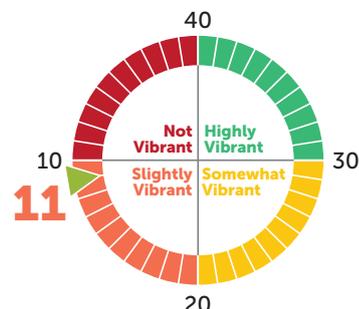


This principle has significant disparities and opportunities across the different indicators of the media landscape. Indicator 15, which looks at community media, claimed the highest score of this principle (28), reflecting the pivotal role of community radios in delivering accurate, unbiased, and community-relevant information, particularly in local languages, thereby fortifying its position as a critical medium in both urban and rural settings. Conversely, Indicator 12, which examines media literacy issues, had the lowest score of this principle (7), signaling profound concerns about the prevalent low media literacy and the apparent deficiency of strategic, sustainable approaches to embed media literacy within the national education system. While there has been progress, like the development of a media literacy curriculum for the University of Juba, there is a clear need to strengthen efforts at all educational levels to improve media literacy. This will ensure informed navigation through the increasingly digital information landscape, despite its current limitations.



## Indicator 11:

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



In addition to low internet penetration, panelists highlighted the challenge of low digital literacy across the country, which contributes to a widespread lack of knowledge about internet safety.

The government is in the process of developing a data protection policy, and the Data Protection Bill is still pending. Without a regulatory framework in place to safeguard internet safety, panelists raised concerns surveillance. One panelist mentioned, “We know that our WhatsApp and our phones are tapped because, in South Sudan, they think that because they are a sovereign country, they can tap anything.” In response to this, many journalists resort to using encrypted messaging apps to protect their communication.

Although cyber-attacks are still uncommon in South Sudan, a notable incident occurred in 2023 when the website of the South Sudan Central Bank was hijacked in a distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attack.<sup>37</sup> Media houses are increasingly raising awareness about website security and starting to implement measures.

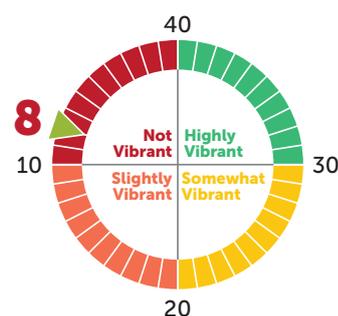
To address digital threats, there has been a rise in training initiatives aimed at creating awareness. Nonprofit organizations like Human Rights Defenders Network<sup>38</sup> and Defy Hate Now<sup>39</sup> provide high-quality online safety and data security training to journalists and civil society actors. Efforts have also been made to train the public on computer literacy, the NCA and SafetyComm South Sudan<sup>40</sup> have conducted awareness campaigns on cybersecurity and online safety. Additionally, media topics are included in the educational curriculum in primary and secondary schools.

However, despite these training initiatives, panelists agreed that the overall low level of digital literacy remains a significant challenge in raising awareness about the importance of digital security.

South Sudan doesn't have data protection laws in place. Its Data Protection Bill is still being developed as such there is no law to enforce in regard to data related crimes.



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



This indicator received the lowest score within the principle. The panelists expressed that media literacy is generally low, and there is a lack of a sustained strategy to

37 [South Sudan Central Bank Website Hijacked, Hackers Set Preconditions For Its Return – Sudans Post.](#)  
 38 [South Sudan Human Rights Defenders Network \(sshrdn.org\).](#)  
 39 [Home page of #defyhatenow.](#)  
 40 [Safety Comm – Online Safety for South Sudan.](#)

incorporate media literacy training into the national educational system.

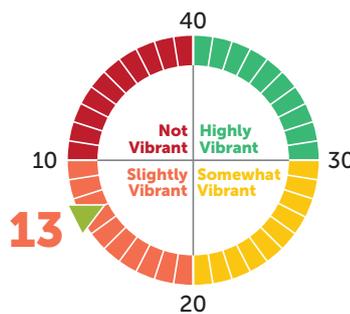
Recent developments, however, have been observed, such as the creation of a media literacy curriculum for the University of Juba, developed with the contribution of AMDISS through its Media Development Institute wing and UNESCO. According to one expert, this initiative “*began last year and recently underwent validation. Once it is approved, it will be disseminated to all schools, thereby making progress in addressing media literacy at higher learning institutions, universities, and other institutions.*”

The South Sudanese are increasingly using social media. This is a positive step, with the benefits of more engagement online and access to information. However, due to the generally low levels of digital and media literacy, there is a risk of people misinterpreting or misunderstanding the messages. This happens everywhere, but with the high conflict potential in South Sudan, the risk of dire offline consequences is significant. There is also an observed increase in hate speech on social media. Furthermore, the panelists highlighted that the perception of online content is influenced by ethnic divisions, as individuals tend to view content as coming from a specific ethnic group targeting another. Currently, there is only one fact-checking website, 211CHECK,<sup>41</sup> administered by Defy Hate Now South Sudan. There is a general lack of information regarding how social media platforms like Facebook function, including how they use personal information and engagement to influence the content that appears on users’ news feeds.

MIL [media and information literacy] is a topic that is new and not yet fully openly discussed or adopted in South Sudan.



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



Freedom of speech and expression are fundamental rights protected by the South Sudanese Constitution. Journalists, CSOs, and citizens use these rights to voice their concerns about contentious issues. However, despite legal provisions that safeguard freedom of speech, expression, and association, there are instances where these rights are restricted by security personnel.

Physical spaces for public debate, such as town halls, where citizens, media, CSOs,

<sup>41</sup> [211CHECK.](#)

and government representatives can openly discuss matters, are limited. Only two town meetings organized by the NCA took place in 2021 and 2022. However, online platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and others serve as arenas for ongoing debates. A panelist acknowledges that these platforms are “diverse and inclusive, with both men and women actively engaging in discussions about current affairs and advocating for policy changes.”

Censorship also manifests when workshops or conferences related to media are planned. Speakers and panelists are required to undergo a preapproval process by the National Security Service (NSS), leading to instances where the government removes participants without providing an explanation. This can impact the diversity of voices represented and specifically target certain individuals.

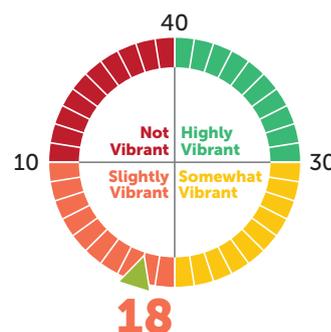
In summary, while South Sudan’s Transitional Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and expression, limitations have been observed in practice and in the implementation of the key provisions. Physical spaces for public discourse are limited, and censorship exists in the approval process for media-related activities, leading to potential restrictions on diversity and the targeted exclusion of individuals without transparent justifications. More inclusive debates are increasingly found on online platforms, where the debates involve a more diverse audience.



*Journalists and civil society and the public have rights to freedom, but currently in South Sudan these freedoms are not that much exercised due to the control by the government. People fear to express their rights because of arrest and torture by some government officials.*



## Indicator 14: Media and information producers engage with their audiences’ needs.



According to panel experts, there is active engagement between media outlets and their audiences. An example is the program *Wake Up Juba* on Radio Bakhita,<sup>42</sup> where listeners contribute ideas for topics to be discussed the following day. However, there are instances when the government intervenes and requests the cessation of call-in features if a listener expresses critical opinions.

42 [Radio Bakhita – Radio Bakhita \(catholicradionetwork.org\)](http://catholicradionetwork.org).

The government targets media houses that enjoy higher levels of public trust. In certain cases, the government demands that media houses apologize for their reporting, aiming to diminish the trust of audiences in those particular media outlets and cast doubt on their credibility. This practice contributes to limiting audience engagement and undermining trust in the media sector.

Insufficient resources, capacity, and security challenges in many parts of the country hinder media houses from effectively engaging with their audience. Consequently, media outlets often do not conduct audience research and analysis. As noted by a panelist, *“This is due to a lack of capacity, resources, and insecurity in most parts of the country, hindering the media house from engaging with its audience.”*

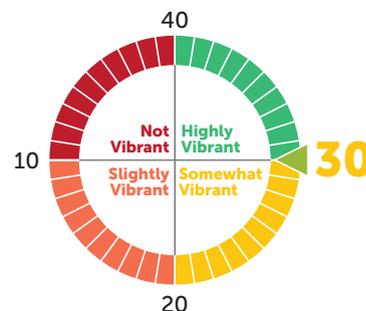
While there are rare instances of government engagement with the media and civil society, these interactions often serve as opportunities for the government to caution them about the content they produce and distribute, emphasizing the need for caution in their speech, broadcasts, or publications.



*People rely on the radio in their communities because it is the only option to obtain information. Some people even call directly for information they need. People in rural areas don't have access to telephones, and there are no sources of information. At any time, even up to 10 people in the family can gather around one radio.*



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



The community radio stations represent a real strength in the media landscape in South Sudan. Community radio serves as a prominent and widespread form of media, particularly in the country’s rural areas. These radio stations operate as nonprofit entities, catering to the specific needs and interests of the communities they serve.

According to the panelists, community radio plays a vital role in giving voice to marginalized populations and disseminating accurate and transparent information while discouraging misinformation. As one panelist noted, *“news and information are always neutral, and it has a lot of audiences listen to it since they are correct and right information, which is not biased.”*

Community media, including radio stations and a limited number of local newspapers, play a crucial role in providing relevant information for community engagement. They address local issues, cover news stories pertinent to their specific audiences, and facilitate community participation on matters such as politics, health, education, and public safety. However, access to community media may not be equally available to all individuals and communities, particularly those residing in remote or marginalized areas. Moreover, the production and distribution of content face challenges due to ongoing conflict and limited infrastructure. Despite these obstacles, community members rely on community media as a source of news and information.

A notable example is the CRN station<sup>43</sup> located in Yambio, which exclusively broadcasts in the Zande language. The prevalence of radio in local languages contributes to its status as the primary and most popular medium in the country, sometimes leading to multiple radio stations competing within a single community.

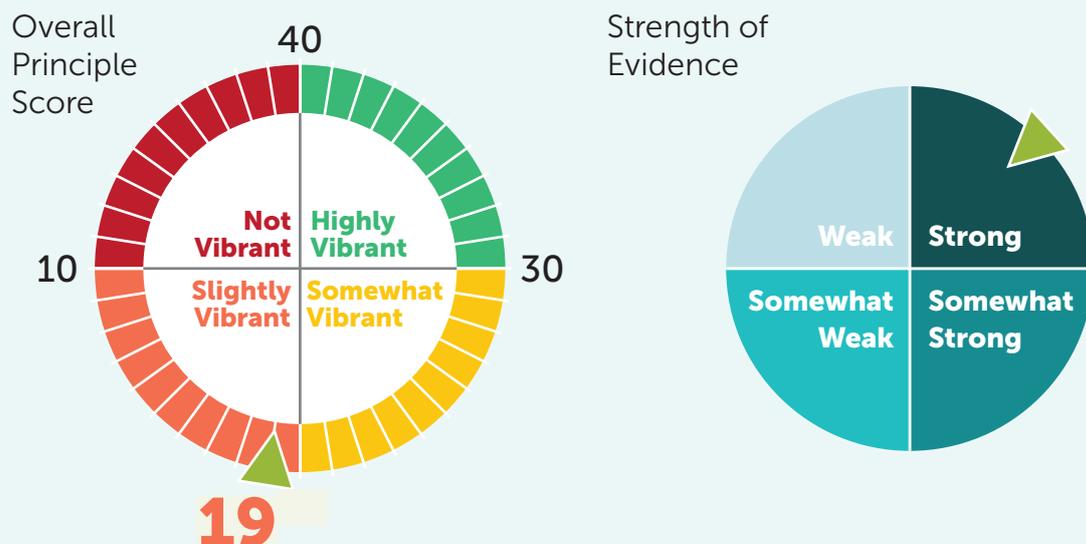
According to AMDISS Database of Media Houses in South Sudan, there are 53 operational radio stations operating today across the country, 65 community broadcasters, 14 commercial broadcasters, and 8 radio broadcasters.

Financial constraints pose significant challenges for community media. As highlighted by a panelist, *“Community media often relies on limited personal resources to initiate operations. The cessation of community media operations is primarily driven by financial limitations.”*

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43 [Home page – Catholic Radio Network for South Sudan and Nuba Mountains | CRN.](#)

# Principle 4: Transformative Action

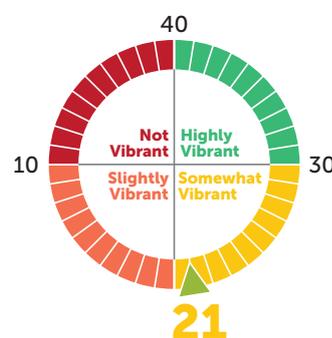


For this principle, Indicator 18, which looks at how civil society uses quality information, received the highest score of 27. Here, CSOs were recognized for their pivotal role in distributing reliable information and engaging with the government and with media outlets to foster beneficial policies, despite facing significant challenges related to conflict, instability, and resource limitations. Nevertheless, Indicator 20, which looks at how information supports good governance and democratic rights, was the lowest scoring of this principle, with a score of 13. This is reflective of the government’s apparent unwillingness to foster a transparent environment, impeding democratic rights by stifling journalists and media outlets who seek to expose corruption and human rights violations. A pervasive environment of fear and self-censorship exists within the media landscape, ultimately hampering the progression toward a transparent, accountable, and democratically healthy society.



## Indicator 16:

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



In recent years, South Sudan has witnessed an increase in new independent media outlets, including radio stations, social media platforms, online news sites, and blogs. As one expert panelist noted: “*These media channels strive to provide balanced,*

*objective reporting and to create opportunities for open discussions and exchange among communities, including those with different ideologies.”*

Social media platforms are increasingly used in South Sudan, despite the country’s limited but expanding internet penetration. Citizens are afforded a platform to connect and share information across ideological and geographic boundaries. This has enabled individuals to build new relationships and engage with a broader range of perspectives beyond their immediate social and political circles. According to the experts, these positive developments contrast with the challenges that persist in accessing information and media in certain parts of the country.

Government restrictions on media and free speech, as well as safety concerns for journalists and information producers, were identified as key challenges. Nevertheless, information producers and distribution channels continue to play a vital role in promoting dialogue, open sharing of information, and fostering a more inclusive and unified South Sudan.

While there are various exchanges taking place in WhatsApp groups and social media pages, facilitating individual citizen engagement and the exchange of viewpoints, there have been instances highlighting the government’s sensitivity to the potential repercussions of such information exchanges. One expert shared an example of the government closing a Facebook and WhatsApp group of the Central Equatoria State government due to concerns about the nature of conversations. However, on the news sections of independent media outlets like Eye Radio, exchanges remain uncensored and continue to grow.

These media exchanges are beginning to have an impact on government actions. As one panelist noted, discussions online and offline influenced by a statement made by the president regarding the inability to stop the conflict in Malakal<sup>44</sup> due to it being between “brothers,” prompted widespread discussions. The discussions eventually reached the president’s office, leading to a clarifying statement. This serves as a clear example of how effective reporting and public debate can impact discussions among people.

According to the panelists, individuals’ opinions are influenced by their backgrounds and origins, and tribalism has become highly toxic in this regard. The media experts



*Information producers and distribution channels play a crucial role in enabling and encouraging information sharing across ideological lines. While the country’s ongoing conflict and political tensions have led to significant polarization among different groups, efforts have been made to promote dialogue and bridge divisions through media and communications.*



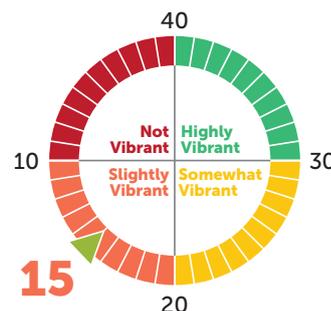
44 [Fighting in South Sudan Camp Leaves 13 Displaced People Dead: UN | Armed Groups News | Al Jazeera.](#)

acknowledged that remaining nonpartisan can be challenging, as audiences often demand a partisan stance. They emphasized that this situation is not a choice but a result of the environment in which media operates. Achieving balanced reporting can be difficult in such circumstances. An incident was shared where a newspaper, *No. 1 Citizen Daily*,<sup>45</sup> attempted to approach a story in a balanced manner by contacting a spokesperson from an opposition group. However, the result was that the media house was shut down, and the government demanded an apology. The expert highlighted that it is almost inevitable for media outlets to become partisan in this context, as they are often only able to quote sources based in Juba, excluding those in remote areas.



## Indicator 17:

Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.



Access to quality information remains a challenge for many people in South Sudan, particularly in remote or conflict-affected areas, impacting their ability to make well-informed decisions. Efforts are being made to provide people with quality information, and it is evident that radio plays a strong role in shaping people’s decisions regarding their health and safety. For example, organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>46</sup> and UNICEF<sup>47</sup> have engaged in campaigns to provide accurate information on vaccines, disease prevention, and treatment options, which have been widely appreciated.

South Sudan has not held an election since 2010 and the 2011 referendum for independence. Consequently, accountability among political leaders has become limited, and access to information regarding government actions is generally low. The experts highlighted instances where parliamentarians are replaced in an arbitrary manner, often through appointments of family members or acquaintances. Moreover, remote governors rarely visit their constituencies, limiting opportunities for local citizens to engage with their representatives to address regional needs. There is also limited information



*South Sudan main challenge is the limited quality of information that might “influence election outcomes instead of misinformation or malinformation.”*



45 [One Citizen Daily – Daily English Newspaper.](#)

46 [South Sudan \(who.int\).](#)

47 [UNICEF South Sudan.](#)

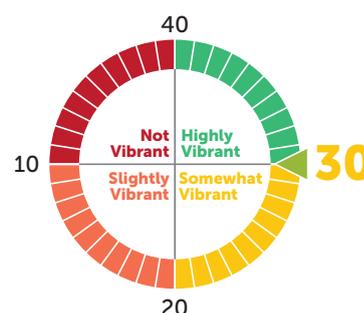
available online. This lack of access to information from the government was noted by the experts, who observed, “Most government institutions do not have a website. Even the Ministry of Information does not have a website.”

Attempts to hold national elections have repeatedly been postponed, but the panel experts anticipated more online postings and pages created by political parties as elections draw closer. This influx of information, whether credible or not, is likely to be influential with citizens due to the limited availability of alternative sources. Citizens increasingly rely on the internet, leading to a proliferation of misinformation resulting in a dearth of quality information for the public to make informed decisions in their daily lives.



## Indicator 18:

Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.



Panelists expressed optimism regarding the role of CSOs in South Sudan, acknowledging them as one of the most trusted entities in the country that provide reliable information to the public and to the government. They emphasized that CSOs rely heavily on news and issue press statements promptly, demonstrating their commitment to providing credible information.

While CSOs play a significant role in South Sudan, panelists noted that their presence only allows for limited public involvement in information policy or legislative change. CSOs engage with media outlets and provide journalists with quality information on crucial social issues, aiming to shape favorable policies on behalf of citizens.

CSOs operate within the framework of freedom of expression and media freedom guaranteed by Article 24 of the 2011 Transitional Constitution, which safeguards both. However, the experts cautioned that CSOs face challenges in accessing and using quality information in South Sudan. The ongoing conflict and instability, the country’s limited infrastructure,



*Civil society organizations (CSOs) in South Sudan play a vital role in using quality information to improve their communities. CSOs are often composed of community members who are passionate about addressing social issues and promoting positive change. These organizations typically have a deep understanding of the local context and use data and information to advocate for policies that can make a difference.*



and resources for data collection and analysis pose difficulties in gathering accurate and reliable data to support their work.

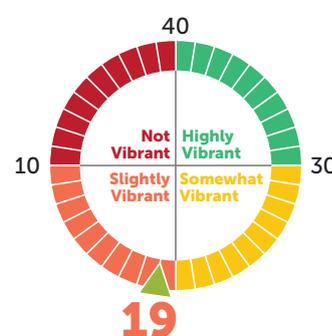
CSOs are instrumental in ensuring civic participation, engaging with governments by providing reliable and relevant information. Noteworthy examples include organizations that use data and research to monitor human rights abuses and promote peace-building efforts, such as Organization for Nonviolence and Development (ONAD).<sup>48</sup> Other CSOs focus on advancing education and health policies through evidence-based advocacy. Access to quality information empowers these organizations to drive positive change and improve communities in South Sudan.

CSOs have played an effective role in the government’s decision-making process, providing input during negotiations for the R-ARCSS. Panelists highlighted the importance of the current participation of CSOs in the implementation mechanisms of the agreement during the negotiation process in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.



## Indicator 19:

Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.



The panelists also discussed the extent to which the government uses quality information in making public policy decisions. One expert expressed concerns about the level of transparency, accountability, and evidence-based decision-making in the South Sudanese government. Governance challenges, such as limited institutional capacity and political instability, hinder the government’s ability to collect and utilize accurate and reliable data and evidence for informed policy decisions.

The media experts emphasized the challenging nature of engaging with the government, highlighting the limited mechanisms available for such engagement. According to the panelists, a mutual distrust between the media, CSOs, and the government exists. The government employs various methods such as press conferences, advocacy meetings, and training workshops, which the panelists considered “somehow



*There’s limited government engagement with media. The media has only been used to pass on information to the public and not used to gather feedback from the public (one-way means of communication). There’s lack of government trust of the local media.*



48 [Home page | Organisation for Nonviolence and Development \(onadev.org\)](https://onadev.org).

effective” but described as “*passive mechanisms*” that offer limited opportunity for questioning.

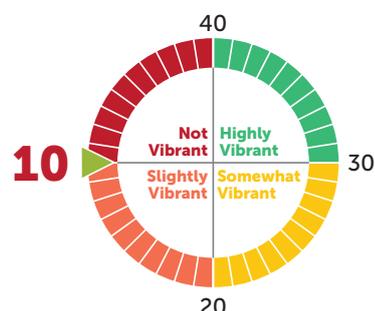
Engaging with government officials poses difficulties for the media, as government officials often refrain from active participation and instead tend to focus on defending themselves in an intimidatory way. As one panelist noted, “*If you include (government officials) in a panel discussion, they will only be defending themselves. They will be scared people.*” Challenging them can result in fear of being marked or targeted. In Wau, issues related to mining and parliamentary procedures have particularly raised concerns. Additionally, institutions of government are weak—and, in some cases, nonexistent—failing to provide meaningful engagement on media issues in many parts of South Sudan.

The distrust held by the media and CSOs toward the government’s use of quality information stems from the belief that information is suppressed and facts are distorted for political gain or to maintain power. This exacerbates the challenges that impede evidence-based policymaking.

Although there have been several attempts and programs aimed at improving the use of quality information in South Sudan, there remains a pressing need for greater transparency, accountability, and institutional capacity to support effective evidence-based governance.



## Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.



The panelists unanimously agreed that the government in South Sudan demonstrates a lack of willingness to address governance issues and uphold democratic norms within the country. When media outlets cover topics related to human rights violations or corruption, the government often condemns them and dismisses the information as false or unacceptable. This hostile response extends to cases where journalists or radio operators expose corruption involving government officials, leading to their arrest. The panelists further highlighted, “*Journalists or radio operators have been arrested for airing out*



*Despite these positive developments, there are still significant challenges to information and media freedom in South Sudan, including government restrictions on journalistic access, harassment and violence against journalists, and economic pressures on media outlets.*



*some [dirty laundry from] government officials who corrupt the country.”* This pattern of targeting individuals who expose corruption illustrates the government’s stance on discussions concerning corrupt practices. Consequently, journalists and media outlets have resorted to self-censorship as a means of protection.

The government consistently dismisses coverage of human rights violations and labels it as false or unacceptable. An example from 2021 illustrates this behavior: An opinion writer who authored a piece about the former minister of finance was arrested and imprisoned for one year.<sup>49</sup> Despite an internal investigation that resulted in the removal of the minister, journalists had to face jail time. Whenever corruption is reported, the government tends to accuse individuals of defamation, treating it as a criminal offense.

South Sudan is grappling with persistent challenges to democratic institutions and practices. Therefore, the significance of access to information cannot be overstated in fostering transparency, accountability, and civic engagement. In recent years, independent media outlets have emerged, providing citizens with alternatives to state-controlled public media and amplifying diverse perspectives for critical issues. These are big steps forward, but the media face numerous structural challenges.

An overall environment of fear and harassment persists, which undermines the efforts to enhance good governance and democracy within South Sudan. There is an atmosphere of intimidation and persecution that poses a significant challenge to the free flow of information, independent journalism, and open exchanges of ideas between people. This fear of reprisals, compounded with other challenges, ultimately impedes progress toward a more transparent, accountable, and democratic society.

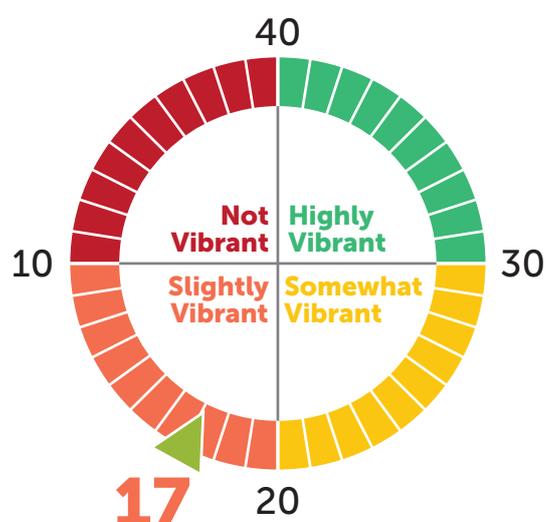
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49 [Family Of A Journalist To Appeal Court Ruling In Favor Of Finance Minister – Eye Radio.](#)

# VIBE Overall Scoring Result

## South Sudan's overall country score is 17

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



## Data Comparison with Other VIBE Reports<sup>50</sup>

Given that this is the first VIBE report for an African country, possible score comparisons are with countries from Eurasian nations where the same methodology has been used in the same year.

Country	Overall Score year 2022
Kosovo	23
North Macedonia	23
Ukraine	22
Armenia	22
Bosnia and Herzegovina	19
<b>South Sudan</b>	<b>17</b>
Serbia	15
Uzbekistan	13
Tajikistan	13
Russia	12

<sup>50</sup> Data from IREX VIBE report dashboard: [VIBE – Vibrant Information Barometer \(irex.org\)](https://irex.org/vibe).

# Conclusions

## Summary of Conclusions by Principle



### Principle Number 1: Information Quality

South Sudan's media landscape reveals a dichotomy of subtle content diversity amid pervasive challenges, such as censorship, misinformation, and technical and financial deficiencies affecting the production and dissemination of quality information. Issues like persistent hate speech and the suppression of varied viewpoints underscore deeply entrenched problems in the nation's information channels. Furthermore, the evident disparity in the accuracy of content between professional and nonprofessional journalists, especially in online platforms, coupled with aspects of limited inclusivity and gender representation, signal areas crucial for further development and advocacy. Despite facing various challenges, including government pressure and a fragile infrastructure, journalists and media houses demonstrate a commendable strength and resourcefulness, continuing to fulfill the informational needs of the populace in a challenging environment. The need for enhanced journalistic training, stringent fact-checking mechanisms, and safeguarding ethical integrity and community protection from hate speech and malinformation is paramount to foster a media environment conducive to democracy and good governance.



### Principle Number 2: Multiple Channels

The media environment in South Sudan confronts daunting challenges despite the country having enacted solid laws aligned with international standards for safeguarding freedom of expression and information access. A gap exists between policy and how it is implemented, underscored by media suppression and misuse of laws significantly hamper the operation and establishment of media outlets, thus limiting information access and stifling free expression. While the nation contends with inevitable infrastructure limitations, particularly in rural areas, the capital, Juba, offers relatively broader access to varied media. Enforcement of existing media laws is inadequate, and the limited diversity and independence of information channels raise concerns about the practical availability and reliability of information. Additionally, mechanisms intended to facilitate the establishment of media outlets and access to governmental information often become entangled in financial, regulatory, and political obstacles, making the realization of theoretical guarantees and freedoms more aspirational than actualized across the country.



### Principle Number 3: Information Consumption and Engagement

Community radio stations stand out as vital conduits for disseminating localized information in South Sudan, despite grappling with notable financial and infrastructural challenges. While the landscape is dotted with endeavors aimed at bolstering media and information literacy, notably through the prospective implementation of a media and information literacy (MIL) policy and strategy, the nation deals with a range of challenges in augmenting digital and media literacy and enhancing online and audience engagement. The prevalent inadequacies in digital literacy and looming threats from unimplemented regulatory frameworks for online security, such as the Cyber Crimes and Computer Misuse Provisional Order of 2021, foment an environment conducive to misinformation and risks to citizen privacy. Even with social media facilitating enhanced access to information, it brings along threats of hate speech and misinformation, oftentimes fanning the flames of ethnic divisions. Nevertheless, different sectors continue working to support media and digital platforms, aiming to enhance access to information and engagement throughout South Sudan's digital landscape.



### Principle Number 4: Transformative Action

Although promising strides signal resilience and innovation in South Sudan's media landscape, such as the rise of independent media outlets and the influential role of CSOs, substantial hurdles persist, particularly in relation to information suppression concerning corruption, accountability, and human rights violations. The media's potential to instigate positive change within society is noticeably stifled by a prevailing climate of fear and various restrictions. Although independent media entities, including radio and online platforms, have facilitated dialogue and even swayed government action, access to quality information remains a critical challenge, more so in remote areas. The burgeoning use of social media has enabled citizen connection and information sharing but has also invited governmental scrutiny and occasional intervention. CSOs have emerged as crucial players in supplying reliable information and influencing policies, even while facing challenges related to information accuracy and accessibility. Efforts to improve governance in South Sudan through reliable information face challenges from deep-rooted issues, distrust between the government, media, and CSOs, and suppression of critical information. Thus, the media, citizens, and CSOs navigate a tricky path, seeking to advance democratic practices and governance amid these significant constraints.

## Final Notes

South Sudan is a young country with many urgent challenges. The good news is that there are signs of improvement in many new media outlets emerging and people engaging in online debates whenever they have access to the internet. Journalists and local CSOs are proving to be resilient in their work despite considerable challenges. Unfortunately, these challenges are very serious. This report highlights significant challenges hampering the media's healthy functioning in the nation, thereby signaling an urgent need for systemic interventions or reforms.

The media landscape in South Sudan is critically unstable, with tenuous freedom of expression, even as journalists show their commitment and courage in navigating intricate political, security, and economic conditions. In the general public, the challenges are further intensified by low digital access, low digital literacy, and a pervasive climate of fear. Regarding MIL, despite lacking a national strategy, positive initiatives—such as those by the University of Juba in collaboration with AMDISS and UNESCO—are underway to develop a MIL curriculum that, upon approval, could be distributed across higher education and other institutions. There is a pressing need for reforms and intervention from local actors (media and CSOs) and potentially international actors, steered by a dedication to enhancing the quality, diversity, and independence of information production and dissemination. These reforms must navigate the complex relationships between policy and its effective applications, resources, journalists' protection, dialogue with government, and societal media perceptions. Establishing a media environment that enables free information flow and encourages critical engagement will be pivotal to propelling democratic governance and sustainable development in South Sudan.

Journalists should be prepared to report on issues such as the conflict involving South Sudan's northern neighbor, Sudan, and its humanitarian implications, which poses a latent threat to South Sudan's already precarious situation. Such transnational predicaments could exacerbate interethnic tensions within South Sudan, heightening challenges for independent media through increased polarization and an uptick in hate speech and misinformation among varied groups.

South Sudanese media also should prioritize capacity-building initiatives, particularly in anticipation of potential future electoral cycles, which are likely to introduce periods of escalated intensity and possibly amplify political and interethnic tensions within the country.

# Recommendations

These are the strategic recommendations based on the expert discussions in April and the meeting in September, where a broader group of media, CSOs, and government representatives reviewed the initial VIBE findings.

## Capacity-Building Activities

- Support and increase the capacity of local media education institutions to provide adequate quality education for journalists both in Juba and outside Juba.
- Offer holistic security training for journalists (physical, digital, psychosocial, risk mapping, and assessment), including conducting training of trainers.
- Organize specific training for journalists to cover and report on humanitarian crises, especially targeting hard-to-reach communities in South Sudan.
- Train journalists to cover humanitarian crises in hard-to-reach communities in South Sudan. Support for media houses and journalists is required for preparing and covering elections, including working with electoral institutions, civil society, communities, and regional and international actors.
- Increase fact-checking capabilities of media outlets, particularly radio stations. Build and strengthen the fact-checking capabilities of media outlets and journalists.
- To expand the capacity building of journalists in remote communities, it is recommended that the Media Development Institute provide online recorded lectures to be accessed through online platforms for media practitioners from the states to benefit from.

## Selected Media Infrastructure Investments

- Select key media outlets to receive infrastructure investment.

## On Content Creation

- It is recommended that media practitioners specialize in other areas, such as health and education, produce content on different thematic areas for their audiences.

## Relationship between Media and Government

- To build mutual understanding, trust, and confidence between the media and government, it is recommended that regular dialogue forums be organized between the media and government institutions.

## Coalition of Media and CSOs

- Facilitate media actors to forge coalitions with CSOs to safeguard the legal protections of journalists and effectively implement current media laws and policies.
- As a broader strategy to address shrinking media space, harassment, intimidation, and threats, it is recommended that media and CSOs engage the Ministry of ICT & Postal Services and Media Authority to establish the Media Appeal Board as required by section 58 of the Media Authority Act of 2013. Improving coordination between the media and other CSOs on content production is needed to serve citizens better.

## Media and the Private Sector

- Support media initiatives such as media sustainability forum to increase the interaction between media houses and private/public economic sectors to facilitate greater collaboration, exchange of experiences, and learning between the media and the private sector thus opening opportunities for partnerships and media sustainability.

## Misinformation, Disinformation, and Malinformation Awareness

- Exclusive awareness of misinformation/disinformation and malinformation should be through radio talk shows in different media houses and through community radio, together with AMDISS.
- Conduct mapping of audience and preferences.
- Implement media audience research in USAID targeted states/counties of operation to obtain a planning baseline. Also, to understand the level of media influence, content, talent, reach, brand awareness, and market dynamics. While conducting the audience research, consider the grassroots and diaspora voices as information consumption.

## Gender

- Support gender and inclusion initiatives to increase the number of females and those excluded in the media.
- To reduce the sexual exploitation of female journalists in hard-to-reach communities and increase female journalists' outreach reporting, safety mechanisms should be identified and implemented by media managers including government at all levels.

## Sustainability

- Promote financial, institutional, and social sustainability for media outlets in South Sudan while ensuring the independence and effectiveness of media outlets in a challenging financial environment.
- While media organizations continue to receive funding from donors, it is recommended that media houses become independent financially and have their revenue-generating sources to remain sustainable.

## For Future of VIBE Editions

- In the future, VIBE Implementation considerations will be needed to include consumer voices. This is necessary because the VIBE contains principles on Information Quality, Multiple Channels: How Information Flows, Information Consumption and Engagement, and Transformative Action: How Information Drives Behavior.

# Appendix

## Annex 1.

### Relevant Statistics

Population (2023 estimate) 12,118,379

Capital city: Juba

Religions (% of population)<sup>51</sup>

- 60.5% Christianity
- 32.9% Traditional faiths
- 6.2% Islam
- 0.4% Other/none

The ethnicity of South Sudan: 64 tribes

More than 60 indigenous languages

Literacy rate 34.52%<sup>52</sup>

Name of president or head of state: 1

Next scheduled local, presidential, and parliamentary elections: December 2024 (anticipated)

Internet usage: Please indicate the number of internet users or the percentage of population regularly accessing the internet.

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51 “South Sudan.” Global Religious Futures. Pew Research Center. Retrieved 1 July 2023.

52 South Sudan Literacy Rate 2008-2023 <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/SSD/south-sudan/literacy-rate>.

## Annex 2.

# Disinformation, Misinformation, and Malinformation: Key Definitions and Concepts<sup>53</sup>

### **Disinformation**

Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country.

### **Misinformation**

Information that is false but not created with the intention of causing harm.

### **Malinformation**

Information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, social group, organization, or country.

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53 [Journalism, “Fake News” and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training \(unesco.org\)](https://unesco.org)

