

ARMENIA



Vibrant Information Barometer

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

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

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

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

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

23

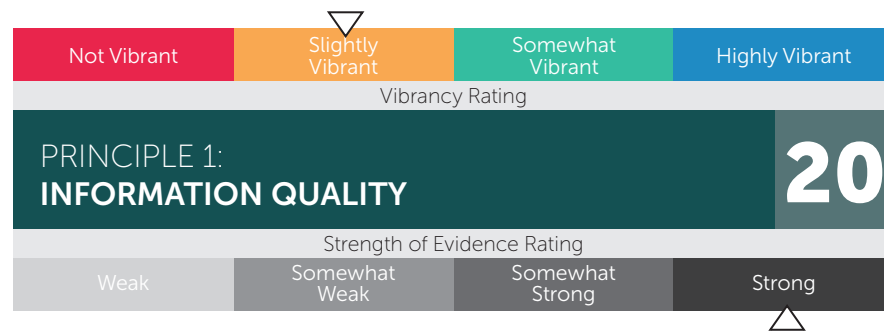
Armenia continued to experience a great deal of political and social turmoil during 2022. Azerbaijan's invasion of Armenia continued to raise political tensions amid peace talks and negotiations of a peace treaty. Generally speaking, an influx of Russian immigrants during the Ukrainian war kept Armenian media and society busy.

On the night of September 12, Azerbaijan launched large-caliber weapons, artillery, rocket systems, and drones, targeting cities along the southern part of Armenia's border with Azerbaijan. At least 208 Armenian soldiers were killed or went missing during the two-day attack on 36 towns, including the communities of Goris, Sisian, Kapan, Jermuk, Vardenis, Tegh, and Gegharnasar. Approximately 192 houses, three hotels, two schools, a medical facility, and other vital infrastructure were completely or partially destroyed, along with two ambulances and four civilian vehicles. Freedom House's President Michael J. Abramowitz condemned the attacks in a September 14th statement, saying, "The Azerbaijani armed forces must immediately cease their deadly attacks on Armenian territory and commit to the ongoing peace process facilitated by the EU, the US, and Russia." Due to the border conflict, journalists were unsafe during 2022. During the September border crisis, a total of seven Armenian and foreign journalists and cameramen in Sotk village in the Gegharkunik marz [administrative region] were targeted, including correspondents of the Public TV Company of Armenia, Armenpress news agency, and the Radar Armenia news website.

A 2021 law criminalizing the act of insulting government officials, "On Making Amendments to the Republic of

Armenia Civil Legislation," also known as the "grave insult" law, was abandoned following an uproar and pressure from local and international civil rights organizations. Additionally, for the first time in Armenia, journalists were targeted by Pegasus spyware. Developed by the Israeli cyber-arms company NSO Group, Pegasus can be covertly installed on mobile phones. Three such spyware cases were reported in 2022, and it is yet unclear who was behind this.

The quality of information has not significantly improved, and in general, it remains quite poor. However, the panelists agreed that perhaps because no major elections occurred, the level of misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech was lower in calendar year 2022 than in 2021. Those, nevertheless, are still major issues in the Armenian media. Most media are still heavily influenced by their mostly opaque ownership. Media literacy remains a major challenge for Armenia, despite work to increase its level that is done by CSOs, local, and international organizations. The existing fact-checking platforms, organizations, although gaining some momentum, are as yet insufficient to combat the current volume of fake information and manipulations. As has been the case for years, with a few exceptions, news and information sources remain largely partisan and biased.



This principle scored slightly better in 2022 than it did in 2021. Although Armenia had many internal and external political developments, including Azerbaijan’s invasion of Armenia, no major elections occurred to stir up misinformation. The level of misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech has not changed since 2021, panelists concurred. Indicator 4, concerning inclusive and diverse news content, scored highest again, while Indicators 3 and 5, concerning hate speech and varied financial sources, scored the lowest, as in last year’s study.

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

Gegham Baghdasaryan, president of Public Agenda NGO, said that varied news content exists and is an important indicator. Other panelists agreed that there are no major impediments to accessing professional and nonprofessional news sources.

Armenia lacks quality journalism training for providing ethical, evidence-based, and coherent news content. Some universities offer formal journalism training but with limited impact, and training for nonprofessional content producers is on an ad hoc basis. International media organizations provide training that is mostly short-term and dependent on donor funding, which represents a major impediment to building and nurturing a pool of potential and existing media professionals trained according to high-quality international standards. “There is the Media Factory, a project by Hetq.am [funded by USAID],

which does an exceptional job, but it isn’t a part of the educational system, and we don’t know [if the funding will be available] in, say, five years from now,” said Karen Harutyunyan, editor-in-chief of Civilnet.am. After the COVID health crisis, funding for journalism training by international donors dwindled, according to Nelli Babayan, a journalist with Aravot.am. However, now that the crisis is easing, some offline training has resumed with the hope of more in the coming year, said Suren Deheryan, chairman of Journalists for the Future NGO. Panelists agreed that Armenia has a significant need for journalism training, more than ever.

Donor-funded trainings mainly attract media outlet representatives who respect fact-based, unbiased, ethical reporting. The propaganda-disseminating outlets do not seek this training at all, maintained Babayan and journalist Gegham Baghdasaryan.

According to reporter Tirayr Muradyan of Hetq.am, not all trainings are high quality. “Sometimes I have the impression that these trainings are conducted by ‘retirees,’ [or nonprofessionals who use trivial content],” Muradyan said. He added that training offerings should conduct needs assessments first and then tailor classes accordingly.

Harutyunyan identified four broad categories of content producers: outlets owned by people close to the government; oppositional media associated with Armenia’s second and third presidents; Russian outlets and their proxies; and a fourth narrow niche of independent outlets. “For the truly independent outlets that do not serve a political agenda [in the fourth category], the content producers [do] act in an ethical and accountable manner, respect facts, and strive to represent the truth,” Harutyunyan said. “And although they are [in the] minority number-wise, I wouldn’t say their impact is insignificant—[it] is far more than the space they occupy,” he said. A wide range of outlets that spread information without fact-checking or use an unethical and unaccountable manner have large audiences, which has been the case for years with little change. Also, traditionally, the quality of information changes if major elections occur during a given year. Media members face hardly any professional ramifications for producing poor-quality content. “These ramifications work for only the ethical, responsible outlets [which might

stumble occasionally and genuinely seek to rectify the situation], but for irresponsible outlets that deliberately spread false information, there are no professional consequences,” said political analyst and researcher Edgar Vardanyan of Boon.tv. “On the contrary, they get aggressive and assault back [if faced with consequences],” added Martirosyan.

The media’s overall body of content covers a variety of topics—more political and social issues but less specialized and thematic reporting. Moreover, journalists hold government officials accountable. “I know from our experience that when you report on a state official’s actions dealing with, for example, corruption risks, they provide feedback themselves or through their speakers or they invite you to a coffee, which you turn down,” maintained Harutyunyan.

“Unfortunately, there might not be any consequences, such as resignations or apologies, but we also have to define ‘consequences’—there can be other forms of consequences, such as the marred reputation of a public figure,” Harutyunyan added. Muradyan maintained that fair reporting on government officials does result in public discourse, and there are possibilities for further consequences. One example was the January 2022 resignation of President Armen Sarkissian, which directly resulted from an unpublished report and ongoing investigation by news platform Hetq.am. Sarkissian attributed his resignation to a lack of power and tools to implement governmental checks and balances. However, his resignation actually followed Hetq.am’s investigation exposing that Sarkissian hid his dual citizenship in St. Kitts and Nevis, which is unlawful under Armenia’s constitution. Fearing possible criminal prosecution, he resigned while abroad.

Overall, regional, national, and international news are available and accessible. But some long-standing hurdles still endure. “The significant part of Armenian media cover international topics through indirect sources—mostly Russian-language sources,” Harutyunyan observed. He suggested that Public Radio of Armenia’s international news is

translated from Russian, and for the majority of outlets it is easier and less costly to translate media content from Russian than from other languages. CyberHub’s Martirosyan suggested laziness might also play a factor, noting that it is easier to translate completed articles rather than conducting proper research and writing original content. In addition, few outlets can afford to keep full-time or freelance correspondents across Armenia, let alone in other countries. “We have a bureau in Goris, Syunik marz, and another one in Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh),” Harutyunyan of Civilnet.am said. The Goris bureau was started with donor funding which subsequently ended, and the news platform began the difficult process of finding other sources of income, he added. “Keeping a correspondent in [administrative regions] is a serious challenge for a media outlet in Armenia,” Harutyunyan said.

“For the truly independent outlets that do not serve a political agenda, the content producers do act in an ethical and accountable manner, respect facts, and strive to represent the truth,” said Karen Harutyunyan, editor-in-chief of Civilnet.am.

News content is seldom editorially independent and depends on whether the outlet is a propaganda tool or a genuine media outlet adhering to high-quality professional standards, according to Harutyunyan. He said if he disagrees with a Civilnet.am journalist’s story, but the journalist proves the story is accurate, as editor-in-chief, “I don’t censor.”

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

Fact-based, well-sourced, and objective information is a rarity rather than the norm. Professional and nonprofessional content producers commonly create and disseminate false or misleading information. Misinformation is prevalent partly because outlets do not fact-check or consult with multiple sources, especially when faced with tight deadlines. For example, Martirosyan observed that last year the Russian state-owned news agency, TASS, claimed 400 EU observers were being deployed to Armenia’s border with Azerbaijan. However, [many outlets] passed along that the figure was 400, “[without] even bothering to check that [the correct number was] 40, not 400,” he said.

Disinformation is more prolific and blatant in nonprofessional content disseminated through apps such as Telegram--an instant-messaging app with channels that broadcast public messages directly to cell phones--TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. However, panelists agreed that the government does not create or disseminate false or misleading information through its official channels.

In general, journalists hold government accountable by identifying misinformation when it is disseminated. Fact-checking platforms CivilnetCheck and Fip.am regularly examine statements by public figures, exposing false claims and manipulations, which are common. Although these sites are not widely known to the public, many media outlets follow up on their fact-checking to publicly debunk false content.

There are seldom professional ramifications for creating or spreading false information. Fact-checking platforms have a small audience, so false information is easily spread without any consequences, according to Babayan. “I don’t know of any cases when several responsible and ethical outlets ... reproach the irresponsible outlets by saying, ‘What you’re doing is rubbish; let’s work within the ethical standards,’” she added.

Harutyunyan observed that no matter how rigorous fact-checking is, the impact of misinformation often outweighs the impact of debunking it. “Debunking reaches around 20 percent of the audience of the original information, and often, even after [falsehoods are publicized], many still are prone to believe the misinformation,” maintained Harutyunyan. He added, however, that journalists do need to attempt to proactively address disinformation, especially for certain topics that have higher misinformation risks. Traditionally, these topics include negotiations around Nagorno-Karabakh, controversial legislation, and the appointment of government officials.

For journalists, CSOs, and active citizens, fact-checking resources--such as Fip.am, Media.am, and CivilnetCheck--are handy tools. The panelists agreed that more fact-checking platforms and resources are needed

to combat the ever-increasing volume of misinformation. In addition, because Armenian society is extremely polarized, people tend to watch TV outlets that reaffirm their ideas, regardless of professional news quality.

Media outlets and their social media normally have mechanisms in place to moderate content to reduce misinformation and hate speech. However, it is often difficult to track the bulk of malicious content generated in a comments section.

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

Foreign governments and their proxies actively create and disseminate misinformation and hate speech, with Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkey being the most notable, panelists observed. “Circles close to the Kremlin intentionally and blatantly create and disseminate disinformation through their proxies in Armenia,” Vardanyan commented, adding that Azerbaijan also spreads disinformation but without use of proxy outlets. Martirosyan noted that, “Azerbaijanis are more active but their impact is weaker [than the Kremlin’s] because [the Kremlin’s] influence comes through Armenian proxies.”

During and after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war, Azerbaijani state propaganda was rampant on social media and the country’s national news sites, with some efforts targeting international audiences (including Armenians), according to the 2021 Freedom House study *Disinformation and Misinformation in Armenia*. Although Armenian fact-checkers rushed to investigate prominent stories from Azerbaijani sources to dispel rumors, Azerbaijani misinformation operations significantly impacted the Armenian public, the report stated. Some operations harassed social media users, including soldiers’ families, and coordinated social media campaigns spread disinformation.

Russian mal-information twists real events to change the meaning to

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suit their needs, manipulations that could be spotted right away if the audience could read English. For example, Telegram and other social media posted the headline, “EU provided € 31 million to integrate LGBT values in Armenia.” The post was accompanied by a screenshot of the English text and a photo from the genuine EU Neighbours East website. However, the real headline from the EU Neighbours East site said, “EU provided € 31 million in 2021 to support civil society organizations.”

Hate speech is more prolific on social media. However, professional content creators often reference nonprofessional content producers, the majority from Telegram channels. Muradyan suggested that public reproach can have more impact than the criticism of professional associations. “Based on my communication with different journalists working at different media outlets, I have come to a conclusion that even a reporter working at Public TV when he/she sees how [adverse reactions] his/her story is discussed in social media [it has a strong impact],” he said.

The panelists found it hard to gauge whether creators of mal-information or hate speech lose audience numbers as a result of their posts or whether, on the contrary, it increases their audiences. Both can occur in some instances. In general, the target audiences that tune in for a specific type, quality, or format of content remain loyal to their preferred content creators regardless of the content’s misinformation.

Media outlets have self-regulatory mechanisms or processes in place for moderating content to reduce mal-information or hate speech. However, panelists noted that the outlets have difficulty deciding which comments should be removed. Vardanyan also notes that the journalism community finds it hard to decide what to do with comments or questions that contain serious criticisms but also some sort of insult. The issue is whether to remove the insult and keep the question or ignore the question altogether. This often occurs during live Facebook shows, when a host reads questions from users and addresses them to guests.

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

Traditional mainstream media inadequately cover viewpoints of all genders, particularly sexual minorities. The public still seems resistant to LGBT coverage and Public TV rarely covers it, according to Vardanyan of Boon.tv. But he said his outlet covers a wide range of diverse issues, including LGBT. “I can see there is a self-censorship issue with many major media outlets regarding a few topics, like LGBT,” he said. “For a program I hosted dedicated to gender issues, I invited a guest speaker, and their first question was, ‘Is it going to be open?’, which meant that other platforms they appeared on were censored,” Vardanyan noted. “Unless there is a connected news event, few journalists dare cover LGBT issues, fearing adverse reactions would follow,” suggested Babayan.

The panelists commented that currently at least one media source will cover any kind of fringe topic with increasing variety. Marginalized groups not represented in the mainstream media have more alternative methods and platforms to express their views. Ethnic minority issues are covered if a news event or development occurs, Babayan said. “It’s not like a reporter or an editor decides, ‘Let me go and see what’s up’ [with an ethnic minority]. But rather, a news event spurs that coverage, and it’s also resourceful to get to those villages [where the news occurred],” she maintained. No actual taboos exist concerning covering diverse communities. “[But] I don’t see reporters excited and eager to find out what diversity is out there and cover it,” observed Vardanyan.

There are still more female than male professional content producers because of low pay in the field. Panelists note now many women are in leading positions in management or as editors and owners.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

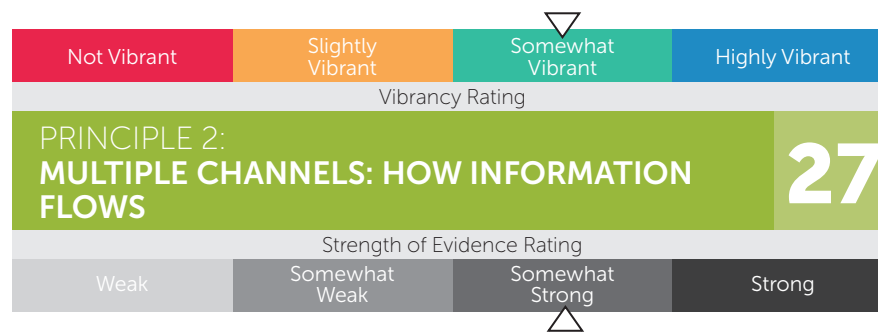
Professional content producers find it increasingly difficult to produce high-quality information because of limited funding streams. A great deal of advertising goes to social media, according to Suren Deheryan of Journalists for the Future, who added that media outlets have difficulty producing quality content without international funding. “Our

market is tiny, and the financial issue is a very serious one,” Babayan agreed. “Sufficient financial resources exist to survive, but there are not [sufficient] resources to produce quality information,” maintained G. Baghdasaryan.

Apolitical public and private funding sources are minimal, if they exist at all. Subscription-type models have not yet been developed in Armenia, and huge portions of local advertising budgets continue to go to international companies, such as Meta (for Facebook and Instagram) or Google. Journalist Anahit Baghdasaryan of Goris Press Club agreed that local advertising revenues mostly go to either media with national coverage or directly to social networks. Advertising placement is less politicized, and although some pro-government-associated business circles might choose not to advertise in oppositional media, it is less common now than years ago. According to the panelists, this aspect of the media market has improved.

Government subsidies, or “grants,” are limited to regional print media, language outlets, or cultural literary publications. Thirty-one outlets altogether get just under AMD 71 million (approximately \$183,000). The amount for each outlet varies from AMD 1 million (approximately \$2,500) to around AMD 5 million (\$12,870).

Journalists do not earn sufficient salaries and often seek outside funding to make a living wage, according to Muradyan. Some select media have donor-funded salaries that are adequate and slightly above average, and some politically affiliated outlets have some well-paid positions. But on average, journalists’ salaries remain low, like in other sectors. “The private sector aggressively attracts communications specialists, and a successful journalist can be easily tempted [to work for the private sector], which is easier and earns a significantly higher salary,” Deheryan maintained.



Up one point from last year’s study, Principle 2 received high scores, due in part to high scores for Indicator 7, which reflects that information technology infrastructure meets most people’s needs. Indicator 10, concerning independent media channels, scored the lowest in this principle, indicating that the majority of media organizations are still influenced by hidden ownership. In the VIBE studies for calendar years 2020 and 2021, the VIBE study’s score for this principle decreased two points--from 28 to 26--indicating a challenge for free press in Armenia. This 2023 study marks something of a recovery in this principle with the removal of the “grave insults” law, a restrictive and regressive piece of legislation. More than 800 filed criminal cases related to this law will be dropped.

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

Legal protections for freedom of speech exist in Armenia. “First [after the 2018 revolution], the new government gave a “green light” to the media and freedom of speech. But later we saw restrictions of journalists’ movements in the National Assembly,” Muradyan observed.

In 2010, Armenia was a pioneer among former Soviet Union countries to decriminalize libel. This achievement, however, was marred by the major setback last year with the passage of the “grave insults” law, which called for a one- to three-month prison term for “seriously” insulting a government official. In addition, the act of cursing or insulting a person’s dignity in an “extremely indecent” manner called for a fine of up to AMD

500,000 (\$1,250); serious insult to public figures called for a fine of up to AMD 1 million (\$2,500); and committing “grave insult” against the same person regularly required a fine of up to AMD 3 million (\$7,500). In July 2022, the government dropped this restrictive provision in the new criminal code, which was less a demonstration of the government’s good will and more a reaction to harsh and consistent condemnation of the law by local and international CSOs and media organizations. Another controversial amendment to the civil liability law for defamation and libel, also adopted during 2021, remains unchanged. For defamation, the penalty tripled from AMD 1 million (\$2,500) to AMD 3 million (\$7,500) and from AMD 2 million (\$5,000) to AMD 6 million (\$15,000) for libel. Opponents challenged the law in the Constitutional Court but could not change it. These restrictive pieces of legislation might not be used actively during relative political calm but could be used if political situations heat up, Muradyan noted.

Self-censorship still endures for various reasons. For example, audience reaction might force reporters to self-censor, Harutyunyan maintains. “This [often occurs in] smaller communities, where reporters have many relatives and friends, so they might take into consideration the fact that if they cover a certain topic it might harm/touch his/her relative,” A. Baghdasaryan observed. “Likewise, if a reporter writes something negative about Nikol Pashinyan [the Armenian prime minister], he or she is called all sorts of names by social media users, both fake and real,” noted Babayan, adding that journalists do not take threats from social media users seriously and do not self-censor in response, despite not knowing if users are trolls or ordinary citizens.

During the first three quarters of 2022, Armenia saw 14 cases of physical violence against journalists; 41 cases of pressure on media outlets and personnel; and 89 violations of the right to receive and disseminate information, according to the October 25, 2022, “Quarterly Report,” by the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression.

“There are laws that protect confidentiality of sources, but if [hackers can

access a journalist’s] Facebook account, they will,” asserted Muradyan. “As a reporter, I don’t have confidence of [protected] communication through my Messenger or other platforms,” he added. Although the court can oblige a media outlet or a reporter to disclose sources, [Armenia] hasn’t had such a precedent, Harutyunyan said.

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

The panelists agreed that information and communications technology infrastructure overall meets most people’s needs. Telecommunications and internet infrastructure extends to all geographic regions, both urban and rural. According to panelists from the marzes, internet quality, speed, and price are generally acceptable. However, service trails behind Yerevan, the capital city, where consumers have more price and quality options. Residents outside the capital also have fewer options for broadcast TV and must subscribe to cable networks for better services.

TV ownership in Armenia remains obscure, and journalists have to dig deep to find connections with political parties, which results in biased coverage.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

According to the 2021 Freedom House study *Disinformation and Misinformation in Armenia*, “The behavior of state officials sometimes exacerbates or triggers misinformation and speculation. The state apparatus is slow and inconsistent in responding to journalists’ requests, and often fails to project clear, timely messages to both journalists and the public.”

Armenians have tools to help access public governmental policy and decision-making information with right- to-information laws. The right to receive information may be restricted only by law for instances involving protecting the public interest or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others. Everyone (including non-citizens and legal entities) has the right to file requests for information. The information is supposed to be

provided within five days after filing a request, or 30 days if additional work is required to obtain the information. A written notice should be provided within five days of the request with a notification if extra time is needed. However, the panelists agreed that requests often do not follow this timeline.

Compliance with the right-to-information law depends on what information is requested. Requests dealing with possible financial corruption often “bump into a wall,” Muradyan maintained. Basic information not concerning crime is easier to get. Often, different state bodies violate the right-to-information access and response time, according to Baghdasaryan. “You have to call hundreds of times... before you can obtain the information. [But] some [agencies] work very well,” she added. “[Some] spokespeople, even if they don’t address the questions personally, redirect you to the responsible officers, who take care of your request,” Babayan acknowledged.

Information requests to public officials often get no response after many repeated requests without explanation, Harutyunyan asserted. It is difficult to obtain information for urgent, timely stories because agencies require five or 30 working days. “There’s also a tendency to answer clearly formulated questions with vague [or irrelevant] answers,” he continued. Media outlets can apply to courts for information if agencies do not comply, but that is a time-consuming and costly burden.

Armenians have tools to help access governmental policy and decision-making information, but regular citizens rarely use them. Reporters and researchers use the tools more often. However, university journalism departments do not train students to use access tools, so many entry-level journalists lack necessary skills and must learn on the job, Harutyunyan observed.

Most panelists agreed that public officials providing information are not trustworthy. For example, “When a government official says economic

growth is high, [citizens know that’s not true] because in reality they see a different picture,” Babayan observed.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Media ownership transparency has been a long-standing issue for Armenian media. According to the 2021 Freedom House report *Disinformation and Misinformation in Armenia*, “...the 2020 Law on Audiovisual Media requires broadcast outlets to provide greater reporting and financial transparency,” but TV ownership in Armenia remains obscure, and journalists have to dig deep to find connections with political parties, which results in biased coverage. The Freedom

House report also highlighted that the Republican Party of Armenia (HHK), the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaktsutyun), and the Prosperous Armenia Party own or are connected to a number of major private TV networks. Former President Robert Kocharyan is associated with several influential media resources; Prime Minister Pashinyan, a former journalist, retains ties to the press—including through the *Armenian Times*

newspaper, where his wife serves as editor. “Ownership information is especially difficult to establish for online news outlets, which leaves consumers either unaware or susceptible to making assumptions based on their coverage,” the Freedom House report states.

The number of legal entities required to submit a “real beneficiary” declaration was expanded to include all media organizations registered in Armenia, including ones providing broadcast media services. The law defines a “real beneficiary” as an individual who owns or oversees the organization. Declarations or updates are submitted during the first quarter of each year.

The panelists agreed that before Armenia’s 2018 revolution, the National Commission on Radio and Television (NCTR), which allocates broadcasting frequencies, was not fair or transparent,

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granting broadcasting licenses based on political affiliations. This left oppositional media with no chance of securing a broadcast license. “Now, [more oppositional TV outlets are available] than pro-government ones, which was not possible before. However, our bar is higher—we want to compare ourselves not with 2017 [Armenia], but with the Czech Republic,” Harutyunyan maintained.

However, in the post-2018 operating environment, the panelists could not agree on how to grant broadcasting licenses in the most fair, transparent, and apolitical way. Because of competition, on December 2, 2022, the NCTR granted nationwide broadcasting licenses to four TV outlets—Armenia TV, ATV, Shant TV, and Kentron TV—leaving out Armenia Second TV (H2) and Yerkir Media. The head of NCTR dismissed allegations that Yerkir Media was left out because of its oppositional stance, stating that the decision was based solely on scoring results. “Even if Yerkir Media were the most pro-government TV outlet, it would be assessed in the same manner and by the same principles,” the head of the NCTR claimed in a December 12, 2022, article in online news site Aravot.am.

However, Harutyunyan questioned NCTR’s granting a broadcasting license to FreeNews, a TV outlet associated with Alen Simonyan, president of Armenia’s National Assembly. Muradyan asserted that the commission is not impartial and objective and that outlets were left out in a questionable manner, especially those strongly opposed to the government. Vardanyan, however, noted that Boon TV was granted a license, even though the platform criticized the government and its director posted criticisms on his social media profile, showing that authorities do not always influence frequency allocation.

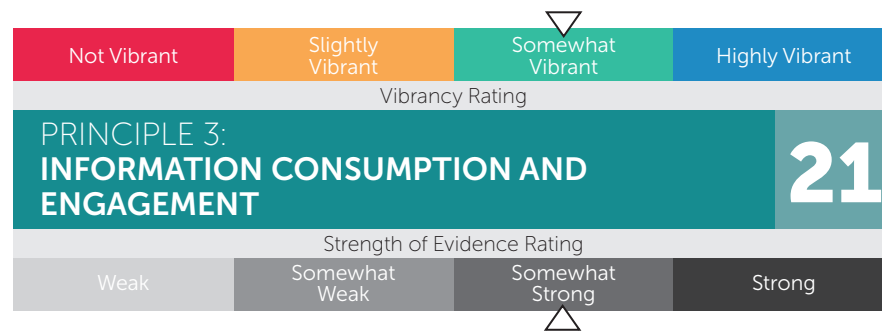
Public service media provide news and information, along with informative, educational, and entertaining programming, which has improved over the years. However, most panelists agreed that Public TV still does not serve the public interests and needs of all citizens in a nonpartisan, editorially independent manner. “Public TV doesn’t cover religious, gender, and other marginalized groups in a diversified and due-diligent manner,” Babayan noted. It remains a propaganda machine for authorities. A diverse array of guests are presented, but hosts often

humiliate opposition representatives while taking a milder approach toward cohorts, she added. As an example, Harutyunyan noted a case where Yerevan officials imported 100 new public transit buses, but Public TV did not cover the event because the authorities had an issue with Yerevan’s mayor at the time.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

The majority of media organizations are heavily influenced by their ownership, and little has changed in this regard over a number of years. Many media outlets are supported by funding sources—usually the owners and silent ‘benefactors’—who dictate editorial stance. “The biggest problem is that we hardly have any media outlets as a business [having at its core a business model of selling news, information],” Harutyunyan asserted. Often owners are the editor-in-chief of an outlet, which is used as a mouthpiece.

Public TV and Public Radio are funded by the state budget. In 2022, Public TV received AMD 6.3 billion (\$16 million), and Public Radio received AMD 925 billion (\$2.4 million). Public TV is still allowed to air commercial advertising, making it perhaps the best-funded media outlet in Armenia. Panelists expressed concern that Public TV has remained overstaffed and pays high salaries, with its management seemingly disinclined to operate more efficiently. The Council of Europe’s 2022 Media Sector Needs Assessment report on Armenia states that the public service media system lacks a critical set of guarantees to preserve its editorial independence as well as to fulfill its mandate. The public is losing trust in the system, which has served as a fertile ground for dis- and misinformation to flourish. Panelists expressed concern about the management and editorial content of public service media, particularly in regard to lines of inquiry that do not probe issues deeply.



Media literacy is still a challenge for Armenia, despite work by CSOs and local and international organizations. The fact-checking process is relatively new in the country, and although it is gaining momentum, existing processes are not sufficient to combat the current volume of fake information. As a result, the VIBE indicator on media literacy skills received low scores, while indicator 13, examining people’s productive engagement with information, received the highest scores of this principle.

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

Cybersecurity expert Martirosyan observed that media professionals have opportunities to use digital security resources to protect themselves, but laws are incomplete and existing penalties for violating the law are inadequate. The maximum fine for a security breach is AMD 500,000 (\$1,250), and the law has never been applied. De facto data leaks are unprecedented in Armenia—no one is held responsible, and the rules of mandatory disclosure to publicly announce data leaks of, for example, passport data, do not work. The panelists noted a major example of a security breach: Google searches yielded personal data from national e-health applications because developers failed to secure the data on the server. The bug was later fixed. However, even after this repair, the panelists noted that a wide range of staff can still access the

The majority of Armenians cannot discern high-quality from poor-quality news and information.

same medical data, revealing a high risk of abuse. For example, staff can still easily check on an individual’s medical background, Martirosyan noted.

Martirosyan’s computer emergency response team (CERT) organization, Cyberhub.am, continues to provide information technology support and training to journalists, independent media, human rights defenders, activists, and CSOs. It also helps media outlets strengthen their digital protection practices and ensure websites are digitally secure.

A new wave of Armenian journalists are being targeted by Pegasus spyware. Three journalists were recently affected along with 30 other citizens from different professions. According to Martirosyan, the spyware managed to snatch 700 megabytes of data in just 20 minutes from one person and then hooked up to nearby devices through Bluetooth connections to snatch data from those, too. Most Armenians have poor digital and data literacy skills, including the basics of how digital technology works and how to keep themselves digitally secure, he added. Hardly any are aware of the algorithms that drive social media along with the mechanics of advertisement targeting and other ways in which personal information is used to target digital users.

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

The majority of Armenians cannot discern high-quality from poor-quality news and information. For example, a news post asking readers to “write the first letter of your name and win AMD 100,000” still garners thousands of responses, even though it is a scam, according to Martirosyan.

The 2022 *Caucasus Barometer for Armenia*, a study by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CRRC), provides valuable insight into this issue. When asked, “How do you know if what you’re reading on the internet, including social media, is accurate and reliable?” 35 percent of the respondents

answered, “I do not check whether it is accurate and reliable.” Only eight percent look at the name of the publisher to see if it is a reputable source, and only 24 percent compare information with other sources. This further underscores that the majority of consumers are not aware of fact-checking platforms, and those who are often do not check them. “When we were conducting media literacy seminars and training, unfortunately people were not aware of these resources,” confirmed A. Baghdasaryan.

School systems do not offer media literacy courses but are expected to include them in the future. Since 2017, the Media Initiatives Centre (MIC), a media support NGO, has had a contract for services with Armenia’s Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports. After the government launched education reforms in 2020, MIC has been actively involved in developing and establishing benchmarks for new national standards for general education for the school system, including preschool, which include media and information literacy competencies. Martirosyan, who has been involved in developing the benchmarks, said media literacy will not be a separate discipline but will be spread out within different disciplines. For example, technical aspects will be included in information science and core content in the social sciences. He said benchmarks have been developed, and the next step will be incorporating them into textbooks, which may take a while.

Media and information literacy and critical-thinking training is not widely available for adults, and not many training offerings are available for consumers. Even well-educated consumers with PhDs are ill informed about media literacy. Martirosyan noted that people with lower educational levels are often more protected because they cannot figure out what a fake post may be asking of them; as a result, they do not act on scams. “Doctors, professors, even deans, call me about the ‘Nigerian Prince’ scams [and ask whether these emails can be trusted]. A week ago, I had a call from a director of a big company, a person who probably has five diplomas [university degrees],

Media and information literacy and critical-thinking training is not widely available for adults, and not many training offerings are available for consumers. Even well-educated consumers with PhDs are ill informed about media literacy.

who asked me to look at an email from a ‘banker in Canada’ because he had some doubts,” Martirosyan observed. Panelists, however, agreed that consumers from civil society groups have stronger media and information literacy skills than other consumers. “The biggest problem is that people perceive information on a ‘like it/don’t like it’ basis; if they don’t like it, it’s a lie; if they like it, it’s the truth,” Martirosyan said.

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

There are no negative consequences for exercising freedom of speech and rights to information. Journalists and civil society activists use their freedom of speech and right to information, while the general public seldom does so by its own initiative. According to the 2022 Caucasus Barometer findings, 80 percent of respondents said they have the right to openly say what they think.

The panelists agreed that most Armenians do not actively engage with fact-based information on at least a weekly basis. Online platforms for public debate exist, but they are not widely known or used. Social media platforms—including Facebook, Instagram, and to some extent Twitter—are the main platforms known and/or used by people in general.

However, many open forums are full of hate speech, mal-information, disinformation, and even calls to violence. Platforms may or may not be moderated; on Facebook, for example, reporting is an option only for violation of its policies.

Public debate takes place on radio call-in shows, and one of the most popular is a program called “Facebook Briefing” by Azatutyun.am (Radio Free Europe’s Armenian service). Users send in questions

for the host to ask a guest speaker. The questions are presented as comments in a designated section on Facebook. Questions containing misinformation, sarcasm, calls to violence, and hate speech are moderated.

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

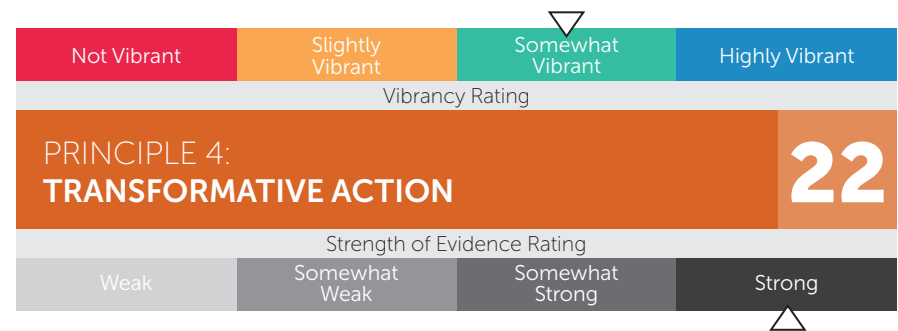
Quality media outlets seek to understand their potential audience's needs and interests. Obtaining qualitative research, however, is difficult because of the expense involved. Most media and content producers use data from Google Analytics and YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram feedback to figure out audience size, access, habits, and demographics. But panelists cautioned that these tools should be used with care. "An [unintelligent] piece of content might garner a lot of views but shouldn't be taken as a token of what your audience needs," Babayan said. Despite how easy to use these tools are, many media outlets do not use them. "Probably about 10 percent of the outlets make use of in-depth Google Analytics data, but some outlets don't even know who currently possesses their Google Analytics credentials," Martirosyan said.

When media outlet representatives were presented with findings from the 2022 Caucasus Barometer that showed the media were considered the least-trusted institution, they reacted with resentment rather than learning from the results and revising editorial policies to improve. "If you're a business that consumers don't like, you should look into why this happened. But our outlets don't want to do that," Babayan observed. However, A. Baghdasaryan noted that when her organization, Goris Press Club, had a grant to work with German news site DW, the project conducted audience research twice in a year. "The research was very helpful for us to identify the areas of audience needs and interests and to improve the content," she said.

Many outlets do not take much interest in their audience's needs because they have a politically motivated agenda, and their task is not to respond to their audience's needs and interests but rather to shape them. However, even these outlets must measure feedback to ensure their content is targeted and efficient. "They seek to understand the needs of the 'client' [the real beneficiaries of a media outlet], as opposed to the needs of the audience," Martirosyan asserted. Quality media outlets have fair and open processes for audiences to provide feedback, such as letters to the editor and moderated online comments sections, and these outlets strive to use these tools to the best of their abilities.

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

The panelists generally agreed that Armenia does not have community media, as classically defined. Similar types of media outlets emerge every now and then, but they disappear most likely because community members are inconsistently involved. Although this type of media is a minimal part of the media sphere, there are local independent, commercial newspapers and radio stations that, according to some panelists, effectively fulfill the functions of community media outlets.



As mentioned earlier, Armenia does have nonpartisan news and information sources, but they are rare. Misinformation, rather than quality information, shapes people's views and informs their actions, the panelists noted; this was reflected in low scores for the related indicator (17). In contrast, civil society groups, for the most part, use quality information to improve their communities, and this indicator (18) received high scores from the panelists.

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

Nonpartisan news and information sources exist and, in some cases, have comparatively large audiences, depending on specific topics that reach more viewers. For example, online news sites Azatutyun.am and Factor.am have relatively extensive audiences. Panelists noted that

other nonpartisan media outlets, including Aravot.am, Hetq.am, and Civilnet.am, have smaller audiences, but certain news events, videos, interviews, and other content can garner comparatively larger numbers of viewers. For example, Azatutyun.am currently has 763,000 subscribers on YouTube and 1.2 million followers on Facebook; Factor TV has 288,000 YouTube subscribers and 367,000 on Facebook; and CivilnetTV has 214,000 YouTube subscribers and 478,000 Facebook followers. On average, individual videos on these channels garner anywhere from 500 to around 43,000 views. “In reality, views are in bad shape. Video stories, programs, and discussions have a maximum of 18,000 views, [which is a lot of] work for just 18,000 views,” Deheryan asserted, “It’s a shame to have such few views on YouTube. But I also understand how difficult it is to get [up to] this number—even 5,000 is difficult to get, let alone numbers in the 100,000 range.”

People exchange information through debate and discussions on radio and Facebook call-in shows, social media platforms, and comments sections of web-based media. These discussions are rarely used for debate, with readers instead using the comments sections to deviate from civilized discourse based on misinformation. Civilized discussions are rare, but they do exist in cases where there are no online trolls.

According to the panelists, most consumers do not usually read or view multiple types of media with varied viewpoints. Rather, they stick to those that resonate with already-established beliefs. Muradyan asserted, “It is very difficult to persuade a [devoted] Public TV viewer to watch [oppositional] TV5 and vice versa. Not many [watch both].”

“ People’s social and political views are influenced by quality information along with misinformation and mal-information. People are prone to be confused, misled, or brainwashed by misinformation. Both types are prevalent and equally split in Armenia, Edgar Vardanyan, political analyst and researcher, Boon.tv, asserted.

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

The panelists agreed that people’s social and political views are influenced by quality information along with misinformation and mal-information. People are prone to be confused, misled, or brainwashed by misinformation. Both types are prevalent and equally split in Armenia, Vardanyan asserted. Disinformation and manipulation especially occur during elections on both sides and influence voting results. “If

the candidates were to present accurate, honest, fact-based information about their goals, and their feasibility [during their pre-elections campaigns], the election results would be different,” Murdyan observed.

During the COVID-19 health crisis and although there were people who followed fact-based health and safety recommendations, people were also swayed by conspiracy theories, misinformation, and fake information from anti-vaxxers, rather than by scientific facts and health and safety recommendations, panelists noted. Widespread misinformation included using

homemade liquor, garlic, baking soda, or ginger as an alternative to getting vaccinated, Martirosyan claimed.

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

Civil society works to reduce the spread of misinformation or mal-information. However, panelists agreed they are referring to CSOs that advocate democratic principles rather than NGOs that appear to be based on democratic principles, but their activities do not reflect them. So-called “pseudo CSOs” are, in fact, NGOs that were specifically set up to disseminate disinformation, Martirosyan

said. The panelists observed that Russian-backed CSOs are being set up to advocate and promote anti-Western narratives.

The panelists agreed that aside from the above-mentioned “pseudo CSOs,” conventional CSOs mostly rely on quality news and information when explaining their mission or objectives and share quality information with the public as part of their mission. They do not disseminate misinformation or mal-information and actively work to reduce their spread.

However, the panelists agreed with Martirosyan that many former representatives of CSOs are now either in government or the parliament, and as a result, they do not voice specific topics—or they voice them only as statements without any form of protest. Muradyan confirmed that CSOs refer to high-quality investigative reports when they call for policy changes or corporate reforms, and he has observed CSOs using Hetq’s investigative content. Muradyan also confirmed that quality media outlets actively engage with civil society to cover socially important issues. “When working on a given topic, we almost always try to find an NGO that has studied this or that topic, because they have already done some of the work, which makes the task easier,” he said.

Civic participation in policy formation and legislative change is common across different sectors. Some recommendations are considered, while some are ignored altogether. In April 2022, Armenia’s executive and legislative authorities signed a memorandum of cooperation with CSOs to modernize the nation’s media sector development policy. The agreement called for reform of legislation regulating media activity in accordance with modern challenges and international best practices and norms. However, government officials then attempted to promote legislative changes without consulting the CSO groups.

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

The panelists agreed that the overall number of press conferences in Armenia dramatically declined in 2022. Previously, at least five government officials would hold ad hoc press conferences after cabinet meetings. During 2022, only the health minister and the minister of economy give a briefing after cabinet meetings and answer journalists’ questions, Muradyan noted.

Political discourse or debate includes references to evidence and fact, alongside a great deal of mal-information, disinformation, and hate speech. Government officials often do not explain their decisions, creating distrust and dissatisfaction among the public. The 2022

“Government officials often do not explain their decisions, creating distrust and dissatisfaction among the public.”

Caucasus Barometer study found 54 percent of respondents were dissatisfied with how high-ranking officials in the Armenian government are appointed. Furthermore, 83 percent believed that sometimes politics and government seem

so complicated that ordinary people, like the respondents themselves, cannot really understand what is going on. Seventy-seven percent think that public officials do not care much what ordinary people, like the respondents, think, and 66 percent think that ordinary people do not have any say in government actions.

Arbitrary decisions commonly occur. For example, officials claim that a decision was made after a public discussion, but in reality, the action was posted on the government’s website for publication of legal acts, or on its e-draft set, with a few posts from fake users, Martirosyan observed. He said government decisions are made in a clandestine manner. Before the 2018 revolution, CSOs were more aggressive about making decisions more public, and the public needs to push CSOs to do more.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

A June 4, 2022, Civilnet.am story revealed that criminal charges were filed against Armenia's deputy head of the State Revenue Committee (SRC) on the grounds of illegal enrichment, submission of a false declaration, and concealment of data. The article, "SRC Vice President Artyom Smbatyan's mother-in-law is getting rich alongside her son-in-law's career," exposed that Smbatyan's mother-in-law bought a 130-square-meter apartment duplex in a residential building in downtown Yerevan for AMD 86.6 million, (\$216,000). Another case of a media outlet exposing corruption was a Hetq investigation into former President Armen Sarkissian's dual citizenship in St. Kitts and Nevis, which he had hidden from the public, violating Armenia's constitution. As mentioned, the investigation led to Sarkissian's resignation.

The number of civil liberties and human rights violations by national or local governments depends more on the number of rallies and demonstrations that occur in Armenia, rather than by the spread of quality information or coverage by media outlets. For example, on Armenia's Independence Day, September 21, 2022, relatives of soldiers killed during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war gathered overnight and were protesting at the entrance to Yerablur military cemetery outside Yerevan to block Prime Minister Pashinyan from entering. They blamed Pashinyan for their sons' deaths, as well as close to 4,000 other Armenian soldiers killed in action. The riot police dragged the black-clad parents of the fallen soldiers, forced them into police vehicles, and drove them away just before Pashinyan's arrival. Overall, 37 citizens were detained. Credible reports show that some of the parents were physically injured during the operation.

A joint statement by 35 CSOs condemned the incident and demanded the resignation of the chief of police. "As a result of the operation, a number of rights of citizens guaranteed by the Constitution of Armenia, the European Convention on Human Rights, and the legislation of Armenia were violated. We, the undersigned nongovernmental organizations, declare that it is unacceptable for the Armenian police leadership to issue and execute orders to carry out illegal force actions

against citizens. At the same time, we consider the lack of response and assessment by the RA National Assembly regarding the incident unacceptable, and even more so, the attempts by some representatives of the ruling faction to justify this criminal behavior of the police," the September 22, 2022, statement¹ from the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor said.

1 Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Vanadzor. September 22, 2022. <https://hcav.am/joint-statement-police-22-09-22/>

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