

AZERBAIJAN



Photo: Fargana Novruzova

Vibrant Information Barometer 2022





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
10

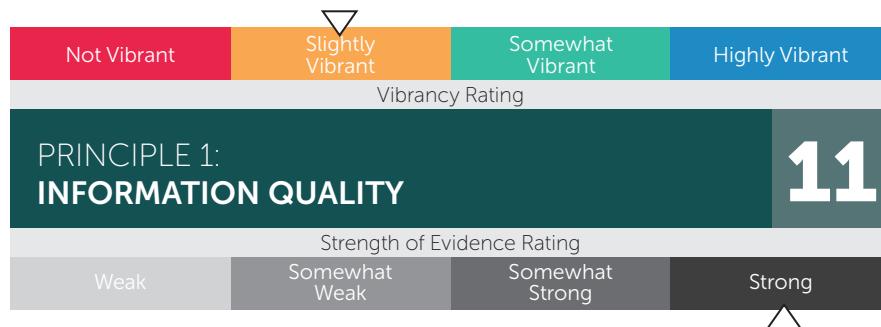
In 2021, Azerbaijan saw ad-hoc persecution of independent media by law enforcement agencies and courts; pandemic-related restrictions; the [revelation](#) that the Azerbaijani government has used “Pegasus,” spyware developed by an Israeli company, NSO Group, to breach the personal information of at least 80 Azerbaijani journalists and civil society leaders; military confrontations at the Armenian-Azerbaijani border; and the introduction of a repressive new media law.

Overall, when discussing media in Azerbaijan, VIBE panelists had to distinguish between two distinct media dichotomies—small independent media—which includes a few websites in the country and few resources outside of it--and mainstream media inside the country, which includes television, radio, print, and online. The panelists agreed that even though independent media are small and constantly need capacity-building for new incoming staff and additional resources to survive, they still sufficiently rival government-ruled media, which have extensive resources, thanks to a rentier state run by a corrupt government.

The government has not fundamentally changed over the years and maintains a strong grip on the media, particularly in terms of coverage. This grasp extends to the issuance of frequencies and licenses for television and radio and results in repressive measures to punish independent outlets that use the Internet for broadcast. The government attempts to control independent media, if not by buying them out or shutting them down, then through legislating restrictive measures. Within a

matter of weeks in December 2021 and January 2022, it introduced a new law on media that aims to control independent online broadcast outlets and journalists by creating a requirement for the nationwide registry of journalists that would further prevent them from accessing information or attending official events. As in previous years, officials continue to try to hide the truth about major events in the country from independent media or manipulate the information in the government’s favor. A few fact-checking organizations attempt to call out this behavior, but they, too, have limited resources. Some journalists or media still attempt to sue the government for not providing them with information, but courts are not independent and do not protect small, free media. Moreover, in fear of persecution, many media outlets self-censor. Independent media still cannot access or benefit from advertising due to official laws and unofficial prohibitions.

Independent civil society organizations have not fully recovered from the persecution of 2013 and subsequent years in order to be able to support or defend independent media. Independent media try to cover sensitive issues, such as LGBTQI topics and other small/minority community challenges, but the resources are far fewer than normal and political repressions are always present. Feminist groups are the only ones that have organized themselves and have online community media, but they have not been particularly successful in preventing daily crimes against women based on “honor killing” and other domestic violence cases.



The panelists unanimously agreed the small number of independent media outlets, which exist entirely online, are the only ones producing quality, ethical content nationwide. They are also the only ones holding officials accountable, both in pursuit of information access and correcting misinformation. Radio, television, and print media remain staunchly nationalist and are dominated by pro-government or government media. They serve the interest of the ruling elites, labeling critics as “foreign agents” who are financed by Western governments and donors. This type of biased media is not limited to traditional media; some independent online media, including YouTube bloggers, also possess nationalist biased views. Experts question whether this issue can be alleviated by capacity-building. While Russia and Iran and their respective proxy media outlets are the main ones to create and disseminate mal-information, their stances do not seem to dominate Azerbaijani society, although the effects of this propaganda have not been measured by independent pollsters and researchers.

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

No major progress regarding infrastructure took place in 2021. Newspaper distribution issues remain unsolved; the only newspapers available in government-controlled kiosks are sports publications, crossword puzzles, or papers such as *Yeni Musavat*, *525-ci qazet*, and *Şərq* (East), which all receive some form of financing from state authorities.

Although some universities teach journalism as part of their curriculum,

the quality is lacking. Those who want to enhance their skills go to private pro-bono courses organized by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). One panelist mentioned observing young journalists in the provinces teaching each other the skills they have. The panelist herself had trained these journalists for five years, demonstrating that generational skill-sharing among independent journalists still exists. The continued existence of small independent media is especially noteworthy given that the state media offer high-tech equipment, better pay, and job stability. The same independent group of journalists take freelance jobs with international media, which helps to pass trustworthy and professional information about Azerbaijan to the outside world. But it also gives the impression, one panelist said, that the same group of people write and read about the problems without any action or changes taking place. Journalists are not able to hold government actors accountable by fairly reporting on their words and actions, and, in fact, journalists get charged for writing the truth. For example, journalist Sakhavat Mammad, who wrote about corruption in the army and draftee process, was detained and fined for his article. This happened when the newly introduced draft law on media was still at its reading in parliament, meaning the authorities started to implement the law before it was ratified.

There are not enough tools in place to help media outlets create ethical content based on facts. Whether the owners or editors of outlets want such tools is also a question, one panelist said; it remains unknown whether the owners and editors feel they have a responsibility for ethical, fact-based coverage. The selection of local, national, or international news coverage is not handled independently by owners or editors. One panelist thinks that, compared with 2000-2014, content quality has gone down. In 2014, as part of its efforts in political oppression and limiting coverage of injustices, the government drove out projects funded by international donors, including training for journalists.

Professional ramifications that could prevent unethical content are nonexistent. One panelist cited the opening of the “Park of Trophies” in downtown Baku in 2021. The park displays war trophies and wax figures from the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War. Although it was criticized by international journalists and observers, the panelists observed

that Azerbaijani journalists did not question this display but often parroted the authorites' rhetoric. National media at large (except a few independent ones) did not cover the voices of the activists who denounced the display of fallen Armenian soldiers' helmets and caricature mannequins at this exhibition, and many applauded its opening. The government removed these displays only after it was clear a verdict from the International Criminal Court at The Hague is coming.

Public television, despite its name, does not air genuine political debates or discussions about major corruption cases. Lider, an oligarchic television channel notorious for libel and blackmail, dissolved

in 2021 after 20 years on air. However, this channel and ANS, another private channel shut down in 2016, were known to create original content, albeit mostly in the nonpolitical sphere. There is some diversity and "freedom" in nonsensitive entertainment programs. Provincial television stations have been eaten by ARB, another oligarchic station. Because laws on ownership have changed in recent years, ownership is more secretive and finding out the true owners of megacorporations is increasingly difficult. As a result, various television "brands" broadcast the same, centrally developed content. All of them seem disconnected from advertisers and look to be surviving only on shady resources. Citizens hear or watch from media outlets established or headquartered abroad who have a crew and broadcast in Azerbaijan. But their numbers and coverage are limited.

However, not all online television stations are polarized, and there are professional ones among them, such as Toplum TV. Its programs attempt to fill in the gaps of traditional media coverage, reporting on daily events, and it even garners interviews from celebrities who generally say no to online media. Other bloggers also cover daily events. Some diaspora media, such as Azad Söz and Düz danişaq, devoted time to cover the torture of military personnel accused in 2017 of conspiring with Armenian secret services, called the "Terter case." Eleven servicemen died as a result of this torture. Online channels, such as Yeni Musavat, invite MPs that independent activists would call "trolls"

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to its studio, while Xural mostly invites retired opposition politicians who are almost forgotten. The BBC Azeri service has made noticeable progress in its content creation, compared with the previous year, one panelist said. Its lead anchor, Seadet Akifgizi, held a "Hard Talk"-style [interview](#) with a state official on the oppressive draft media law, one of the rare cases in which the BBC used its leverage to approach officials

and secure an interview in the public's interest. Still, according to Alexa, the list of [online resources](#) accessed are, after such websites as Google, Facebook, YouTube, and Wikipedia, predominantly local entertainment and car/commodity sales outlets.

Official media and the media under government control are, in principle, tools of agitation, and their news programs are full of propaganda. There are a few independent media outlets, such as Turan Information Agency, that can provide quality, professional content to their audiences.

Print media cannot publish material upsetting to authorities, and electronic media are closely watched. Access to information by independent journalists remains very limited. Therefore, creating quality content is extremely difficult for them. The newly adopted media law would make it even more difficult, as it brings more limitations than freedoms. Online media are relatively free in creating quality content, but if that content falls out of the government's favor, those with larger audiences get punished.

Content produced by provincial media is rampant with silence and "ordered" material from authorities and hierarchical media. "There's almost a new channel on YouTube every day, mostly established and produced in Baku," a panelist said, "But the hosts of these channels are the people who don't know journalism." The shows look like debates, but the propaganda is noticeable. Healthy competition and opportunities created for professionals could help eradicate this problem.

Authorities have not created significant problems for social media; however, it is constantly kept under control through various methods,

such as “troll factories,” the spread of disinformation via WhatsApp, etc. Nevertheless, social media remains a safer option for people to get truthful news than national or local electronic media.

According to the new law, adopted on December 14, 2021, and signed by the president in early 2022, digital and broadcast media and their journalists must be recorded at a common registry and receive a special ID—literally meaning the end of “independent media” and “independent journalist” in Azerbaijan, one panelist said.

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

Currently, media in Azerbaijan can be divided into three branches, one panelist said: government media; independent, but unprofessional, media; and independent and professional media. Government media present only one-sided news; objective and factual newsmaking is not observed. Unprofessional independent media, mostly online and on YouTube, try to produce and air accurate information but can, and do, air false and misleading information both intentionally and unintentionally. The third group of independent and professional media, although the minority, produce and air well-sourced and fact-based information. Unfortunately, even when independent journalists identify illegal government activities, officials are never held accountable by the legal system.

The outcome of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War (September-November 2020) significantly strengthened the executive power’s propaganda machine. One panelist said that it has become extremely difficult for independent media to attract an audience. Using tools like CrowdTangle, independent media’s reach is measured to be only about 3 percent. Conversely, the pro-government [BakuWS](#) and [Bələ-bələ işlər](#) (which is said to be linked to the first vice president) post new content daily and almost hourly and boast a high number of visits (sometimes tens of thousands). Independent media outlets are able to get high viewership only on particularly noteworthy days—for example, when there is a protest or turbulence in society due to judicial injustice.

Another panelist asked if it is too hard to judge whether the government creates or disseminates false or misleading information. “Yes and no,” the panelist said, “It is very manipulative.”

The majority of media outlets simply publish or air press releases and statements from the executive government as-is, without any right to change, comment, or question, one panelist said. Outlets ignore the presumption of innocence, and suspects detained for even minor administrative code violations are photographed and/or filmed and shown on prime-time news as criminals; they are forced to apologize to the public, which is then aired on these news outlets. A Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Azeri service investigation revealed that a person named Rovshan Hajiев, presented as a drug lord by the Ministry of Interior “news,” was acquitted by a local court, and the Ministry never bothered to apologize.

Mainstream news media, which are controlled entirely by the authorities, carefully choose what to air or publish each day based on their political agenda. For example, on June 4, two journalists from state-owned companies, Siraj Abishov of AzTV and Maharram Ibrahimov of Azertag, tragically died in the Kalbajar district when their truck ran onto an anti-tank land mine. Although this news should have been the main story on both outlets, which are two prominent mainstream outlets, it was presented only as ordinary news, one story among many for that day. On the first day, outlets professionally covered the tragedy, not jumping to conclusions before an initial investigation could be completed. But the following day, the outlets accused Armenians of planting the mine without proof of an investigation or citing sources for the information.

On November 30, a military helicopter with the State Border Control (SBC) crashed, killing 14 of the 16 high-ranking officers on board. Right after the tragedy, SBC’s chief, Elchin Gulyev, in a rare appearance given his rank and local political traditions, [came in front of television cameras and microphones and answered](#) questions from journalists, telling them that the cause of the crash was weather conditions and excluding the possibility of external man-made factors. In a way, this served to discourage journalists from investigating further. Politician and opposition party leader Ali Aliyev was arrested after participating in an

interview with a major [YouTube channel host, Sevinj Osmangizi](#); Aliyev said Russia may have had a hand in this crash and that it was impossible for the two to survive given the scale of the crash.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in senior government officials and spokespersons coming forward to answer questions from journalists and media, as occurs in the West, they did not necessarily provide trustworthy information. Independent media outlets and fact-checkers [occasionally](#) expose the lies and exaggerations in statistics or official statements.

There were no cases when government officials were held responsible for lies, but there were cases when journalists were persecuted for seeking the truth, such as in the case of Sakhavat Mammad. The Prosecutor General's office interrogated Mammad, and then a local court fined him AZN 500 (about \$300) for writing a series of articles on corruption in the army. [FaktYoxla.info](#) (established by Azeri journalists abroad) remains the only major outlet solely dedicated to checking the truthfulness of government servants' statements; however, there have been no instances of measures taken against these officials after the outlet exposed their deceptions. One panelist thinks many of them have limited access to information due to the unofficial bans and sometimes censor themselves on sensitive topics to protect their journalists and sources in the country. With the new repressive media law in place, their professional lives might be further worsened. As one panelist said, "The new media law grants journalists free access to museums, but not to archives." In the meantime, the government has created its own "fact-checking" platform, [FaktYoxla.az](#), and "is pushing its own propaganda and creating confusion," another panelist noted.

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

The professional independent media do not produce mal-information or hate speech. These media often publish balanced materials about those

who practice hate speech, thus contributing to a "cancel culture" of those individuals. On certain topics, social media users do not even wait for professional media reports about hate speech; they start lynching campaigns independently and achieve results. This was demonstrated in a [recent case involving celebrity PanTural](#), who in a short video called on men to rape women who "dress inappropriately." As a result of both pressure from the general public and involvement from law-enforcement agencies, PanTural was forced to publicly apologize.

66 For at least 20 years, businesses have been instructed to not advertise with media that criticize the government.

Panelists observed that Sputnik, Russia's state-owned news agency, has a local website that periodically publishes anti-Western propaganda in both Azerbaijani and Russian. Other than this site, most panelists said they have not seen many incidents of harmful content from foreign governments. Cases of disinformation are not rampant. Misinformation remains the main issue, as well as false data and statistics. Many panelists also said that after the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, most media, with the exception of a few professional, independent, or diaspora outlets, promoted anti-Armenian rhetoric. The same negative rhetoric exists against the LGBTQ community. One former journalist and, at the time, the spokesman for the State Maritime Agency, Tural Museyibov wrote a homophobic Facebook comment about Shaig Kalbiyev, a member of the LGBTQ community who was killed during the Nagorno-Karabakh War. Anews.az published an editorial about the spokesman without condemning his hate speech, and the Ministry of Digital Development sent a warning and ordered the piece be removed, citing the Law on Information Article 13 on hate speech, which the media outlet obeyed. Otherwise, the site could have been blocked. This was a rare case when hate speech was removed from a media outlet.

There are still cases when hate speech is orchestrated by the using multiple media outlets and celebrities, observed in almost synchronized headlines and social media posts with the same disinformation and hate speech. These posts also bash the government's critics and opposition leaders. The same method was used during the 2020 war to disparage Armenia and Armenians. A new civil society community that emerged

during the war, called “nowarçu” (from “No to War”), also became the target of this orchestrated process.

The law in Azerbaijan, including in the criminal code, prohibits hate speech based on religion and ethnicity, but that law is not applied to those who engage in hate speech on orders from authorities. Additionally, this law does not mention LGBTQ or any other social group, which is what law-enforcement agencies told feminist leader Gulnara Mehdiyeva when she filed a protest regarding the [hate speech](#) against the LGBTQ community from blogger Sevinj Huseynova. One of the victims she targeted, a fellow journalist named Afaz Hafizli, was killed in March 2022 by his relative, likely based on Huseynova’s hate speech. The government took no legal action against Huseynova. The feminist movement itself is small but strong and subsequently attracts hate speech from various users.

LGBTQ is a taboo topic for mainstream Azerbaijani media. They rarely develop an independent story, but if a law-enforcement agency makes a statement, they will publish it without any change. Mainstream media are also hesitant to publish any news about the international criticism against Azerbaijan’s authorities and any activities or rallies of the opposition. The BBC Azeri service was the most objective source about the clashes at the Armenian-Azerbaijani border in November 2021.

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

Given that the majority of the country is composed of ethnic Azerbaijanis, they probably do not face problems in getting the news in Azerbaijani, a panelist noted. However, there is also news and content available in Russian for Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian ethnic minorities and other Slavic groups that speak primarily Russian, given Azerbaijan’s Soviet heritage. However, news and content creation in the languages of other minorities is scarce, particularly independent professional news. Regionally, in the South, where the Talysh minority lives, there is an online television version of the *Cənub Xəbərləri* (Southern News) called [Cənub Xəbər TV](#) which is a small, nascent initiative known only to the local community there, but it broadcasts in Azerbaijani, not Talysh.

As noted earlier, the mainstream media are homophobic, and the LGBTQ community faces discrimination from them. LGBTQ members face hate crimes and feel underrepresented by the media, and many try to leave the country as soon as they can. The same is true for feminist groups, many of whom spent 2021 under continuous pressure from the government, police brutality and unprofessionalism, and orchestrated social media attacks by online trolls. This abuse arose in part because of feminist groups’ protests and outcry over domestic violence. Detractors have falsely told the general public that the main objective of feminists is to encourage divorce.

The groups whose viewpoints are excluded from mainstream media turn to social media or platforms like YouTube to express or defend themselves. Two feminist groups have online channels, the most famous being [Fem-Utopia](#). Diaspora media, like Meydan TV, are the only ones that show sensitivity to the cause and cover taboo or underreported topics around minorities or marginalized groups. They are also the only ones that cover stories about physical attacks and arrests of LGBTQ members objectively.

On television, adequate coverage of the experiences and viewpoints of people from different genders, ideologies, and ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds does not exist, if at all, a panelist said. As a rule, when oligarchic or state media cover stories about minorities, it is presented as, “There are no problems in this area.” There has been increased interest both in mainstream and online oligarchic media, as well as on social media platforms, about war casualties from the 2020 conflict, as it has become increasingly apparent that many draftees who died were minorities from rural areas.

There are multiple online outlets from religious communities, but the government blocked six of them in 2021 for allegedly not having transparent financial sources and propagating the confessionalism of the Iranian regime. These resources are [deyerler.az](#), [maide.az](#), [ahlibeyt.az](#), [ehlibet.info](#), [shia.az](#), and [islaminsesi.org](#). The editor-in-chief of [Shia.az](#), Sardar Babayev, even got arrested.

Women make up the majority of journalists, but their share in leadership

and ownership roles is minuscule. There is, however, a gender parity among citizen journalists.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

As one panelist observed, the portentous nature of the past year, with ongoing court hearings exposing the corruption of the dissolved “State Support Fund to Mass Media,” says a lot about this indicator. The government spends millions to control the media but drowns in its own corruption, she added. Once the government dissolved the state support fund and a new media development agency was created as its successor, there was some hope it would be different, one panelist said, but that hope died quickly. No policy changes were initiated or even suggested to liberalize the advertising market, which could significantly improve the livelihood of media.

For many years, the majority of digital and print media have had only a few financial sources—the state budget, corrupt senior officials represented in various pillars of the government, or businesses that those officials control and instruct to pay. For at least 20 years, businesses have been instructed to not advertise with media that criticize the government. Businesses advertise only with media outlets owned by oligarchs. Even the classifieds that focus on car and property sales earn money from advertising, but not independent news resources. Once the new repressive media law starts to be applied, the life of the independent media will become even more difficult, one panelist said.

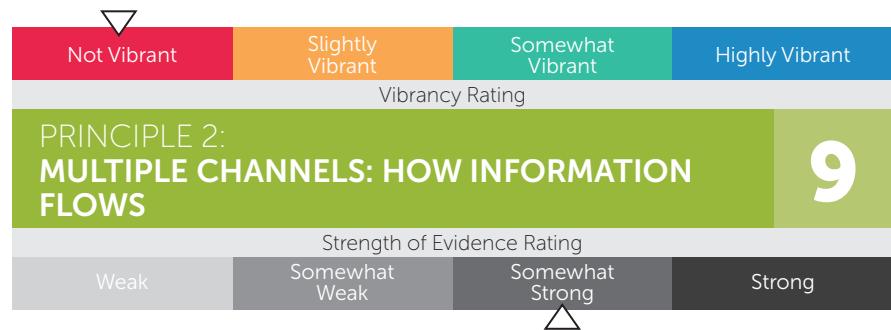
The advertising market itself is not transparent, and there are no local reference points, like the Czech Republic’s [Netmonitor](#), to determine the cost.

When it comes to the quality and professionalism of the content, state- and oligarchy-owned media are significantly worse than small independent media.

The journalists who work at oligarchic media outlets may be paid better than those with independent media, but they lack freedom. They cannot independently decide to create content even on the simplest, least

harmful cases. Censorship at these outlets remains high. Moreover, these salaries are not market-based. Journalists who work at independent media have limited choices if they want to change jobs and remain professional.

Very few media outlets can use subscriptions. State subsidies are allocated only to the propagators of the government’s propaganda, and the list is open. Independent media primarily survive on funding from international donors, though they nearly always remain underfunded. Recently, some outlets have adopted subscription models using the platform Prateon.



All panelists expressed concern regarding the newly introduced repressive media law and its ability to paralyze even the existing minority independent media. Most panelists gave their lowest scores for indicators that evaluate journalists being intimidated, killed, imprisoned, or fined for doing their work, all of which led to self-censorship under the previous, “better” law and never resulted in serious punishment for the perpetrators. Although the previous law was formally more favorable to journalists in theory, if not in practice, panelists are increasingly concerned now that the law is formally in opposition to free press. Internet penetration, especially in urban areas, is probably better than in previous years. However, everything else either did not improve or deteriorated, including the right to information, public-service media providing quality information, the allocation of frequencies and licenses to independent broadcasters, and a lack of support and persecution by law-enforcement agencies.

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

At the time the VIBE panel interviews were held, the [new oppressive law on media](#) had not been signed by the president. Many panelists thought that if signed and enacted, the scores for this indicator could be straight zeros. The law, introduced in Azerbaijan's parliament as a surprise piece of legislation right before the new year and signed by the president in early 2022, includes the introduction of a nation-wide "journalist ID card" that would allow journalists to report. The legislation contradicts Article 10 of the European Convention, which proclaims that "everyone has the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers." The same concept is confirmed by Article 50 of the Azerbaijani constitution, although articles of the country's own constitution are not equitably implemented.

The draft was adopted by the parliament and then signed into law even despite protest from civil society and independent journalists/media. Journalists even brought a [symbolic gravestone](#) for Azerbaijani media to a demonstration, which was dispersed by police. Some panelists hope independent and professional journalists will still find a way to work in spite of the new law.

Currently, the Law on Information, Informatics, and Protection of Information Article 13 on defamation is often used to fine or warn independent and investigative journalists. Defamation cases are also ruled on in the courts. There are defamation articles about the country's president even in the old legislation, although it is likely that journalists will be punished for trumped-up charges, like hooliganism or drugs, rather than for defamation against the president.

Journalists faced [police brutality](#) while broadcasting the feminists' protest in front of a police station and while reporting live on social media. The authorities' physical attacks and a lack of respect for the

66 Panelists observed that year after year, instead of becoming more transparent, the process to access information is becoming even more closed.

media have become so normalized that even government-friendly [Yeni Musavat employee Ilkin Muradov](#) was physically attacked in the courtroom by a relative of an oligarch.

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

In isolated parts of the country, Internet penetration remains low, largely due to both a lack of infrastructure and the economic realities of the residents. Although these areas do not have broadband Wi-Fi, youth in these areas access social media from their smartphones using mobile data. Some parts of the country, like villages in the Tovuz region bordering Armenia, do not even have telephone lines. As such, television remains the main source of news in these areas, and local channels here present only one-sided news. Moreover, if you do not speak the language of the majority, accessibility is further limited. As a result, people do not receive balanced information, which

is available primarily online. Internet prices remain high for the low-income rural population, many of whom struggle to make ends meet. This problem was particularly acute in 2021 during pandemic-related lockdowns, as many students were unable to join online classes due to a lack of resources for hardware and/or Internet.

The quality of the provided Internet outside of the capital, Baku, also remains low, but this is not driven by identification with a minority ethnic group; the majority population and ethnic minorities face the same problems with regard to Internet access. However, ethnic minorities do lack sufficient sources in their own native languages, something the government has made no effort to solve. Additionally, without a VPN, a lot of objective news is inaccessible.

The majority of people still get their news from free, antenna-reception television channels. Cable television companies, though relatively affordable, primarily serve large cities, like Baku and Sumgayit. Turkish Fox TV was removed from the list of the channels offered by these cable

companies after it criticized the ruling family of Azerbaijan, one panelist said. “Turkish Kanal-D also faced a similar fate after criticizing the First Lady/First Vice President but was later pardoned,” she added.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Several journalists on the panel said the situation in 2021 with regard to the right to information was worse than in 2020. One panelist cited an instance in which a media company was creating video materials, and the government refused to answer questions. The Cabinet of Ministers either gave general, short, unrelated answers or referred the questions to lower suboffices, which kicked the request for information amongst themselves, never addressing the questions and discouraging the media company’s questions.

Panelists observed that year after year, instead of becoming more transparent, the process to access information is becoming even more closed. For example, information provided at Tender.gov.az, such as files regarding government contract procurements, has become scarcer than in previous years. The number of “single-source” purchases has drastically increased. Information provided on subsidies and national assistance plans is very general. The information about companies on the national tax registry is becoming more hidden each year, especially for companies that belong to the ruling families.

Although the laws in 2021 (prior to the new media law) say that citizens have a right to information, in practice this is not implemented. One panelist said that spokespersons at the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Defense, and State Border Control Service think that they can respond to inquiries only from pro-government media. If they do respond, then the answers are very general or not germane. Some journalists do take cases to the local courts, but local courts rule against them most of the time. Former minister and current opposition politician Fahmin Hajiyev brought his case of not getting information to the European Court via

the Council of Europe, and the latter ruled in his favor ([Case of Hajiyev v. Azerbaijan](#)). Information primarily related to state policy is kept hidden from the public and media. The state’s information-sharing structure is built to mask corruption. As in the case with the recent repressive media law, the public is kept out of the discussions.

Subsequently, the public has a low level of trust in government officials and what they say or share publicly, though the government rarely shares information and often with delay. This indifference is widely observed when looking at the low turnout in general elections. The distrust is also noticed when state agencies share information on their social media pages about events in the country, like [unsanctioned rallies](#), and some users bravely dispute their statements. In one particular rally, the government attempted to hide the fact that one participant, opposition leader Tofiq Yagublu, [was kidnapped by unclaimed government forces and severely beaten](#).

The same panelist said that many independent journalists contact government spokespersons knowing they will not get any information, but at least they can say they have done their job in attempting to be unbiased and thorough.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Azerbaijan has public television, called *İctimai TV* in Azerbaijani, established in 2005 to meet the Council of Europe admission commitment. “However, the ‘public’ is in name only,” one panelist said. As a rule, this channel does not highlight the major problems in society, such as corruption, abuse of power, and the low quality of public education. However, from time to time, it may talk about petty corruption cases, which looks performative. Recently, it has also had shows on social norms and traffic rules, which are apolitical but bring some color to its programs. Political debates hosted by this channel mainly serve the government’s propaganda. It very carefully chooses whom to invite to these shows, and truly independent experts

are excluded. In general, its programs do not differ from government-owned or -controlled television channels. The same channels are used to blackmail the opposition or independent activists. Laws allow the real owners of these media outlets to remain hidden from the public. One panelist recalled that a few years ago, independent journalists discovered a person with several media outlets registered under his name. The person looked quite surprised to learn about this from the journalists, but he was a close relative of one official.

The government strictly controls the allocation of frequencies, and the process has no transparency. As such, no independent television channels have emerged in the past 20 years. Although it is easier to formally found a print outlet, it is impossible to own or rent an infrastructure for this media outlet or distribute it without the government's permission. Founding an Internet-based outlet is easy, but the employees do not enjoy the same privileges as officially registered media, and the new law will further limit those privileges.

The new media law came up during discussion of the question related to public service media as well. Many panelists believe it will significantly limit or censor rights—for example, the right to independently found a media outlet not related to a frequency-operated television station, which was not possible even under the previous law. The law says that Internet-based television must have a license to air in the country, which, in turn, contradicts Azerbaijan's own constitution and international instruments to which it is a signatory.

The government also influences Internet service providers--since all of them have to follow orders from the governmental security services and since the internet comes to the country via a government-controlled company--and does not take users' interests into account. For example, it will block a website even before the court's decision, after simply a call from the Telecommunications Ministry. In the case of journalist Khadija Ismayil, [the Internet in her neighborhood was turned off](#) while she was speaking virtually at an international forum.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

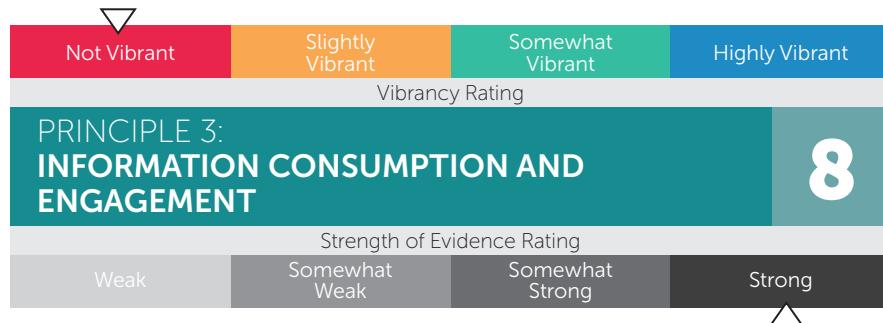
Mainstream media outlets are clearly influenced by their funders or owners. Panelists believe funding of these outlets is entrusted to officials and oligarchs. Each of these officials/oligarchs then promotes himself or herself in the funded channel, and criticism is not permitted. For example, Report.az does not criticize the State Oil Company (SOCAR) and APA does not criticize the Minister of Emergency. These mainstream media outlets also do not criticize government policies or actions. Otherwise, both the editors and leadership would be dismissed. Political interference in the management and editorial content of mainstream media is high.

Government subsidies or advertising contracts widely [influence editorial independence](#).

Pro-government and government journalists did not receive free apartments from the government in 2021, as in previous years, possibly due to lower government spending as a result of low oil prices.

There are now more and more barriers that make it difficult for professional independent media to film in public. Police officers, probably through CCTV cameras, learn about journalists' locations and approach them, trying to prevent journalists' activity and demanding information about the purpose of their filming. Although professional independent journalists are used to this, it interrupts their work and often requires they visit a police station and write a statement about their professional activity.

The presidential administration nominates and appoints members of the Broadcast Council, the regulatory body overseeing frequency allocations. The same goes for the agency that allocates the licenses for frequencies. Subsequently, these groups are dependent on the central government.



In terms of digital security, the country's media experienced one of its worst years, not only in the number of social media accounts hacked by secretive groups, but also the revelation that journalists were tracked by the spyware "Pegasus," exposing their personal information. People also fell victim to COVID-19 mis- and disinformation, but there were some gains, thanks to small but active fact-checking resources. Dynamic discussion platforms for public debate exist only online and primarily from diaspora media. VIBE indicators on public discourse and media literacy were scored low. Many panelists were also skeptical that community media exist at all in the country, with some pointing to online media outlets owned or run by feminist groups and the social media channels of a few villages.

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

Media outlets and other professional content producers have access to digital security training and tools; however, panelists trust trainings provided only by international NGOs. Moreover, as one panelist noted, these tools and materials are available only for a small group of people who are aware and have access to them, not all Internet users. The Pegasus scandal proved that many of these security measures were not effective, and the government was able to bypass these protection protocols, with several panelists noting that they were also victims of interference by the government, which used the Pegasus spyware.

The government also used local mobile operators to access journalists'

and civil society leaders' smartphones, ultimately hacking or gaining control of their social media pages. Using operators, the government can read or capture two-step authentication passwords sent to the smartphone prior to the real owner. Feminist activist Narmin Shahmarzade was among civil society leaders the government hacked. The attackers also used fake images and "conversations" to "prove" her intimate relationship with another political activist, Bakhtiyar Hajiyev. This particular [incident](#) took place right before Shahmarzade's announcement of a March 8 International Women's Day rally, which is usually unsanctioned. As a result, some activists try to use mobile numbers from foreign operators to protect their electronic accounts.

OCCRP [published](#) a report on July 18, 2021, highlighting journalists, civic activists, and politicians from 24 countries tracked by the Pegasus software. According to this report, within the past two years, the private information of more than one thousand journalists, opposition leaders, and activists was exposed or followed using the software. More than 74 of them were identified by their phone numbers, retracted by the researchers.

Although the Israeli company later said they sold this software to be used against suspects in grave crimes, the Azerbaijani government used it against civil society and media representatives. Some of these representatives [said](#) they would take this case to court within Azerbaijan and, if not satisfied, to the European Court of Human Rights.

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

Media literacy levels remain low. Academic education for journalists is almost entirely politicized. Students are followed on social media for their comments and reactions and can be punished or warned to refrain from such actions in the future.

Only those who have access to media and social networks have an average media literacy level. Those who do not have this access and live in remote and isolated areas do not have media literacy skills. There are no school or university programs about media literacy. "The state

does everything to isolate or prevent critical thinking at the school or university level and promotes the cult of personality,” one panelist said. The students are trained along the lines of the ruling New Azerbaijan Party ideology. The first pages of textbooks in elementary, middle, and high schools show pictures of the former president, Haydar Aliyev (the father of the current president); the current president, Ilham Aliyev; and his wife, First Vice President Mehriban Aliyeva.

Academic independence is not allowed at universities. Students cannot refer, for example, to the Western-published books of Jamil Hasanli, a historian and former professor at Baku State University who is part of the opposition. The government denies this, but lecturers at these universities who wish to remain anonymous confirm the order.

The number of researchers doing fact-checking is really only a handful. “Fakt Yoxla” and “Yalan-Dogru Teftis” are two platforms that focus on fact-checking and media literacy, though their audiences are still quite narrow.

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

There are journalists and public representatives who use their freedom of speech and right to information. However, as in the case mentioned above, an opposition leader was arrested after he had expressed doubt about the official version of the military helicopter crash to popular YouTube-based channel OsmanqiziTV. This was not the only case in which activists or civic journalists were punished for exercising their rights. Throughout 2021, multiple journalists and bloggers were detained or received prison terms. For example, a blogger from the [Jalilabad](#) district was arrested on November 21 for expressing his views on social media.

In 2021, as in previous years, the government of Azerbaijan prevented peaceful rallies from opposition forces, feminist activists, animal

rights groups, and independent journalists by using police force. As discussed earlier, during a protest asking for the liberation of opposition activist Saleh Rustamly, who was imprisoned on trumped-up charges, opposition leader Tofiq Yagubly was taken from the police station by men with their faces covered and assaulted. Although the prosecutor’s office opened an investigation after Yagublu’s complaint, it was quickly [dropped](#) for being “groundless.”

In another example, animal rights activist Nijat Ismayil received a 15-day administrative sentence for attending or organizing a rally in front of the [Toplan](#) center, which was supposedly taking care of street dogs but was actually discovered to be killing or torturing them.

In May 2017, the president of Azerbaijan signed an executive order obligating the Human Rights Ombudsman to file a claim to the courts about officials who violate the law on access to information. However, to date, no protocols have been filed with regard to the hundreds of officials who have refused to provide information to the public or media.

Despite the difficult political situation, there are a few platforms for public debate that are diverse and inclusive. However, most politicians choose to ignore them rather than accept their offers for interviews. Almost all of these independent platforms are online, using multiple platforms, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram. These are the only places where dynamic and independent debates are happening. Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp also have many troll accounts or real accounts orchestrated by the central government, one panelist said. The same orchestration of thoughts or imitations of debates are happening in the comments sections of YouTube videos of relatively independent online television channels.

The situation with physical spaces allocated for such debates, like municipality or town hall buildings, remains the same as in previous years. There are few truly independent physical locations that will allow

for such debates to take place, and they are closely watched by the authorities.

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

Since the mainstream media's financing comes from pre-determined sources among the elites and not from quality content or advertising, it does not care about the audience's needs and interests. "They want to steer the audience's needs rather than understand them," a panelist said. Some plan to attract audiences through scandalous or entertaining shows, making quality a low priority. These are the so-called reality shows that are built on manipulating unfortunate human stories.

While television channels compete for audiences with these kinds of shows, the oligarchic news agencies compete to see which organization posts more breaking news stories and how fast they do so. For these outlets, if the online comments sections are not closed or strongly censored, they are monitored, often by law-enforcement agencies' personnel. The media outlets that represent the government's views—such as Yeni Musavat, Haqqin.az, Oxu.az, and Qafqazinfo--are often able to mask it with occasional critical pieces on lower-level problems, and they have their comments sections closed. Except for the BBC's Azeri service, quality independent media such as RFE/RL Azerbaijani have the comments sections open and uncensored. VOA Azerbaijani had a comments section open in 2020 but not anymore, one panelist observed.

Independent media reach out to independent civil society representatives for information-sharing, and pro-government and government media reach out to or interview government-organized NGO (GONGO) representatives. Public opinion polls are rarely conducted by media outlets, be it for independent or pro-government media for different reasons. The former do not have funds for it, and the latter do not want to learn anything, a panelist mentioned.

66 The state does everything to isolate or prevent critical thinking at the school or university level and promotes the cult of personality," said one panelist.

Independent media and journalists rarely have opportunities to conduct community events with their audiences or stakeholders. Both the media and the public are under political pressure, as they are surveilled closely for carrying out any civic initiatives and have a high chance of being punished for these initiatives. They would be lucky to find a space for such events, one panelist noted.

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

Different sections of the population are slowly beginning to appreciate the concept or importance of community media. In addition to a few that started in previous years, the LGBTQ community has a new journal and YouTube channel. But the majority of panelists agree that there are no community media outlets channels in Azerbaijan, as is traditionally defined.

Under current conditions, the emergence of community media is not feasible.



PRINCIPLE 4: TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION

Panelists mentioned several examples of nonpartisan online media, which includes both professional media and citizen journalism and outlets based in-country and abroad. However, the public largely remains apolitical, even when quality, truthful information surfaces about major issues.

When journalist [Aytan Mammadova](#) was threatened at knifepoint, there was some protest on social media and a rally in Baku attended by a couple hundred people. NGOs, especially those working for or around media freedom, have struggled following a 2013 crackdown by authorities and still function in limbo. Misinformation about the government's policy successes or achievements is widespread. Official press conferences or events are not diverse and only in rare instances does the government invite a small group of independent media to its public events. Some exceptions may exist, depending on the topic and nature of the event--such as a government-organized trip to the territories freed during the 2020 war which may have included independent media.

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

Nonpartisan media outlets exist, but the number is limited. Most of them broadcast from abroad, and their websites have been blocked in the country as of 2017. Their readers and viewers have to use proxies or VPN to access the websites. To circumvent the blocks, these outlets use social media and proxy-linked web addresses to specific articles and materials. However, the majority of potential audiences do not use or know about VPN services. Observers saw an increase in VPN use in 2020, during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, when authorities reduced Internet speed nationally and limited access to the majority of Western, impartial media.

Nonpartisan media have a huge potential for growth, if allowed. A panelist said that two decades ago, there were nonpartisan media outlets that sold 100,000 to 200,000 newspapers a day.

In the absence of in-person fora, the only opportunities for people to

**66
Official press conferences or events are not diverse and only in rare instances does the government invite a small group of independent media to its public events.**

freely participate in the exchange of information with those with whom they disagree is on social media platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube comments sections. Authorities still use their troll "army" to shatter the trust in independent journalists and attack their critics on social media.

Audiences' primary source of information is the mainstream media from Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkey. As in past years, the strengthening authoritarianism in Turkey has marginalized or derailed independent media in Turkey, which has further negatively affected Azerbaijan's independent media.

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

Regaining control of once-lost national territories gave the government wide opportunities to push its propaganda while simultaneously reducing the need for news produced according to international best practices and standards.

Given that alternative independent media have been cornered in the country, there is a high likelihood that the population can be easily misled on political and social issues. Additionally, the absence of any democratic processes for more than two decades has caused widespread political apathy. As such, quality information will hardly influence the outcome of nationwide elections. When running for parliament in 2020, popular

blogger Mehman Huseynov recorded a bribe offered to him by another candidate from the same precinct, incumbent MP Faraj Guliyev, in return for Huseynov's quitting the race. The recording was widely distributed and caused a huge scandal. Without this recording, Guliyev likely would have won the election, but this time, the outcome of the elections was overruled for violations in the voting process. However, Guliyev was not charged with corruption.

One panelist observed that while the government was not able to effectively manage the pandemic, media coverage, including from outlets owned by oligarchs, did not produce or disseminate disinformation regarding COVID-19 or the vaccination process. Throughout the year, the pandemic and movement of civilians in the mined territories of recent war zones was the primary focus of mainstream media and resulted in very little misinformation from outlets. The same cannot be said about TikTok, WhatsApp, and other social media channels, where disinformation on the pandemic and vaccination remains very high, primarily in the Russian language and from Russian sources.

Disinformation in other topics remains high, and unfortunately there are many people, both in the provinces and in Baku, who do not consume news critically and think national television channels and the officials on them tell the absolute truth. The facts unfortunately show the opposite. For example, when speaking at NATO's meeting in Brussels, President Ilham Aliyev [said](#) that Azerbaijan exports oil to 20 NATO countries. The fact-checking site FaktYoxla researched the statement and [declared](#) the claim untrue. One panelist thought that whether a person believes disinformation or seeks quality information depends on his or her social and political education and knowledge. "The media literacy level is very low," the panelist concluded.

After "hate-speech blogger" Sevinj Huseynova's (mentioned earlier) call "to kill LGBTQ representatives," hostility in society for this group has significantly increased.

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

Despite the rampant attack on independent civil society in 2014, there are still NGOs that criticize authorities and give interviews to independent media. However, one panelist said there are also NGOs that are now under the government's umbrella after these attacks.



"There are thousands of registered NGOs in Azerbaijan, but fewer than one-tenth of them give reactions to the important topics of society," said a panelist.

Independent NGOs and journalists protested and criticized the new media law when it was in parliament for reading, but their voices were not heard. Just like in other post-Soviet, authoritarian countries, civil society is divided into two groups—real NGOs and government-organized NGOs (GONGOs)—a panelist said. "The latter may use quality information for personal use, but when it comes to statements by them, they are rarely balanced." The government uses GONGOs to push its propaganda and almost never registers real NGOs, thus keeping them in limbo when it comes to fulfilling their missions. Only GONGOs receive state funding through calls for grants.

"There are thousands of registered NGOs in Azerbaijan, but fewer than one-tenth of them give reactions to the important topics of society," said a panelist. Journalists are happy with a few experts and civil society leaders they can always approach for quality data and analyses, particularly on the economy and democracy, like Rovshan Aghayev, Azer Mehdiyev, and the Elections Monitoring and Democracy Studies Center, led by Anar Mammadli.

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

Returning to opposition leader Tofiq Yagublu's case, several panelists recalled a situation where police kidnapped and assaulted Yagublu, according to his statements, photos and videos taken immediately following the incident. Police claimed he beat himself up. The same situation happened in 2019 with Ali Karimli, leader of the National Front Party. "Times have changed, but the officials' tactics haven't," a panelist said.

Independent fact-checkers constantly expose untruths. Only "friendly media" are invited to press conferences of the line ministries.

Although there are cases when state officials rely on fake statistics, they rarely make their decisions based on disinformation.

The country lacks normal political dialogue or discussion, and those that do exist rarely rely on science. As a general rule, officials never explain new laws or provide a breakdown for what they entail.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

The panelists noted that the lack of credible government statistics and state agencies' opacity do not allow for a thorough evaluation of this indicator. However, they reiterated that the latest elections, just like previous ones, were fraudulent and that authorities are never influenced by quality information because their decisions are always political.

According to national legislation, even if there is no specific complaint by the victim, the start of a media corruption investigation can result in punishment for the media outlets, including fines or shutting down the outlet. In practice, when the media expose large-scale corruption by senior officials, there is no resulting punishment for the officials. For example, the media repeatedly wrote about a watch worth a million euros [mugged from State Oil Company's chairman's son while he was vacationing in Ibiza, Spain](#), but no formal investigation into how he could afford the watch was ever launched. Media have also written about the murder case linked to the Azerbaijani Army General Rovshan Akbarov some 20 years ago, for which he was never investigated. But when he lost his job in 2020, the prosecutor general's office suddenly remembered the case, and in 2021, Akbarov was arrested for allegedly killing businessman Elchin Aliyev.

The parliament still has several empty seats, and authorities have not rushed to have another set of elections.

A lack of independent courts causes further barriers for the restoration of basic human rights.

Because of the restrictive media environment, participants in the Azerbaijan study will remain anonymous. An Azerbaijani journalist developed this chapter after a series of structured interviews with colleagues who have firsthand knowledge of the media and information sector.

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