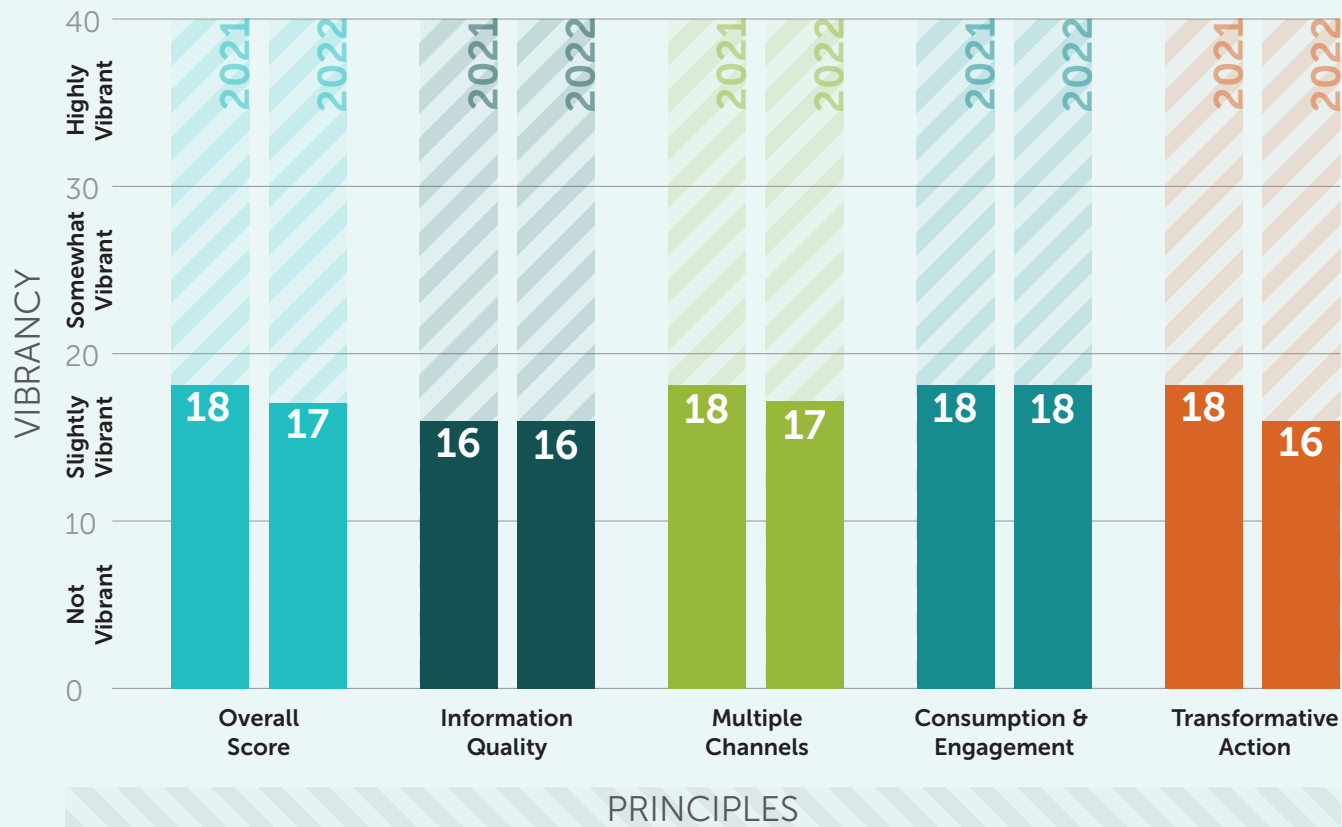


# BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

## Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 2





**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

17

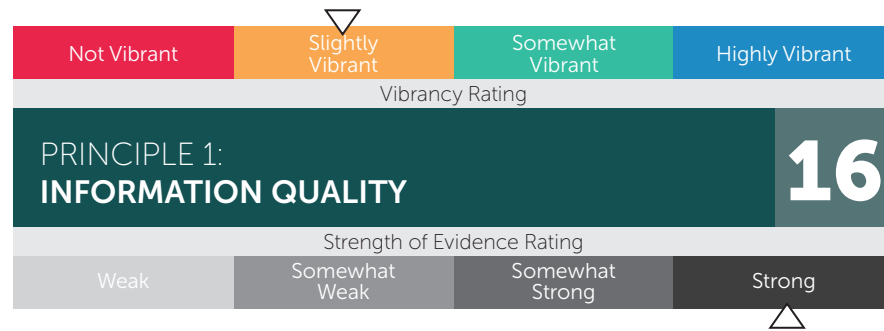
The year 2021 has been so turbulent for Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) that local and international media have been reporting about a possible new conflict. In July, the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina amended the country's criminal code to prohibit public condonation, denial, gross diminution, or attempts to justify the crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes established by final judgments. Republika Srpska, one of the two Bosnian and Herzegovinian entities, has called these amendments anti-Serb and has adopted the Law on Nonapplication of the Decision of the High Representative. Representatives of Republika Srpska boycotted the work of central government institutions, halting the administration of the country. The rest of the year was marked by a political stalemate, political skirmishes, and inflammatory statements about a possible secession for Republika Srpska.

The lack of consensus over electoral reform has also been impacting the overall political situation. Only Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats can run to be a member of the Bosnia and Herzegovina presidency, violating the European Convention on Human Rights. Disagreements among major political parties have halted any progress toward finding a solution for electoral reform before 2022's general elections.

The year was also marked by COVID-19: surges in the number of cases, delays in the procurement of vaccines, and the small number of vaccinated citizens (29 percent) despite the availability of vaccines. The media have

published inflammatory statements by politicians with no accompanying criticism, while misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines has circulated on the internet and in traditional media. There have been attempts to better regulate online media. The Press and Online Media Code of B&H was amended in late 2021 to include, among other things, disinformation and editorial responsibility for the comments sections of online media. The Communications Regulatory Agency (CRA) has prepared draft amendments to apply their code on audiovisual and radio media services to web pages of radio and television stations. The Ministry of Justice of B&H has prepared a draft law on the freedom to access information, but it has been criticized by civil society organizations for containing many exceptions.

The information system remains slightly vibrant, with the overall score dropping one point to 17 compared with the 2020 VIBE study. Panelists agree that there is still a significant amount of misinformation and hate speech, particularly online; that media outlets struggle financially and are rarely independent; and that journalists and citizens face problems in obtaining information. The media and information literacy skills of citizens are still low, and there is a growing trend of distrust for everything institutional and evidence based. Information does not support good governance, and governments do not use quality information to make their policy decisions.



Professional media produce content on a variety of topics, but the overall quality of information does not meet high professional standards, and there is a lack of specialized and thematic reporting. The media have largely reported on political skirmishes, inflammatory political statements, and talks about a possible armed conflict. The COVID-19 pandemic has generated a lot of misinformation and conspiracy theories, especially from nonprofessional content producers. In a modest media market and under political pressure, journalism remains a hard and unrewarding profession. Panelists give their lowest score to the resources for content production and their highest to the availability of quality information on a variety of topics.

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

Infrastructure for the production of varied content exists, but Velida Kulenović, vice president of the BH Journalists Association, said that—except for some foreign-owned private media—most local media outlets lack the financial, technical, and staff capacity to produce quality content. Even when they have the means, content producers do not have enough skills to use new approaches to content production. Media-related studies at universities do not provide adequate practical training, and there is a lack of courses for nonprofessional content production, even though in 2021 some training opportunities for podcasters and influencers were provided by international and nongovernmental

organizations. The overall body of content covers a variety of topics, but it is mostly focused on daily political events. Understaffed newsrooms publish content with the aim to attract more clicks, overproducing low-quality and copy-pasted articles, and do not have the capacity for specialized and thematic media reporting—such as science journalism or reporting on violations of human rights and violence against women and girls. Lejla Turčilo, a professor at the Faculty of Political Science, University of Sarajevo, noted that in media reporting, “there is very little context. The media mostly cover daily events in which the agenda is being set by the actors of those events.”

Political skirmishes, inflammatory statements by politicians, and talks of a new conflict in B&H have dominated the public discourse in the latter half of the year. Azra Maslo, program standards coordinator at the CRA, said that for the past three years, one of the most frequently breached principles in television and radio station programs has been the principle of fairness and impartiality. “Professional media publish information by consulting relevant sources and stating the facts, although objectivity in the manner of their reporting is not necessarily guaranteed,” Maslo said. Objectivity is often compromised by political influence on the media, along with politically and ethnationally biased media reporting that remain widely present both in traditional and online media.

Professional ramifications for content that violates journalistic standards exist, but their implementation and effects are minimal particularly for online media. The CRA can issue fines and warnings to television and radio stations for the breaches of its codes, but it mostly acts upon citizens’ reports and does not conduct regular monitoring. Moreover, there are growing concerns over its politization as in the past two years it failed to react to politically biased media reporting, particularly regarding the public service broadcaster of Repulika Srpska, RTRS.<sup>1</sup> The Press Council in B&H, on the other hand, has a self-regulatory mechanism for online and print media, but its activities are limited to mediation and non-binding decisions about media content that violates the standards

<sup>1</sup> Mladen Bubonjić, *Otkako je bivši direktor RTRS na poziciji direktora RAK, nema objavljenih kazni za RTRS*, Media.ba, 2022. <https://media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/otkako-je-bivsi-direktor-rtrs-na-mjestu-direktora-rak-nema-objavljenih-kazni-za>



of the Press and Online Code of B&H. However, there are a number of highly professional media outlets that abide by professional standards, such as the Center for Investigative Reporting, and that mostly report on corruption. Additionally, Detektor.ba of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network specializes in reporting on war crime trials.

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

Journalistic codes require media outlets to publish accurate information. However, due to low capacity and political and commercial interests that influence content, media outlets in numerous instances have violated those standards.

COVID-19 vaccines and the immunization process have particularly generated a lot of false and misleading information—especially by non-professional content producers. Over the last two years, the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje has debunked thousands of pieces of false and manipulative content related to COVID-19 that has been published by media outlets and by users of social media networks.

According to a regional research study published in 2021, most of the debunked content about COVID-19—including false medicaments, vaccine safety and the origin of the virus—was found on Facebook.<sup>2</sup> However, sources of this kind of content were also traced to Serbia-based tabloid media and the major mainstream media in B&H.<sup>3</sup> Lejla Gačanica, an independent legal consultant, said that the pandemic shows how vulnerable

both professional and non-professional content producers are to misinformation: “The purpose of this content is rarely unintentional but is created and distributed with intents ranging from raising readership/clicks—sensationalism—to creating context suitable for a very specific purpose—fear, political retaliation, slander.” Some of the reasons for such a high number of false and misleading content include copy-pasted content, lack of in-house capacity to fact-check information, and commercial and political interests.

False and misleading information also comes from politicians and government officials. Vanja Stokić, the editor of the online magazine *eTrafika* in Banja Luka, recalled how the prime minister of the Una-Sana Canton—one of 10 cantons in the country—has said that migrants and refugees have committed 3,500 crimes in the Una-Sana Canton. However, data received from the canton’s Ministry of Interior have shown that these people have committed less than 1,000 crimes and minor offenses during a three-year period. “That man stated very malicious

**“Professional media publish information by consulting relevant sources and stating the facts, although objectivity in the manner of their reporting is not necessarily guaranteed,” said Maslo.**

information multiple times at the expense of that group of people, and he will never be held responsible for that,” says Stokić. Nikolija Bjelica Škrivan, a journalist with Direkt Portal in Trebinje, spoke about the “oxygen” affair regarding the use of industrial oxygen to treat COVID-19 patients in Republika Srpska hospitals—something the media has revealed but

public officials have denied: “They twisted the arguments and transferred blame on the journalists. In the end, it looked like journalists lied, and they did not. . . . It was the other way around.” The accuracy of statements of government actors are rarely questioned by journalists, mostly because they lack capacity to fact-check information and face difficulties in obtaining information from public institutions.

Efforts to counter false and misleading information are mainly related to the work of fact-checkers and non-governmental media organizations; there are no initiatives to counter disinformation from authorities and institutions. According to the CRA’s code, fake and misleading programs

2 Rašid Krupalija et al, *Disinformation During Covid-19 Pandemic*, 2021, Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit Bosnien-Herzegowina, 2021. [https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/disinformation\\_covid-19\\_march\\_2021.pdf](https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/disinformation_covid-19_march_2021.pdf)

3 Rašid Krupalija et al, *Disinformation During Covid-19 Pandemic*, 2021, Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit Bosnien-Herzegowina, 2021. [https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/disinformation\\_covid-19\\_march\\_2021.pdf](https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/disinformation_covid-19_march_2021.pdf)

are prohibited on television and radio stations, but these provisions are rarely used to sanction media outlets that spread false and misleading information. The Press and Online Media Code of B&H was amended at the end of 2021 to include, among other things, provisions identifying disinformation as a gross violation of the basic rules of professional journalism and re-publishing disinformation from another medium or source does not absolve the responsibility of the editors of the media which transmit it. However, the effect of these amendments is yet to be seen.

Watchdog platforms Media.ba and Analiziraj.ba have showed examples of misleading information and partisan reporting, while the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje has debunked thousands of examples of disinformation online. Verification of the credibility of politicians' statements and the fulfilment of election promises of Instinomjer are available online, but mainstream media rarely refer to these reports or overall reports on false and misleading information. In 2020, the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje started working in partnership with Facebook: After fact-checkers identify content as fake, Facebook marks it as disputed content and reduces the reach of these posts. Media representatives, however, have complained that such measures drastically reduce their reach.<sup>4</sup> Mechanisms and processes to moderate content with the aim to reduce misinformation mostly have not been developed by media outlets.

### **Indicator 3: The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm.**

Harmful content, such as hate speech or smear campaigns against individuals, is rarely part of the content of professional media; however, it is pervasive in social media networks and in comments sections of online media.

A recent study on media habits of adults in B&H indicated that 35% of

4 Stokić, Vanja, *Zašto pojedini medijima ne odgovara rad fact-checkera?*, Media.ba, 2021. <https://www.media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/zasto-pojedinim-medijima-ne-odgovara-rad-fact-checkera>

respondents said that they have been exposed to potentially harmful content in the media and information-communication environment, including hate speech (48%) and discriminatory content (32%), and only a fifth (19%) reported inappropriate content they were exposed to.<sup>5</sup> Another study showed that harmful content often remains on Facebook and Twitter in the Western Balkan countries despite that it being reported. A poll conducted by BIRN showed that according to a survey, 43 per cent of content reported as hate speech and 60 percent of content reported as targeted harassment on Facebook and Twitter remained online.<sup>6</sup>

Hate speech in user-generated content most often targets ethno-national groups, women, migrants, and refugees, and it is often based on conflicting ethno-national narratives. The amended Press Code of the Press Council of B&H expanded the editorial responsibility of the overall content of online media, including user-generated comments. According to the new provisions, editors are obligated to delete user-generated comments that contain hate speech, incitement to violence, harassment, threats, and all other forms of inappropriate and socially unacceptable communication. So far, most of the complaints to the Press Council on user-generated content were related to hate speech. In 2021, the Press Council received 1,073 complaints, out of which 505 refer to user-generated comments, mostly hate speech, in online media. Many complaints (766) have been resolved by self-regulation, and most cases of hate speech have been removed by the media. These numbers demonstrate the effectiveness and reach of the self-regulatory system, according to Maida Bahto Kestendžić, project coordinator at the Press Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, the reach of the Press Council is particularly limited regarding anonymous portals and does not relate to user-generated content on media outlets' accounts on social networks.

5 Hasanagić, Snježana et al, *Research on Media Habits of Adults in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Council of Europe and Communications Regulatory Agency, 2021.

6 Jeremić, Ivana, and Milica Stojanović, *Facebook, Twitter Struggling in Fight against Balkan Content Violations*, Detektor.ba, 2021. <https://detektor.ba/2021/02/16/facebook-twitter-struggling-in-fight-against-balkan-content-violations/?lang=en>

Hate speech is also prohibited by the codes of the Communications Regulatory Agency, which only apply to television and radio stations. The CRA has also made efforts to change its rules and prepared draft amendments to expand its jurisdiction to online content produced under the logos of television and radio stations. The provisions of the code that would apply to this type of online content relate to the prohibition of spreading and inciting hatred, violence, or discrimination; content that could have adverse consequences for human safety and health; rules that pertain to the protection of minors, including the protection of their privacy; and the right of reply. Media representatives support the efforts of the CRA to improve the regulation of online media, but opinions over these draft amendments are divided, especially considering that these changes would not include other online media that are not associated with radio and television stations.

Particular forms of hate speech are prohibited by criminal laws and the Election Law prohibits political candidates from using language which could provoke someone to violence and from spreading of hatred during pre-election campaigns.<sup>7</sup> Cases of hate speech being pursued legally, overall, are rare, particularly for hate speech on the internet, and court decisions are inconsistent. For example, Fatmir Alispahić, the person behind Antimigrant.ba that maliciously targets migrants and refugees, has been acquitted by the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina of a first-instance verdict on charges of spreading national, racial, and religious hatred and intolerance against migrants and refugees in 2021. Turčilo stated that such a verdict sets a dangerous precedent that anyone can spread hate speech without consequences.

In July, the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina introduced amendments to the criminal code to prohibit public condonation,

<sup>7</sup> Sokol, Anida, *National Regulatory and Self-Regulatory Framework against Hate Speech and Disinformation*, SEENPM, 2021. <https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Resilience-Factsheet-Bosnia-and-Herzegovina.pdf>

“**I personally think that the influence of China is minor. But I think that the influence of Russia is pretty clear. It is malignant because it creates problems with internal relations,”** noted Kontić.

denial, gross diminution, or attempts to justify the crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes established by final judgments, and glorification of war criminals. Media monitoring by the Srebrenica Memorial Center has shown that genocide denial has been carried out less explicitly since then, and the number of such acts has decreased. However, genocide denial is still present, especially in the content of the public service broadcaster, Radio Television of Republika Srpska (RTRS), and the public news agency, Srna.<sup>8</sup> High-ranking politicians and government actors also continue to deny war crimes, and their statements are published by the mainstream media without criticism, the database Mapping Hate of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIRN BiH) shows.

Condonation and denials of genocide are most often uttered by local and foreign politicians in Serbia-based media, which are then copy-pasted in the B&H media. Boro Kontić, director of Mediacentar Sarajevo, stated that Croatia and Serbia have a substantial influence on public discourse, especially in the region of Herzegovina and the entity of Republika Srpska. “I personally think that the influence of China is minor. But I think that the influence of Russia is pretty clear. It is malignant because it creates problems with internal relations,” Kontić noted. Foreign states such as the United States, Russia, China, and Turkey influence public and media discourse in B&H, but further research is needed in this regard.

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

Panelists agreed that marginalized groups are not sufficiently represented in the mainstream media and content for, or dedicated to, minorities and vulnerable groups—and adapted for persons with

<sup>8</sup> Memorijalni Centar Srebrenica, *Memorijalni centar Srebrenica: Smanjen broj slučajeva negiranja genocida u entitetu RS*, September 27, 2021. <https://srebrenicamemorial.org/bs/aktuelnosti/memorijalni-centar-srebrenica-smanjen-broj-slucajeva-negiranja-genocida-u-entitetu-rs/61>.

disabilities—is extremely rare. Mainstream media mostly follow the interests and political leaders of the three constituent groups (Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats) and exclude others. Bjelica Škrivan said that media reports on minority issues are mostly the output of donor-supported project activities or are part of media content on days when no major events are taking place. There are, however, specialized online media and groups on social networks dedicated to human rights and minority groups.

Tijana Cvjetićanin, editor of the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje, said that the overall media reporting on the LGBTQ community and women has improved, mainly due to the efforts of civil society organizations, and intense media reporting on the pandemic has decreased the xenophobic and racist discourse toward migrants and refugees that exist in the media. Senad Zaimović, director of the marketing agency Fabrika, says that attitudes toward the LGBTQ community are not consistent across the country, and there are places where reporting on certain issues is considered to be very brave.

Research on media reporting of gender-based violence published in 2021 shows that media reporting on this issue has improved to some extent when compared to 2016: however, examples of sensationalism and tabloid-style reporting on violence against women is still present, especially in cases of femicide. Moreover, the media in general neglect the existence and recognition of gender-based violence against women and girls as a social problem.<sup>9</sup>

CRA data show that women hold fewer managerial positions at television and radio outlets compared to men: 25.6 percent of managerial positions are held by women—5 percent less when compared with the previous year—while 42.2 percent of editors-in-chief are women. Female journalists are worse off than men, and they face more insults. For example, the journalist Zinaida Đelilović of *Žurnal* magazine has

received vulgar insults and threats from a B&H Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees official against whom disciplinary procedures have been initiated. Bjelica Škrivan described how it is more challenging to be a female journalist, especially in a small town where the patriarchy is dominant: “I cannot say that it is simple for a woman journalist in a community like this one because, aside from everyday pressures on us due to our profession, [we are subject to] misogynist comments, which we have to listen to while doing our fieldwork and the ways in which these interlocutors, if they are men, approach us. They do not have that approach toward our male colleagues.”

Public broadcasters are obliged to broadcast programming intended for members of national minorities for at least one hour a week, and the CRA plans to monitor such compliance. Maslo said that the CRA aims to conduct thematic monitoring and analysis on topics related to violence and women, women in sports, portrayal of women in advertising messages, and gender representation in news programs; based on this analysis, it will prepare guidelines for the media on how to report on these topics.

Finally, there is little specialized content for young people and children in the traditional media in B&H, despite CRA rules that oblige public broadcasters and public media to produce content for children and youth. Research shows that young people are not satisfied with the content in traditional media, and they mainly follow different non-professional content producers on the Internet.<sup>10</sup>

### Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Most content producers have very limited financial resources to operate and lack resources to produce high quality content. There are numerous media outlets – 107 television stations, 157 radio stations, seven news agencies, 8 dailies, 181 different publications and magazines – that compete for funds on a very modest advertising market and are mainly

<sup>9</sup> UN Women, *Research on media reporting on gender-based violence against women in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2020, 2021*. <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/2021/9/un%20women%20research%20on%20media%20reporting.pdf?la=en&vs=420>

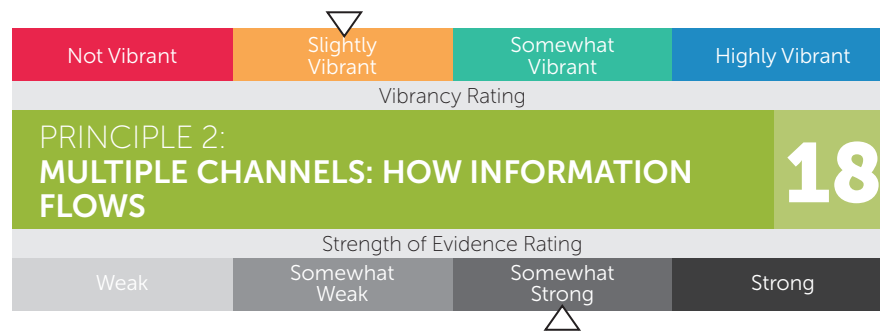
<sup>10</sup> Sokol, Anida, and Senad Alibegović, *Mladi za bolje medije: Stavovi, navike i potrebe mladih za medijskim sadržajima u BiH*, Mediacentar Sarajevo, 2021. [https://www.media.ba/sites/default/files/mladi\\_za\\_bolje\\_medije\\_dtp\\_05.pdf](https://www.media.ba/sites/default/files/mladi_za_bolje_medije_dtp_05.pdf)



funded through public budgets and/or advertisements. In addition to these, the numbers of non-professional content producers, such as YouTubers, have been rising.

Media financing from public budgets—through grants, subsidies, and commercial contracts—is arbitrary and nontransparent. Local public media outlets—65 radio and 15 TV stations—founded by local assemblies, are highly dependent on local governments for financing, and this impacts their reporting. Kulenović said that local public media outlets receive constant threats that their funds will be reduced if they do not report and produce content that suits them. Slađana Jašarević, a journalist at BN TV, added that not all media outlets have equal access to public funds since, for example, contracts for advertising from institutions and public companies are being allocated to those media that are close to the ruling political party.

Economic consequences of the pandemic have decreased available budgets for media production and advertising from private advertisers, local governments, and public companies. Traditional media has suffered the most, according to Zaimović who warned that the political crisis and talks of a new conflict could also impact investments in the advertising sector. “Money [has been] redirected partly to digital media, but the fact is that the whole market has deteriorated 20–30 percent. If we have previously talked about lack of resources, they are now lacking even more,” said Zaimović. A media fund that would mitigate the financial consequences caused by COVID-19 has not been set up, and the state does not provide funds for the support of media pluralism, said Maslo. Panelists noted that many journalists do not have proper work contracts and health-care insurance. They are underpaid, and according to Jašarević, some earn €200–250 (\$220 - \$270) per month—half the average salary, even though there are differences between locally and foreign-owned media. Employee mobility in the media market is low, and journalism remains a hard and unrewarding profession.



Freedom of speech and the right to information are protected by national laws and international conventions that Bosnia and Herzegovina has ratified, but their implementation remains inadequate. Diverse channels and types of information exist, but the public is polarized and follows the media that portray their group in a positive light. The media’s political dependence is of great concern, and media ownership lacks transparency. Information channels are mostly not independent, impacting the overall quality of information, and panelists gave it their lowest score. Appropriate channels for government information exist, but they are not used adequately.

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

Freedom of expression is guaranteed by the constitution of B&H, along with constitutions of the entities of Federation and Republika Srpska. The B&H constitution stipulates that the country and both entities shall ensure the highest level of internationally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms, and that the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms and its Protocols shall apply directly and have priority over other law.

Curbs on free speech are, however, widespread across the country, even though there are differences between the Federation of B&H and Republika Srpska. In the latter, attacks on freedom of speech are more direct. The *Western Balkans Journalists’ Safety Index* in 2021 shows that B&H is the second worst-ranked country in the western Balkan region in

terms of security of journalists and freedom of the media.<sup>11</sup> The biggest shortcomings are the lack of urgent protection measures in response to reported attacks and death threats against journalists and distrust regarding institutions; this leads to journalists not reporting attacks and threats. “There is no sufficiently efficient and independent judiciary, and that is why normalization of violence against journalists is so present,” Gačanica said. She also added that there is a worrying trend of strategic lawsuits against public participation as the laws against defamation—instead of protecting both the media and those that the media report about—are being used to silence the press.

According to data provided by the BH Journalists Association, in 2021 there were 70 cases of freedom of expression violations of media workers, including threats, political pressures, censorship, and physical attacks. In October, BN TV journalist Jašarević was publicly insulted and labeled as “a traitor” by a Serb member of the B&H presidency, Milorad Dodik. Dodik said at a press conference that BN TV is “part of the joint criminal enterprise against Republika Srpska” and “the biggest villain in Republika Srpska.”<sup>12</sup> Jašarević said that the state of media freedoms is highly troubling. “Intensive efforts are being made to curb media freedoms. . . . Literally people will physically try to stop you from saying and writing what you think,” Jašarević said. Another method used to curb media freedom is ignoring journalists’ requests for information or only providing partial information. For example, at a hospital press conference in Trebinje, only journalists of trusted media outlets were allowed to pose questions—those who wrote critically about the local government, such as Direkt Portal, were not permitted to speak.

A study by the Press Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that

“There is no sufficiently efficient and independent judiciary, and that is why normalization of violence against journalists is so present,” said Gačanica.

journalists are often targets of disinformation, trolling, doxing, or harassment on social networks. More than half of the study’s respondents have stated that they have received threats on Facebook through private messages or in comment sections, and only a small number of them have reported those threats to the police.<sup>13</sup> Jasmin Mulahusić, a Luxembourg citizen with Bosnia and Herzegovina heritage, has been targeting journalists and labeling them as traitors on social networks and on his website. The Prosecutor’s Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina opened an investigation, and he was arrested and questioned in September. Such acts are worrying, as Mulahusić

is associated with the leading Bosniak party SDA.<sup>14</sup> Members of the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje are also targeted online for their work debunking disinformation, especially about COVID-19. Cvjetičanin states that they have received threats over the phone from a journalist working for a media outlet whose articles

they debunked; there has been no reaction from other journalists and media organizations.

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

Most people can access most information channels, including radio, television, newspapers or magazines, and digital or social media; communities are not precluded from accessing information due to social norms. Television is the most important and most trusted source of information for the general public, but the use of the internet and social media platforms as news sources has been on the rise, particularly among young people. A recent study on media habits of adults shows

11 Radević, Maja, and Borka Rudić, *Western Balkans Journalists’ Safety Index: Bosnia and Herzegovina 2020 Narrative Report*, BH Journalists Association, 2021. <https://bhnovinari.ba/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/BIH-ENG.pdf>.

12 Sokol, Anida, *Nastavlja se targetiranje novinara i biranje podobnih*, Media.ba, 2021. <https://media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/nastavlja-se-targetiranje-novinar-a-i-biranje-podobnih>

13 Delilović, Zinaida, *Društvene mreže i novinarstvo u Bosni i Hercegovini*, Vijeće za Štampu u Bosni i Hercegovini, February 2021. [https://www.vzs.ba/images/2021/drustvene\\_mreze\\_i\\_novinarstvo\\_u\\_BiH.pdf](https://www.vzs.ba/images/2021/drustvene_mreze_i_novinarstvo_u_BiH.pdf).

14 Tomić, Slađan, *Slučaj Mulahusić: Hapšenje zbog govora mržnje na društvenim mrežama*, Media.ba, September 7, 2021. <https://media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/slucaj-mulahusic-hapsenje-zbog-govora-mrznje-na-drustvenim-mrezama>.

that almost nine out of 10 adults use the internet (87 percent)—mostly through smartphones—and the majority (77 percent) are satisfied with their current level of access to media and information communication services. Still, 11 percent of them do not use digital services or the internet and say that the lack of money is what limits their access to media and information communication services.<sup>15</sup>

According to the CRA, the internet usage rate is 94.49 percent, but rural areas are neglected due to the lack of a national broadband strategy. Internet governance and regulation of the digital space provides open and equal access to users and content producers, but websites are largely not adapted for people with disabilities, said Maslo, who works at the CRA. In addition, Gačanica said, that because of digital gaps, minority groups—such as the Romani—are excluded from open digital communications. Panelists reinforced that online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic showed that internet is not available to all the population.

The CRA has introduced obligatory quotas for public broadcasters for content that needs to be adjusted to persons with disabilities, and public broadcasters have submitted their five-year action plans to gradually increase the adaptation of their content to such persons. Analysis from the CRA shows that there are 32 operators of cable distributors of audiovisual and radio media services, among which 10 are larger operators. There are concerns that some of the larger operators have acquired large shares of subscribers. In the event of a disruption to the telecommunications infrastructure, such as television, people have access to alternate information systems, such as the internet and radio. The transition from analog to digital has not yet been finalized, even though it originally had to be finished by 2015.

By order of the CRA and at the request of Croatia (owing to their introduction of the 5G access network and possible interference with the

analog signal), the analog signal of 26 public and commercial televisions with 171 transmitters throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina was turned off in 2021. This move has provoked concerns that people without cable TV in those areas will not have access to different sources of information and sparked accusations from some media outlets that certain decisions in the process were politically motivated. Six TV stations with national coverage have been given access to the multiplex A, a system that can be used for the transmission of multiple digital TV channels. However, it has limited capacities, and the country needs to finalize the digitalization process and provide full operational capacities of all the multiplexes.

### **Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.**

Access to information laws, introduced at the beginning of the 2000s, have been essential to the work of investigative journalists, and they have been used to discover numerous abuses and illegalities in the work of institutions and public officials. However, their implementation remains inadequate, and their legal solutions do not meet international standards, particularly in terms of proactive transparency.

Data from Transparency International Bosnia and Herzegovina show that in 2021 public authorities provided information more often by the legally proscribed deadline compared with previous years, but it is still common that requested information has to be obtained by court order. According to their research, 59 percent of ministries and municipalities have given information about the amounts allocated to citizen associations and foundations within the proscribed deadline of 15 days. This is higher when compared with 2020.<sup>16</sup> “Despite the legal framework guaranteeing the right to free access to information, citizens are still unaware that this is one of their basic human rights and do not use the available mechanisms to exercise this right,” said Bahto Kestendžić.

<sup>15</sup> Hasanagić, Snježana, et al, *Media Habits of Adults in BiH*, Council of Europe and the Communications Regulatory Agency, 2021 <https://rm.coe.int/adults-media-habits-eng/1680a454d7>.

<sup>16</sup> Transparency International BiH, *Izveštaj o primjeni Zakona o slobodi pristupa informacijama u 2021*. September 28, 2021, <https://ti-bih.org/izvestaj-o-primjeni-zakona-o-slobodi-pristupa-informacijama-u-2021-godini/>.

The Ministry of Justice of B&H has prepared a draft law on free access to information for institutions to be in harmony with international standards. Even though the law, if adopted, would oblige institutions to proactively publish information—including information on the manner of decision-making, financing, public procurement, public tenders, and grants awarded—it has been criticized by civil society organizations, as it provides a wide list of possible exceptions to access information and does not define the test of public interest, thus proving to be problematic in practice.<sup>17</sup>

Journalists face difficulties in obtaining information from public bodies. Panelists said this often depends on personal contacts, the availability and professionalism of spokespersons, and whether journalists are on good terms with them. Journalists from BIRN B&H face difficulties in obtaining information from judicial authorities, particularly from the Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina. For example, at the end of the year, BIRN BiH sent a petition signed by 5,000 persons to the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, asking for a more transparent judiciary and demanding proactive publication of indictments and judgments. Judicial bodies publish information on the platform *Pravosudje.ba*, but these practices are not uniform—only some publish confirmed indictments; some do not publish judgments, or the judgments are anonymized.<sup>18</sup> *eKonsultacije* is a platform containing information on legislative procedures. The platform is not very user-friendly, and many people do not know about it. “I don't think that people use [the platforms]. I don't know how to use them. Even if they exist, they are made to be very complicated,” said Cvjetičanin.

“Intensive efforts are being made to curb media freedoms....Literally people will physically try to stop you from saying and writing what you think,” said Jašarević.

### Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

There is no data on excessive concentration of media ownership, and there are only a few cases where two or three media organizations have the same owner.<sup>19</sup> However, the concentration of the influence of political elites on media content that seriously hampers media pluralism and independence is worrisome. In addition, there are no laws that regulate domestic and foreign ownership concentration in the media and media-related industries, and there are no laws that require transparency in media ownership. The European Commission

in its yearly progress reports for Bosnia and Herzegovina, including 2021, has been emphasizing that the country should adopt legislation on media ownership transparency and criteria on public advertising. The lack of media ownership transparency poses a huge problem, especially in the online sector. A

recent study identified 615 online news media in the country, and only 27 percent of them have an impressum on their websites.<sup>20</sup> Anyone can easily open an online media, but these are usually not registered and mostly remain out of the reach of any legislative and regulatory frameworks.

The process of spectrum allocation so far has been fair and transparent but there are growing concerns over the politicization of the CRA, especially as its current director Draško Milinović is the former director of RTRS. Maslo stated that the issue of ensuring the independence of the CRA has always been present. “At the operational level, there are absolutely no obstacles or pressures on our work,” she said, adding, “We

17 Hasečić, Nejra, *Novi ZOSP bi mogao dodatno ograničiti slobodan pristup informacijama u BiH*, Media.ba, March 29, 2021. <https://www.media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/novi-zosp-bi-mogao-dodatno-ograniciti-slobodan-pristup-informacijama-u-bih>.

18 Sokol, Anida. *Judicial Transparency During the Pandemic: Public and Media Outreach*, The Aire Center, 2021. <https://www.media.ba/sites/default/files/transparency-report-vol-01-eng.pdf>.

19 Petković, Brankica, and Sanela Hodžić, *Sustainability of Professional Journalism in the Media Business Environment of the Western Balkans*, TACSO, 2021. <http://tacso.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Sustainability-of-Professional-Journalism-in-WB-Study-National-Data-Overview-BiH-final.pdf>

20 Osmančević, Enes, et al., *Mapiranje medijskih web portala u BiH*, USAID, CPCD, 2021. [https://2am-objavi-ba.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/17113734/Istrazivanje\\_Mapiranje-medijskih-web-portala-u-BiH-1.pdf](https://2am-objavi-ba.s3.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/17113734/Istrazivanje_Mapiranje-medijskih-web-portala-u-BiH-1.pdf).



who work in the regulatory body—that is, at the operational level—have absolutely no obstacles in doing this job.”

In recent years, the CRA did not sanction RTRS for biased media reporting despite many instances of such coverage. However, other publicly funded media outlets engage in biased media reporting most often by lack of criticism towards the ruling political parties. Public media and public service broadcasters provide informative and educational news and information, but concerns over their ethno-national and politically biased media reporting remains.

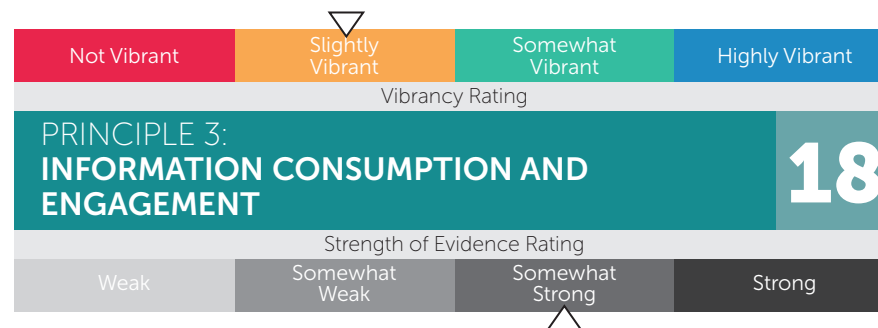
### Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Media organizations are highly influenced by ownership, and this remains one of the most problematic issues in the media sector. The media are susceptible to the influences of political and business elites through non-transparent and arbitrary media financing and media ownership.

On a yearly basis, governments at different administrative levels (entities, cantons, cities, municipalities) give grants and subsidies to the media and also make commercial contracts with media outlets to promote activities. In recent years, there has not been any research about the overall amount of such allocations; however, in 2017 research indicated that such spending could amount from BAM 30 million to 100 million annually (\$16 million to \$54 million).<sup>21</sup>

Advertising of public companies in the media is another way that content is influenced, as public companies are mainly held by people close to political parties. In addition to giving grants and subsidies to the media, local governments also make commercial contracts with media outlets to cover the work of mayors and local assemblies, but this is

often used for political promotion and their legitimacy is questionable.<sup>22</sup> Political interference into the editorial content of public media and public service broadcasters is also done through appointments of the members of managerial bodies. “There are no completely independent media. The media are seen as a powerful tool in the hands of politicians and powerful people, and therefore each political option (more or less) has its own media,” said Bjelica Škrivan.



The level of media and information literacy is low, and the efforts of various government institutions and state bodies to promote and include media and information literacy in media and education policies are still at an early stage. The population lacks the knowledge and skills on how to keep themselves digitally secure, and digital training courses are scarce and mostly attended by journalists and representatives of nongovernmental organizations. Denials of war crimes are still present, and there is a trend to equate freedom of speech with theories that are not evidence based and institutional. Panelists give their lowest score to the level of media and information literacy skills of citizens and to the availability of media and information literacy tools; they gave their highest score to the information provided by community media, even though the number of community media is still extremely low.

21 Hodžić, Sanela, and Anida Sokol, *Obrasci finansiranja medija iz javnih budžeta, politički pritisci i fiansijska nestabilnost*, Mediacentar Sarajevo, 2017. <https://www.media.ba/bs/publication/obraci-finansiranja-medija-iz-javnih-budzeta-politicki-iritisci-i-fiansijska>

22 Arnes Grbešić, *Zagrijavanje za lokalne izbore: Stotine hiljada maraka za medije*, Media.ba, 2021. <https://media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/zagrijavanje-za-lokalne-izbore-2020-stotine-hiljada-maraka-za-medije>

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

The Law on the Protection of Personal Data prohibits the publication of private data, but provisions are not aligned with international standards and do not apply to companies registered in other countries, such as social networks, or to media that are under the jurisdiction of the CRA. Edin Ibrahimfendić, a lawyer with the Institution of Human Rights Ombudsman of Bosnia and Herzegovina, states that cybercrimes are penalized. For example, in 2021, a group of people were arrested for hacking bank accounts and for bank fraud. Panelists agreed that legal protections are insufficiently enforced, and the population lacks the knowledge and skills to keep themselves digitally secure.

Digital security training courses provided through different donor-supported projects are scarce and are mostly attended by journalists and representatives from niche media and nongovernmental organizations. Journalists from mainstream private and public media mainly do not attend such training courses and lack skills and knowledge about digital security. Jašarević states that she

has never attended such a training course but that her media outlet employs persons who are responsible for digital security. “Whenever we are reporting on an affair, there are attempts to take down our site, but interruptions do not last long—maybe half an hour, an hour maximum—and we manage to restore everything,” Jašarević said.

Other media representatives note that distributed denial-of-service attacks are not frequent but that they face other issues, such as phishing. Stokić said that she has had the opportunity to attend educational activities on digital security, but her media outlet does not have a person responsible for digital hygiene practices, and journalists rarely apply knowledge gained at such training courses. She also stated that many journalists lack digital literacy, including knowledge on how digital

technology and social networks work, even though they actively use them. A study shows that journalists use social networks extensively, even to obtain information, and consider them immensely important for the visibility of their work.<sup>23</sup> Some, however, have had their content removed from social networks or their social media profiles and accounts banned as their posts were mistakenly identified or reported as violating the community guidelines of social networks. Journalists see this as a form of censorship and, in certain cases, as orchestrated efforts to lower the visibility of their content. For example, in 2021 the Facebook account of Direkt Portal, located in Trebinje, was banned; Bjelica Škrivan stated that it could have been the result of efforts to silence their criticism toward the local government.

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

Panelists agreed that the level of media and information literacy is low even though some progress has been made. In the aforementioned

**“There are no completely independent media. The media are seen as a powerful tool in the hands of politicians and powerful people, and therefore each political option (more or less) has its own media,” said Škrivan.**

study, only a quarter of the respondents (24 percent) believe in their ability to identify false information in media and information communication services and over half of the respondents who use the internet (56 percent) do not perform any fact-checking of online information. Only half (50 percent) believe that they have sufficient knowledge about how to protect themselves and their family members from the negative effects

of media and information communication technologies, and only a third (32 percent) know how to report content they consider inappropriate in various media and information communication technologies.<sup>24</sup>

23 Đelilović, Zinaida, *Društvene mreže i novinarstvo u Bosni i Hercegovini*, Vijeće za Štampu u Bosni i Hercegovini, February 2021, [https://www.vzs.ba/images/2021/drustvene\\_mreze\\_i\\_novinarstvo\\_u\\_BiH.pdf](https://www.vzs.ba/images/2021/drustvene_mreze_i_novinarstvo_u_BiH.pdf).

24 Hasanagić, Snježana, et al., *Media Habits of Adults in BiH*, Council of Europe and Communications Regulatory Agency, 2021. <https://rm.coe.int/adults-media-habits-eng/1680a454d7>.

Citizens are not aware of the algorithms driving social media, the mechanics of advertisement targeting, and other ways in which personal information is utilized to target digital users. These topics are not discussed at school, in the public, or in the media, and there is a lack of expertise and organizations that deal with digital rights. Cvjetićanin said that the number of people who are tricked by fraudulent digital messages designed to hoax people into revealing sensitive information, such as back details and IDs, is significant, especially among the older population: “What I see from our work is really concerning . . . also because I don’t see responses from judicial investigative bodies. Frauds that happen [in] which people probably lose money are completely invisible.”

In recent years regulatory, nongovernmental, and international organizations have continued to work on diverse media and information literacy activities. The informal media and information literacy coalition of media and information experts remains active. The CRA has held a campaign called Days of Media and Information Literacy and a Fair on Media and Information Literacy, and it has opened a website ([medijskapismenost.ba](http://medijskapismenost.ba)) dedicated to media and information literacy. The subject “the digital world” has been introduced in the second grade in primary schools in Republika Srpska; the Republika Srpska government plans to introduce a subject called media literacy in secondary schools in 2022. A national-level strategy on media and information literacy has not been established yet. Efforts by various government institutions and state bodies to promote media and information literacy and include it in media and education policies are still at an early stage.

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

Online platforms for the exchange of information exist, but Gačanica stated that they either assemble like-minded people or are places of insults, hate speech, and violence. People engage with information

but often in a negative way. “We now have a paradox where criticism [shown] toward sources of information is turned completely upside down, and everyone is very critical in the sense that there are some conspiracies. There is currently a trend that equates freedom of opinion . . . with complete denial of anything institutional [and] evidence based,” Cvjetićanin said. She gave an example: on YouTube, people follow what they consider “truth media”—nonprofessional content producers that, according to them, are brave enough to tell the truth but are essentially very professional disinformers.

Trusting noninstitutional and non-evidence-based theories can be explained by the lack of trust in institutions due to high levels of corruption and people’s negative experiences with, for example, health institutions. Lack of trust in official information and public institutions has been particularly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic when poor communication from health authorities and the lack of an official government campaign on the importance of immunization further undermined the public health response. Despite the availability of

vaccines, only 29 percent of citizens got vaccinated. As Denis Džidić, director of BIRN B&H, said, citizens still decline to accept court verdicts on war crimes and genocide, and historical revisionism is still a fact of life. On social networks, people tend to react toward issues such as vaccination

and epidemiological measures, but the public is apathetic toward local politics and air pollution—a source for serious concern in certain towns. Kantić partially blamed the media for this state of affairs since they are mostly reporting on high-level politics; it is almost impossible to obtain information, for example, on local community meetings in which citizens can directly participate.

Representatives of the CRA, the Press Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Raskrinkavanje said that people react to problematic media content and send in reports and complaints. Bahtić Kestendžić said that different persons complain over user-generated content, such as hate speech, but that people who are targeted by specific articles are the ones who

**Citizens still decline to accept court verdicts on war crimes and genocide, and historical revisionism is still a fact of life.**

mostly send complaints—usually for defamation—about content in the print and online media. Bahto Kestendžić also said that civil society organizations used to react more to rights violations—such as women’s rights—of the groups whose interests they protect, but this trend has decreased in recent years. Citizens mostly have been sending complaints to the CRA regarding rule breaches over the payment of calls in TV shows and over the protection of minors. Maslo said that people also complain over diverse issues, stating wrongly that it is hate speech: “A citizen [might] complain about the TV appearance of the son of a convicted war criminal . . . with a request to ban the broadcasting of this type of program, . . . or they complain because a certain politician has been criticized in a program, and they see it as an attack on the entire nation from which that politician comes.” Most cases of disinformation that people report to the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje are usually debunked as disinformation.

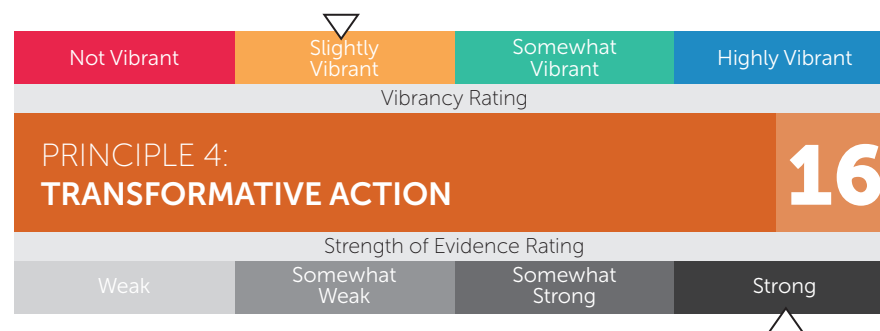
#### Indicator 14: Media and information producers engage with their audience’s needs.

Media and content producers follow statistical data on the most-followed topics and programs and adjust their content to their audience’s needs. Zaimović said that the most popular media content is trivial—such as TV reality shows and online media content on crimes and accidents—and if a media outlet wants to reach a certain number of views to obtain revenue, they have to produce such content. Marketing agencies conduct research on audience and market size but mostly only for their clients; data are not available to the public. There is, however, a lack of qualitative research on the audience’s needs and interests, as media outlets lack financial resources, knowledge, and staff to conduct such analyses. Some research has been done by nongovernmental organizations. For example, research on media consumption habits of young people has shown that they are not satisfied with the overall content in the media and would like to follow more content on diverse

topics, including music, art, science, and ecology.<sup>25</sup> The media receive audience feedback mostly through social networks and user-generated comments, but as Stokić said, their followers also suggest topics by sending emails or during conversations at different events.

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

Community media is still undeveloped, and there is no unanimous consensus about the definition of community media among media experts and representatives. Based on the regulation of the CRA, it is possible to establish a community radio for the specific needs of a certain social group, but so far, only three community radio stations have been set up: Radio Otvorena Mreža, Radio Active, and Radio Marija. Maslo said that these stations provide relevant information to their audiences and give space to marginalized groups to participate in public communication and social debate, but even though the criteria to establish a community radio are simple, so far, there has not been much interest. There is a rise in nonprofessional content production and citizen journalism, but panelists are concerned that these can be used for spreading disinformation and problematic media content.



Audiences are largely polarized along ethnonational and political party lines, and even though people view media with different ideological

<sup>25</sup> Sokol, Anida, and Senad Alibegović, *Stavovi, navike i potrebe mladih za medijskim sadržajima u BiH*, Mediacentar Sarajevo, 2021. <https://media.ba/bs/publication/stavovi-navike-i-potrebe-mladih-za-medijskim-sadrzajima-u-bih>.



leanings, they trust only those media that support their viewpoints. People participate in the exchange of information with others, mostly through social media platforms and in the comments sections of online media, but such discussions are not constructive and are mostly based on insults and derogatory language. Panelists agreed that the quality of information does not support good governance and democratic rights but that some civil society organizations use quality information to improve communities.

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

There are diverse sources of information but information sharing between different ideological lines is limited. Jašarević said that people follow media with different ideological leanings, only to report later regarding negative opinions about that media or about the people who produce the news. A poll on media trust conducted in 2021 by Mediacentar Sarajevo and IPSOS Agency shows that the audience is largely polarized along political and ethnonational lines and that people follow and trust the media that show their group—ethnonational or political—in a positive light. Polarization is most visible regarding public service broadcasters and media that favor different political fractions. For example, according to the poll, 30 percent of Serbs trust RTRS (whose reporting favors the ruling party, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), in Republika Srpska) the most, and 40 percent trust BN TV, which favors the opposition parties in the same area. The poll also shows that the main reasons for distrust are related to the perception that most media outlets are politically influenced and spread disinformation. Such overgeneralizations can harm the work of professional and independent media because of the tendency of the public to consider most media to be under political influence.

Kulenović said that due to the epidemiological measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, discussion on television was limited, but it has also brought the use of new communication tools that allow journalists to

invite guests from different fields and different parts of the world. Despite this, there have not been many constructive discussions on important topics and exchanges of different opinions. “What is crucial and problematic is that, in these debates, people are not actually engaged to hear and understand the views of others but to defend those that they a priori consider theirs,” Turčilo said. Insults, derogatory language, and even hate speech are particularly present online, especially regarding topics such as ethnonationalism, and panelists agree that the culture of dialogue and communication is not at a high level online.

The divisive political and ethnonational discourse of political elites has further intensified with the amendments to the criminal code that prohibit public condonation, denial, gross diminution, or attempts to justify the crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes established by final judgments—amplifying the already-complex issues of facing a difficult war heritage and of facing the past. In response to these amendments, Republika Srpska has called the amendments anti-Serb and has adopted the Law on Nonapplication of the Decision of the High Representative, deciding to boycott the work of central government institutions. The media also transmit inflammatory and divisive political statements, and talks about a possible armed conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina has further polarized the public. For example, a popular anchor of a TV news program has asked his viewers to answer via televoting—“What they would do if a war started: would they stay or leave?”—while online media has published statements by different actors that a new conflict is possible.

Panelists noted that the media play a role in fomenting division and report on events in diametrically opposite ways. In December 2021, RTRS (the public service broadcaster of Republika Srpska) ran a story in which the reporter and an interviewee falsely claimed that Santa Claus and pork were banned in Sarajevo, serving as proof that the capital city is monocultural and not welcoming for non-Bosniaks. The report provoked numerous reactions in the media and on social networks across the country.

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

People's views on political or social issues are not shaped by quality information, and quality information does not influence election outcomes, panelists agreed. "You have a thousand pieces of information that tell you that society is falling apart, that people are leaving, that dissatisfaction exists," Kontić said. This information, however, does not influence the public's decision regarding their voting choices, as for the past 30 years people have been electing the same political parties that have brought the country to a very poor state, according to Kontić.

Pre-election periods are usually marked by abuses of public resources, different types of fraud, and biased media reporting that promotes certain political parties. Turčilo said that studies that monitor election periods show there is a serious number of media that, during the election campaign, serve exclusively as mouthpieces for certain political parties, and in that context, citizens cannot receive accurate, objective, and fair information. People's voting choices are not being made on the basis of political programs. "I was interested in the educational programs of political parties, and I saw that these programs are almost identical. [Political parties] copy-paste it, but that does not impact for whom people will vote," added Turčilo.

Bahto Kestendžić said that government actors often directly influence the creation of false and inaccurate information, using it either to justify their actions or to make new decisions. "Organized bot armies of ruling structures are beginning to pose a special problem [by] trying to intimidate political rivals and dissidents, both party-active and ordinary citizens," Bahto Kestendžić added.

Panelists agreed that people do not follow fact-based health and safety recommendations—as can be seen by the fact that only 29 percent of citizens have gotten vaccinated for the COVID-19 virus—

and most of them do not follow epidemiological measures. "I have no other explanation [for] why the vaccination rate is so low. There is no other reason [except] that people do not believe that it is safe, do not believe that it is effective, or do not believe that there is a disease at all," Cvjetičanin said. A member of parliament, Lana Prlić, has received over 30,000 comments on Facebook—including numerous threats, hate speech, and calls for violence—for publishing a photo of her receiving her second COVID-19 vaccine and for inviting people to get vaccinated. Panelists agreed that this large number of aggressive comments shows the effect of disinformation regarding COVID-19 vaccines; they are also based on gender, as Prlić's male colleagues have not received the same number of insults and threats for similar acts.

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

**“You have a thousand pieces of information that tell you that society is falling apart, that people are leaving, that dissatisfaction exists,” said Kontić.**

There are numerous and diverse civil society organizations, but panelists questioned the extent of their influence. Cvjetičanin noted that civil society organizations are becoming weaker; there are not enough organized civic actions to influence the issues being faced in society.

Maslo said that civil society activism is present to some extent, but there is a need for more consistent and better communication and cooperation between the media and civil society organizations. The government rarely communicates with civil society organizations, and when they do, the government does it out of formality rather than real interest, Džidić noted.

There are CSOs that have their own online media and through which they inform their followers on issues relevant to their work based on facts and research – such as the Sarajevo Open Center, which is devoted to LGBTIQ rights. Bjelica Škrivan also mentioned citizens and groups on social media networks that base their local activism on quality and accurate information. Bahto Kestendžić said that CSOs are rare bright spots in society when it comes to fighting for true and accurate

information, and developing awareness among citizens about the need to question sources of information. Different civil society organizations have been working on educating citizens to identify disinformation through different media literacy activities, and more research on the media sector was conducted in 2021.

Gaćanica said that in general CSOs are more responsible when using and disseminating information, but there are civil society groups that do not promote democratic values and human rights—such as groups hostile to migrants and refugees, reproductive rights, the LGBTQ community. The issue, however, has not been researched enough, according to Gaćanica.

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

Governments rarely engage with civil society and media, and most political discourse and debate lack references to research and analyses.

Maslo said that there is an established communication between government bodies with citizens and the media through, among other things, press conferences and lately more often communication through social networks. “However, these seem to be mechanisms used by government bodies mainly in cases where certain information is to be transmitted by one-way communication,” she added.

Džidić noted that governments rarely communicate with CSOs, and when they do, it is out of formality. Governments rarely use research prepared by civil society organizations, and as Džidić said, “they mostly have their own facts and proof.”

Despite advocacy efforts, CSOs are rarely able to advance certain legislative and policy changes. For example, Kulenović recalled how media-related CSOs—such as the Association BH Journalists, the Press Council and Mediacentar Sarajevo—prepared draft laws on the transparency of media ownership and of advertisement but these

never entered into the parliamentary procedure. Panelists agreed that government actors search for quality information but use them in the way that suit their interests.

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

When information sources reveal human rights violations, the government rarely respond in an appropriate manner. Gaćanica said that revelations of human rights violations and calls for changes are based on individual cases and that various levels of government are mostly unresponsive to demands for change.

Only in rare cases do prosecutors launch inquiries after investigative journalists publish stories on corruption, bribery, and influence peddling, and even when they do, the process is long. For example, in 2020, journalists revealed the case of Srebrena malina (*Silver raspberry*) where

government authorities granted a permit to a fruit grower and processor to procure 100 ventilators from China. The Prosecutor’s Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina charged Prime Minister Fadil Novalić and Fahrudin Solak, the suspended director of the Federal Administration of Civil Protection, with abuse of position or authority, and Deputy Prime Minister Jelka Miličević was

charged with negligent work in the service. However, as Kulenović noted, no one has resigned, and the case has not been concluded.

Bahto Kestendžić said that after journalists reveal cases of corruption, these cases mostly end up having no adequate or timely response, and thus the public loses interest and forgets the case. Džidić pointed to some positive examples media reporting has had on judicial institutions: at the end of 2020, Milan Tegeltija, then president of the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina (VSTV), resigned from all positions in the VSTV after accusations of influence peddling, and Gordana Tadić was removed from her position as chief prosecutor of

**“Organized bot armies of ruling structures are beginning to pose a special problem [by] trying to intimidate political rivals and dissidents, both party-active and ordinary citizens,” said Kestendžić.**

the Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina because of negligence in the performance of official duties. Džidić says that a symbiosis between leak journalists—those who revealed the wrongdoings—and the daily media—which then continuously reported on the affair—had been set up, eventually leading to disciplinary procedures and, finally, resignations by these officials.

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