

KOSOVO

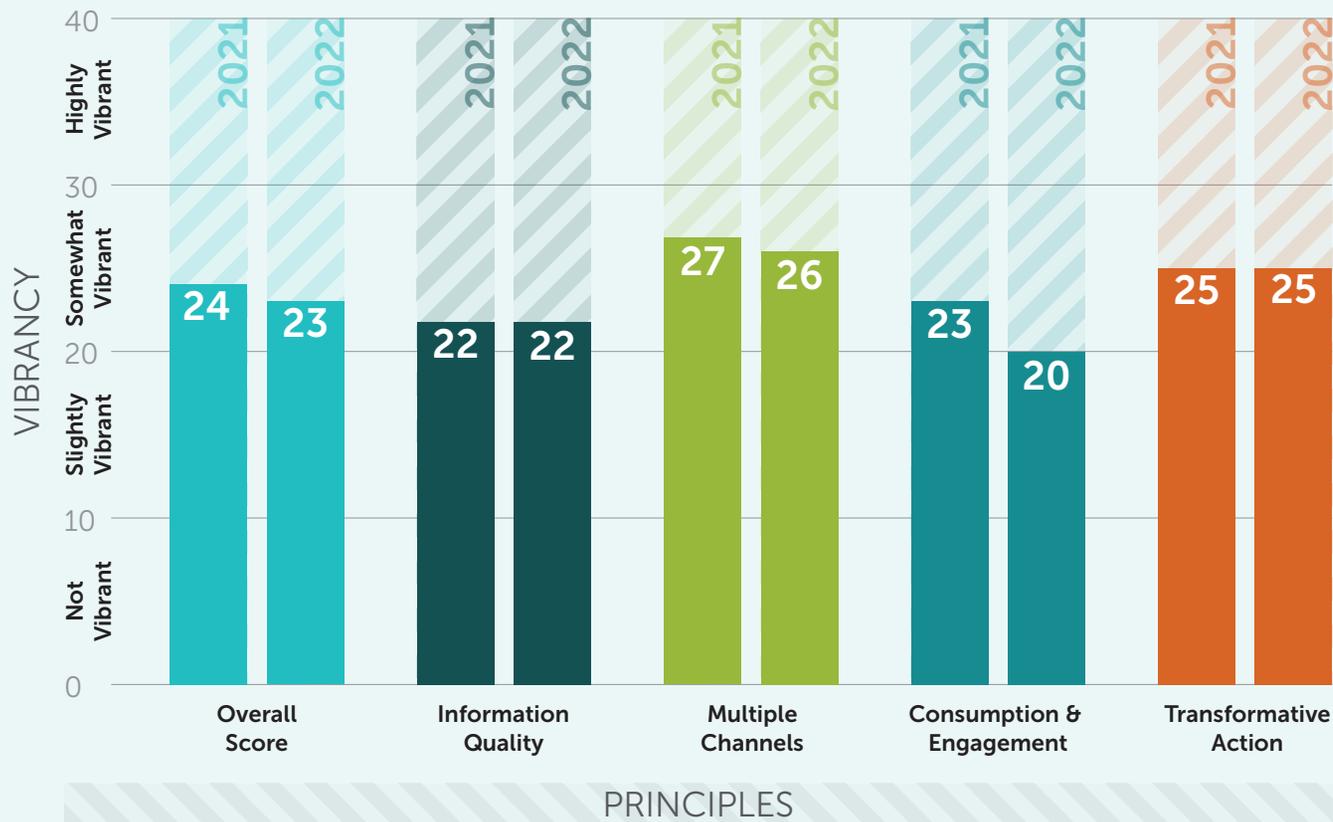
Vibrant Information Barometer

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Driton Pacarada





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

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

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

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

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

23

Kosovo saw more political upheaval in 2021. On February 14, Prime Minister Albin Kurti clinched power again in the general election. Around the same time in 2020, Kurti's government was ousted from the parliament in a no-confidence vote, a move he called "a coup." The new government soon faced problems. The first challenge was securing COVID-19 vaccines and organizing a vaccination campaign; by the end of the year, Kosovo's vaccination rates were higher than neighboring countries. In the international arena, however, Kosovo has not yet secured membership in the United Nations, INTERPOL, and UNESCO. The European Union (EU) did not grant visa liberalization, and the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue did not produce a concrete agreement between the two countries.

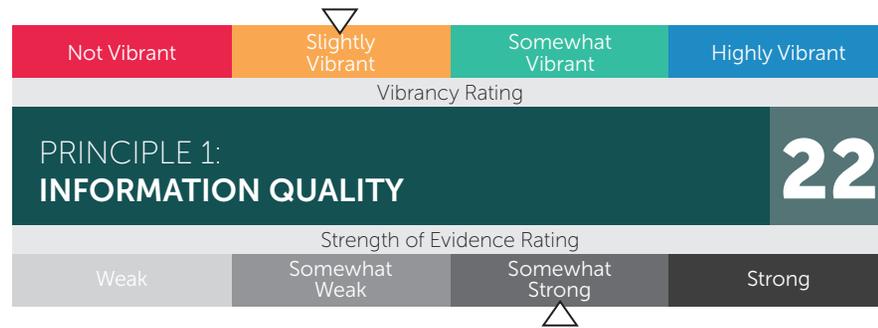
Kosovo citizens headed to voting stations once again at the end of 2021. This time, local elections were organized to elect mayors for 38 Kosovo municipalities and representatives of local assemblies. According to the EU Election Observation Mission, journalists were able to exercise their professional duties, and major television channels covered the elections in news and other formats. The public broadcaster and the main private television channels organized debates among most mayoral candidates, which streamed live on their social media channels.

Some of the biggest changes on the media scene in 2021 involved Radio Television of Kosova (RTK). The Kosovo Assembly dismissed the board of RTK because of allegations of budget mismanagement. However, in December, the assembly elected new board members in a process that civil society observers considered transparent. However, the EU Election Observation

Mission report on local elections concluded that RTK is not fully independent, as it is largely financed by the state.

A public opinion poll organized in March by Ipsos shows that citizens of Kosovo are heavy consumers of media, and they place a lot of trust in it. Despite a rapid increase in online media, television is the main source of information for most people, with 82 percent of respondents claiming to use it daily to get information about political and social events. Social networks are in second place as sources of news and information (65 percent), followed by online news media (45 percent), personal contacts (44 percent), radio (9 percent), and print newspapers/magazines (5 percent). The level of trust in the media is higher (64 percent) than distrust (35 percent), with television appearing to be the most trusted.

However, VIBE 2022 shows that Kosovo's overall country score of 23 dropped from last year's score of 24, placing Kosovo close to the midrange of scores when measuring information openness, factuality, professionalism, and economic sustainability. Further analysis of Kosovo's scores indicates that Principles 1 (information quality) and 3 (information consumption and engagement) received the lowest scores, underlining the media and information sectors' lack of full adherence to international standards. On the other hand, panelists gave higher scores to Principle 2 (how information flows) and Principle 4 (transformative action), suggesting that consumers have experienced no restrictions, political or otherwise, with creating, sharing, or consuming information.



Out of five key indicators that measure information quality in Kosovo, panelists gave similar scores to Indicators examining the availability of quality information, fact-based information, and inclusivity and diversity. A slightly lower score was given to Indicator 3—which gauges whether the norm for information is that it is not intended to harm.

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

In general, it appears that Kosovo enjoys great media pluralism. However, panelists believe that this is mostly based on quantitative aspects rather than diversity in terms of topics and viewpoints. Most reporting is about politics rather than policies. Individual politicians and their interpretation of developments dominate much of the news.

A variety of content is produced in Kosovo, including broadcast and digital media. However, no print media exist anymore, as all daily newspapers are not digital and publish online. Public and private journalism schools exist, and adequate trainings are offered from local and international organizations on content production, including evidence-based and ethical reporting.

The Code of Ethics for Media Service Providers in Kosovo was adopted in 2016 by the Independent Media Commission (IMC), and the Code of Print Media adopted by the Kosovo Press Council includes specific regulations against hate speech and disinformation. The IMC is a constitutional body that regulates broadcast media in Kosovo, while the Press Council is a

self-regulatory body with members from print and online media. Both bodies uncovered violations of the ethical code by the media throughout 2021. Press Council data show that the number of complaints about journalism standards violations is increasing, along with the number of decisions confirming such violations, signaling that professional standards in journalism are in decline. One panelist observed that standards are in decline due to the lack of newsroom editors, particularly in online media.

The body of content covers a variety of topics; however, political issues tend to dominate media coverage compared to social issue and thematic reporting.

Journalists hold government actors accountable by reporting on their works and actions. There are specialized fact-checking organizations that monitor public claims from the political elites. Due to a high number of online media that operate in the country, information covering local, national, regional, and international development are all available. News content overall is editorially independent.

However, media rarely devote adequate attention to background information, contextualization, and explanation of issues under discussion. There is also a significant lack of coverage of economic and social welfare issues. As one panelist put it, television channels use most of their prime time for political debates, which heavily feature political gossip and analyses by fellow journalists.

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

Most online media publish half-stories, based only on individual statements, typically mined from social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. In most of these cases, there is a lack of background information and failure to include multiple sources. These trends show a general decline in professional standards. Another problem is that many stories are built on anonymous sources. While protection of sources is well regulated by the law, anonymous sources are typical in online reporting. One panelist warns that this will lead to increased skepticism about the

accuracy of reporting.

Printed newspapers no longer exist in Kosovo; the economic crisis fueled by the pandemic forced them to turn online. There are schools for journalism training; however, at least one panelist questioned their quality. Journalism programs typically feature old curricula, focused mostly on theory rather than practical skills. The panelists suggest that journalism programs should add new elements concerning investigative journalism, especially on current issues such as money laundering, offshore companies, and regional organized crime. Moreover, they see an urgent need for more training on identifying fake news and disinformation.

The norm for information is not fact-based and well-sourced. Panelist gave this sub-indicator low score due to the lack of background information usually provided by online media in their stories. Nevertheless, professional content producers, such as televisions, radio and online newspapers, do not intentionally create or disseminate false or misleading information. Yet panelists highlight in their discussion the significant amount of false information that is spread over social networks, mostly by online media. Some fact-checking organizations are also engaged in identifying false information that is spread by online media. However, there is no evidence that the government creates or disseminates false or misleading information.

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

The media's frequent breaches of ethical standards rarely draw any professional ramifications. Hate speech and disinformation are pervasive, especially among online media. However, there are laws and regulations that prohibit hate speech. To begin with, the Criminal Code of the Republic of Kosovo, adopted in 2019, states, "Whoever publicly incites or publicly spreads hatred, discord and intolerance between

national, racial, religious, ethnic and other groups or based on sexual orientation, gender identity and other personal characteristics, in a manner which is likely to disturb the public order shall be punished by a fine or imprisonment of up to five years."

While protection of sources is well regulated by the law, anonymous sources are typical in online reporting. One panelist warns that this will lead to increased skepticism about the accuracy of reporting.

The government does not create or disseminate content that is intended to harm. Nevertheless, hate speech is present across online media, especially on the comment sections. Media outlets have a self-regulatory mechanism that identifies hate speech when such complaints are put forward by the public. The Press Council of Kosovo is the only self-regulatory body that deals with audience complaints on

reporting that is biased, untrue and that contain hate speech. Its rulings are only opinions with no legal weight.

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

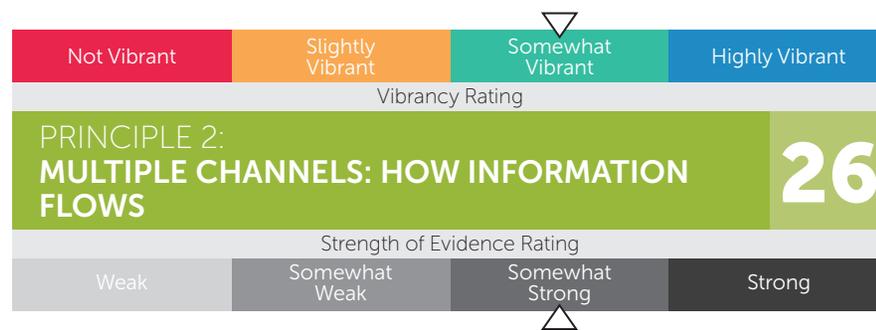
Information is published in many languages and format in which people need it. There are many community media in the country. In addition to Albanian speaking media, there are local media in Serbian language, Turkish, Bosnian and Roma language. Overall, the information produced by these media include different ideologies and perspectives, including gender and religious perspectives, in addition to media that religious content. Marginalized groups have alternative methods and platforms from expressing their views. Media owners, judging based on the size of media outlets, are mostly men, while the editorial staff and journalists are gender balanced.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The lowest score for this Principle, however, was given to Indicator 5 on resources for content production, suggesting that media produce a large amount of news without sufficient resourcing. This trend is especially

present in emerging online media that tend to produce single-source news stories.

Overall, professional content producers do not have sufficient financial resources to operate and produce high quality information. Financial crises arising from the global pandemic have negatively affected the wellbeing of smaller media outlets, especially local radio and televisions that rely mostly on advertising from local businesses and funding from international donors. There are no government subsidies for local and community media. The only media with a secure funding is public media that receives the budget from the state. However, most media are adjusting to new technological changes by generating income from YouTube and Google. However, most journalists' salaries are not sufficient, especially across local media.



Principle 2, focused on the plurality and information flow of media, drew the highest scores from the panelists. Freedom of information is guaranteed by the constitution, and several laws exist to protect press freedom, information sources, and whistleblowers, such as the Law on Access to Public Documents, the Law on Protection of Journalism Sources, and the Law on Protection of Whistleblowers.

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

Laws that provide legal protection for freedom of speech are enforced impartially, and the government is not trying to modify them to erode

freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the government overtly or covertly censors media or pressures ICT providers to censor media.

Although the government does not censor media directly, one panelist noted that the government applies “pressure through organized citizen feedback on journalists.” Self-censorship is quite common, especially when reporting about large companies that own media outlets. Journalists are aware of the editorial stance they are expected to pursue: the media company’s political position. Self-censorship is more or less agreed upon and applied from the moment a journalist joins a media outlet that has certain political leanings; however, self-censorship stems from financial interests rather than political fear.

Sometimes pressure comes the other way around: when the media threatens the public. In a case that triggered a sharp response from many civil society organizations in 2021, the director of the public broadcaster RTK sued a civil society activist, Agron Demi, alleging that Demi’s criticism of RTK’s reporting damaged the outlet’s image. One panelist calls the move a strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP) or an intimidation lawsuit, mainly intended to censor and silence public critique.

RTK is the only public media outlet in Kosovo, financed almost entirely from the public budget. Kosovo’s parliament fired the entire board of directors in June 2021, citing budget mismanagement.

A new board, however, should not be seen as a silver bullet, rather a first step in long-needed reform following years of chronic mismanagement and politicization, according to Boris Bergant, a Slovenian former vice president of the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and now senior EBU consultant. “Alone, the board of directors cannot change a situation where the interests related to public service media are so political. ... It will be a long run to make some changes,” Bergant told Balkan Insight.¹

Journalists are not imprisoned, fined or killed for doing their jobs. There

¹ Bami, Xhorxhina. “New Board No Silver Bullet for Troubled Kosovo Broadcaster,” Balkan Insight. December 3, 2021. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/03/new-board-no-silver-bullet-for-troubled-kosovo-broadcaster/>.

are laws that protect the confidentiality of sources, and laws are not used to persecute journalists for their openly expressed opinions or news coverage. Libel and insult are not part of the criminal law.

Access to public information improved in 2021, as citizens and journalists rely more and more on the Agency for Information and Privacy, an independent agency that enforces the implementation of the Law on Access to Public Documents and the Law on the Protection of Personal Data and that serves as an intermediary between the public and government institutions. The head of the agency was elected by the Kosovo parliament in 2021 after many failed attempts in previous years, and the new leadership has already taken steps to improve access to public documents, with most claims for information addressed in a timely manner.

Although the working environment for media practitioners is safe overall, reports of physical attacks and verbal threats continue to be reported—in fact, according to the Association of Journalists of Kosovo (AGK), such incidents are increasing.

A violent attack on Visar Duriqi, an investigative journalist for Insjderi, in February 2021 prompted international media watchdogs to call for an official investigation. Duriqi, who suffered head injuries in an attack by three masked men, suspects that his coverage of alleged political connections to organized crime groups spurred the attack.²

AGK has recorded 17 such cases in 2018, 21 cases in 2019, 24 cases in 2020, and 25 cases in 2021. While the association is quick to issue public statements condemning incidents involving verbal and physical attacks on journalists, reporters, or camera operators, state mechanisms for monitoring and gathering data on threats against journalists are missing, although threats against journalists are typically reported to the police and the prosecutor's office, as well as the AGK. The judiciary,

however, slated to introduce a new mechanism in 2022, called SIMR (Online System for Case Management), to create a database of cases and monitor trials related to these cases.

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

Kosovo's telecommunication and internet infrastructure covers almost all of the country. Cable television has been extended everywhere, including rural places. Cable operators provide different packages, from basic to advanced, that are priced accordingly, allowing most people afford to have internet and cable television in their home. For those families with lower incomes, terrestrial broadcasting is still available. No communities or groups of people are precluded from accessing information due to social norms. Internet governance and regulation of the digital space provides open and equal access to users and content producers.

Internet penetration is above 92 percent, and there are about 40 licensed cable providers. The problem is that some of them have issues with content providers and vice versa. For example, the Basic Court in Prishtina received a demand from the Trade Inspectorate to initiate a lawsuit against IPKO, one of the main cable providers in the country. The lawsuit claims that IPKO violated the Law on Consumer Protection by failing to provide all the channels advertised in their package; the inspectorate claims that it has received over 180 complaints from IPKO customers. Another controversy surrounds two other cable operators, ArtMotion and Kujtesa, which, despite appearing as two separate entities, offer identical cable platforms and pricing, suggesting a hidden agreement between the two operators.

Journalists' knowledge is generally satisfactory in the field of information and communication technologies, but the infrastructure does not sufficiently meet the information needs of people with disabilities and people who speak nondominant languages. One panelist noted that “a large number of websites of local and central institutions

“**Journalists are aware of the editorial stance they are expected to pursue: the media company's political position.**”

² “Investigative Journalist Visar Duriqi Assaulted in Kosovo,” Committee to Protect Journalists. March 3, 2021. <https://cpj.org/2021/03/investigative-journalist-visar-duriqi-assaulted-in-kosovo/>.

do not have information in Serbian, or they are not adequately updated.”

One of IMC’s main responsibilities is to transform the broadcast system from analog to digital transmission. The deadline for doing it was back in 2015. Because of the lack of digital transmission, private television outlets are at the mercy of cable providers to be included in their platforms. Local television stations have been hit the hardest under this system, as many cable providers put local television stations at the bottom of their media channels. The IMC has licensed over 40 cable providers throughout the country. The 2021 arrest of two of IMC’s key personnel by state authorities for corruption charges seriously damaged the organization’s reputation.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Kosovo has a good legal infrastructure in terms of guaranteeing freedom of information. These laws conform to international standards and norms. Yet, their implementation sometimes is selective, especially in terms of access to public documents. Therefore, the Agency for Information and Privacy, is a very important mechanism to help the public access governmental policy and decision-making information. Most requests for access come from the media and the non-governmental organizations rather than from ordinary citizens. However, there are no groups that are systematically excluded from exercising their right to information.

Most public institutions have hired a spokesperson; however, their job is mostly administrative rather than answering the inquires of the media and the public. The central government spokesperson is more vocal compared to local governments spokespeople.

“**Although the working environment for media practitioners is safe overall, reports of physical attacks and verbal threats continue to be reported.**”

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

Editorial and ownership transparency are still not regulated for media outlets in Kosovo. A new attempt was made in 2021 to empower the IMC to regulate media ownership and prevent media monopolies; the suggestions are proposed in the new draft law on the IMC, which the government put under public consultation. However, the IMC’s reputation took a serious hit when the chief executive and the finance director were arrested on corruption charges on June 30, 2021—allegedly for taking bribes to issue a license for a new television station.³

The process for spectrum allocation for broadcasting frequencies is fair and transparent since it is done under a public bid. However, the majority of television channels in Kosovo are distributed through cable operators, which must go through licensing procedures. Easy licensing procedures for broadcast media has seen a rapid increase of television channels in recent years. Online media can be freely established and there are no special licensing requirements.

Radio Television of Kosovo is the only public media in the country that provides programming in various languages such as Albanian, Serbian, Turkish, Bosnian and Roma.

Internet governance provides open and equal access to users and content producers. Consumers have a variety of channels for accessing government information. Additionally, media provide live coverage of parliamentary sessions and government cabinet meetings, which also often provide their own livestreams.

The freedom to establish media is guaranteed. License holders usually renew every few years, with IMC managing the licensing procedures. In what is seen as a positive move, the new government is making

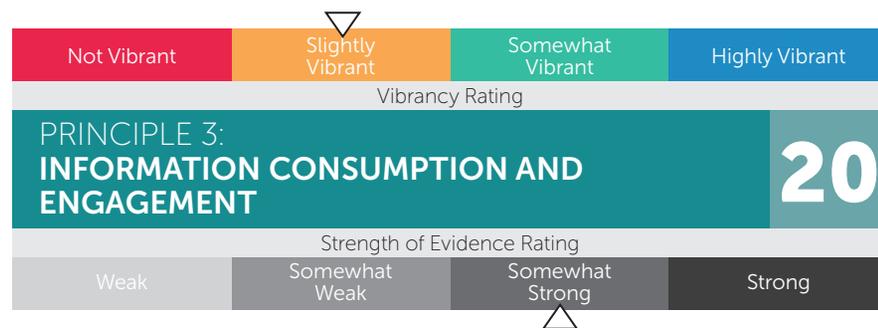
³ Isufi, Perparim. “Kosovo Court Orders Detention for Media Commission Duo for Bribery,” Balkan Insight. July 1, 2021. <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/07/01/kosovo-court-orders-detention-for-media-commission-duo-for-bribery/>.

the recruitment of members of regulatory bodies more transparent. The panelists hope this may lead to the appointment of professionals in regulatory bodies that oversee frequency allocations and media licensing, as well as offer telecommunications services.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

The panelists see no clear division between editorial functions, and the management of most media outlets, and they believe that media owners and managers frequently interfere in newsroom matters and editorial decisions.

Funding sources, especially ownership investments into media outlets, have a great deal of influence over editorial stance during election periods. There are no government subsidies for the media, except for the public media which is entirely funded from the state budget. Over the years, this has created room for political interference into the management and editorial content of public media. The board members of RTK and the members of the Independent Media Commission are elected by the Parliament and are in charge over the management of these institutions.



Overall, the panelists agreed that media literacy skills among Kosovo's citizens have not improved, which is why panelists gave this indicator the lowest of all scores in this year's VIBE study. Furthermore, citizens lack proper information on digital security and have a poor understanding of its importance. Trainings for media workers are increasing, some

of which are organized by the AGK itself, while new online tools--such as verified-kosovo.org (developed by IREX with funding from the U.S. Embassy in Pristina)--allow users to learn for themselves about media literacy and Kosovo's media environment. Compared with younger people who are more aware of how algorithms drive social media content, older groups are more prone to fall prey to fake news and misinformation.

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

The panelists feel that there is a lack of awareness on how social networks use personal data to promote certain content. This is important especially during election time, as seen in 2021 with parliamentary and local government elections when a large number of so-called online media were established by groups or individuals close to political parties. As they spread disinformation and launch attacks on political opponents, their content dominates social networks.

Data privacy is protected by law, and the Agency for Information and Privacy handles complaints from people when their privacy is breached. Most frequently, private data are misused for advertising purposes. Digital hygiene practices among media outlets are not very strong, and their websites are not digitally secure. The same goes for public institutions, which are often target of cyber-attacks.

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

Although evidence shows that the Kosovo citizens are heavy consumers of media, media literacy is not the same across people of different education levels. The general public lacks the knowledge to verify the authenticity of online media, such as whether there is editorial, ownership, or contact information available.

The government does not promote media literacy adequately, except for a few cases when the Ministry of Education participated in media literacy events. There is no state curriculum to make it mandatory

in the country's school system. However, in a positive development, websites for fact-checking, debunking, or exposing disinformation are on the rise in Kosovo—both in the Albanian and Serbian languages. Furthermore, more and more media and information literacy and critical thinking training is becoming available for adults, students, and young journalists.

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

Journalists and civil society activists use their freedom of speech and rights to information. The general public also uses other means in addition to social networks to express their views, such as town hall meetings or call-in shows. There are no negative consequences for exercising freedom of speech. Ombudsperson is another institution that deals with such cases when freedom of speech or other human rights are violated. Ex-officio reports from Ombudsperson's institution show cases when people have become target of hate speech and violation of human rights.

In an attempt to curb comments containing hate speech and insults, both of which are prohibited by the law, many websites responded by removing their comment sections. However, as they share the same content over their social network profiles, the debate among users is carried out over Facebook. Hate speech, derogatory language, and insults heavily coat such debates, especially when gender and religious issues are under discussion. Panelists believe that citizens do not make full use of mechanisms available for filing complaints to the IMC or the Press Council. The complaints that are filed, however, reveal how the media deliberately uses hate speech targeting certain individuals. The Press Council is not empowered to issue any fines, just a confirmation of whether a violation of its code of ethics occurred or not. On the other hand, the IMC has the right to issue fines up to €100,000 (\$110,650) for

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violations of the code of ethics or other regulations. However, most media escape with just a warning or a notional fine.

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

Most media use using social networks to communicate with their audiences and get their feedback. However, building trust with audiences through sponsoring or organizing community events is not a common practice.

Despite the audiences' needs and interests, most media have their own agendas in terms of content coverage. Panelists draw a comparison between prime-time shows and Public Pulse findings (a yearly national survey that asks citizens to identify their main concerns). While most people cite economic and social welfare as their top concerns, televised prime-time shows primarily present daily political news and statements from politicians.

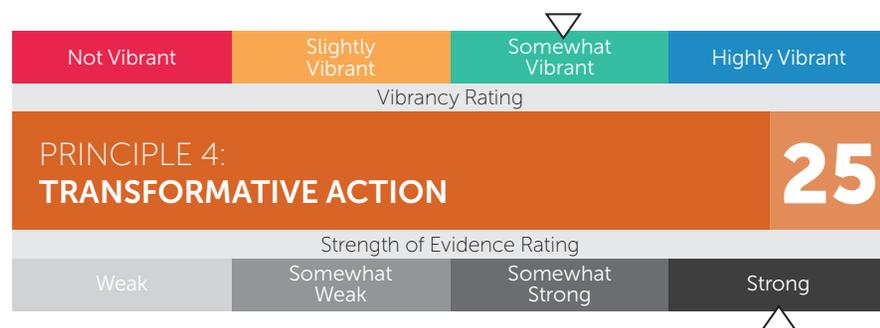
Social networks are the main mechanism Kosovo's media use to interact with the public. Most local media use Facebook and YouTube, less often Twitter and Instagram. They mine their social networks for audience details, such as the number of followers, video and page views, and “likes” and “shares.” Several media use Google Analytics to track traffic to internet portals, but more advanced software tools dedicated to content analysis are extremely rare. However, a general research poll conducted by Ipsos in 2021 shows media consumption habits in Kosovo--including how much citizens use the media on a daily basis--their main sources of information, and how much they trust the media they use.

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

Community media are on the rise in Kosovo, especially those focusing on youth and gender. Such examples include Perspektiva of Foundation 17,

dylberzimi, QIKA, and Grazeta. They combine journalistic and new-media platforms, and they target and respond to the needs of specific societal groups. Their initiatives are filling in a gap in mainstream media, which rarely delve into marginalized communities or their issues.

However, community media in Kosovo does not operate with a mandate that is clearly different from public media and private media. Most local media are also community media, as they have a specific audience in mind. They give voice to marginalized populations and prioritize debate about the issues that concern their communities. Nevertheless, most local media operate with small budgets and the communities rarely support them through volunteering or through donations. Like in other media, local media sometimes spread unverified information.



Panelists agree that despite the decline of journalism standards, nonpartisan news and information exist, and the public read or view multiple types of media. Moreover, panelists agreed that distribution channels enable and encourage information sharing, and this, in turn, supports good governance and democratic rights. The public is also quite active online, through comments, and most do not hesitate to share their opinion publicly. Television debates seem to play a particularly influential role in setting the agenda for public dialogue, though, and these debates tend to feature heavily opinionated or partisan discussions rather than fact-based analysis or commentary. The panelists also noted that the government does not rely enough on quality information to make public policy decisions.

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

Nonpartisan news and information sources exist. Established media, such as main radio and televisions and some online newspapers, have good extensive audiences. There is media diversity, which allows people to access multiple types of information. People participate in the exchange of information with others they disagree with through digital forms such as social media platforms. However, the level of debate is mostly emotional and not evidence-based. These forms of discussions also generate a lot of hate speech among users. There is no evidence to suggest that individuals engage in open and constructive discussions informed by quality news and information.

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

In recent years, political changes through elections show that people’s views on political and social issues are shaped primarily by quality information rather than misinformation. Quality information, produced by the media and civil society organizations, is used by citizens to engage with their elected officials on issues they care about. However, false information about the wealth and private lives of public officials also flows heavily across online media. Panelists see a tendency for citizens to trust such news and respond with their votes at election time; local elections saw many experienced political figures lose their race.

Online media feature false news about COVID-19 vaccines prominently. When politicians share unverified information about the safety of vaccines, the impact is especially pronounced. Although the vaccination rate in 2021 ended up at a satisfactory level (60 percent of the targeted population received the first shot by the end of the year), more than 133,000 AstraZeneca vaccines were reportedly destroyed after they expired in August 2021—refused by citizens who were influenced mainly by media reporting. Television shows gave many people a platform to comment on the safety of vaccines, despite their lack of professional

background. Anti-vaxxers have fueled debates in the media that have further contributed to spreading unverified information about the safety of COVID-19 vaccines. Still, panelists also view quality information as an important element that made the majority of people take the vaccine.

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

Input from CSOs significantly influences decision-making in Kosovo. Many established CSOs produce evidence-based research on various topics, such as sustainable development, rule of law, and good governance. Moreover, some of them also work to reduce the spread of misinformation and mal-information.

Overall, there is solid media coverage of CSO work and activities. However, as one panelist put it, although CSOs touch on the most pressing issues in the society, they are not regularly invited to share their opinions in television debates. Mainstream televisions prefer to invite guests—mostly controversial figures, including former politicians—who “put on a show.” A mix of information and entertainment programs, or infotainment, is also on the rise in prime time.

CSOs and media organizations collaborate regularly for information sharing. For instance, most television debates with mayoral candidates were based on research produced by GAP Institute and other similar CSOs. Media-CSO partnerships in research projects are also common.

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

There are robust mechanisms in place for government to engage with civil society and media, such as press conferences and consultations. Sometimes government actors refer to quality news media or

information from civil society when explaining their decisions. Moreover, there is an online platform called the Public Consultation Platform used by the government to consult with the public on all bills and strategic documents. In most cases, public officials refer to facts and evidence in explaining their decisions.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Public institutions are quick to react, mostly with statements, when the media uncovers certain scandals. Panelists mentioned a rape case scandal against a minor: The media discovered that the judge had given the alleged rapist a mild sentence of eight months of jail time. After the media covered the case, the judge was suspended from her

work. In such cases, relevant institutions typically issue strong statements; however, concrete actions are rarely taken. Every Kosovo government official professes a commitment to fighting corruption, but the results so far have been poor.

However, when information sources reveal human rights violations, the government responds in an appropriate manner. Quality information has had a positive impact

on reducing the occurrence of human rights violations. There is also evidence that quality information contributes to free and fair elections at the local and national level.

Lastly, the panelists believe that government institutions should increase their interaction with the media. Government officials increasingly rely on social media posts, reducing the number of press conferences. This presents a challenge for media, especially non-Albanian-speaking media.

“People participate in the exchange of information with others they disagree with through digital forms such as social media platforms. However, the level of debate is mostly emotional and not evidence-based.”

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