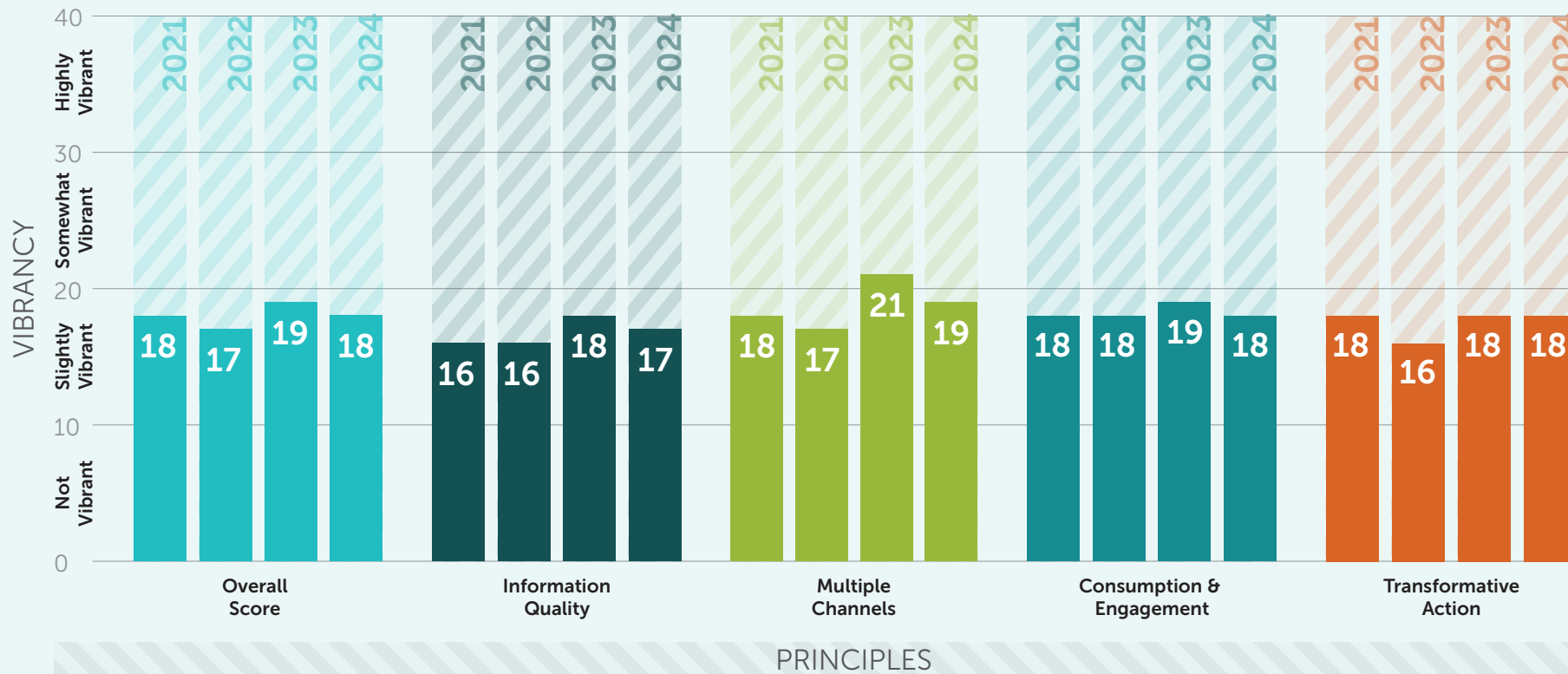


BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 4





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.

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.

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.

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.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE**18**

The year 2023 was marked by attempts to enforce increasingly repressive legislation aimed at curtailing media freedoms and stifling freedom of expression in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H). In Republika Srpska (RS), one of the two entities in B&H, authorities enacted amendments to the Criminal Code, reinstating libel as a criminal offence, despite the protests from journalists, international organizations, and CSOs urging against such measures. RS authorities adopted a draft law on non-profit organizations that would further discriminate against and stigmatize CSOs receiving foreign funding, while a new Law on Freedom to Access Information regarding B&H Institutions entered into force at the state level.

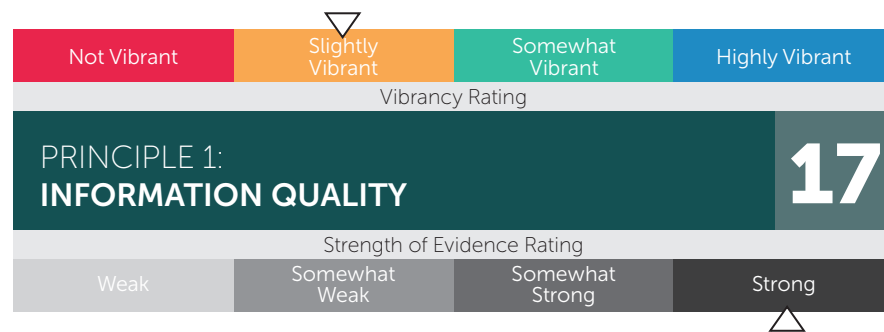
Other challenges facing the media sector include: the severe financial crisis experienced by the state-level public service broadcaster (BHRT) towards the end of the year; the prevalence of aggressive verbal attacks targeting journalists; and a femicide case which shook the nation after it was livestreamed on Instagram, along with a surge in acts of violence against women, which spurred protests in multiple towns.

After the General Elections in 2022, state and entity-level legislative and executive bodies were established by May 2023. The Council of Ministers formed in January 2023, backed by a ruling coalition. The Council began to implement measures to adopt EU reforms following the country's attainment of EU candidate status at the end of 2022.

Politicians from RS frequently resorted to divisive rhetoric and advocated for the secession of the entity from B&H.

The Constitutional Court suspended several legal and political acts by RS, whose leadership was determined to enforce such laws, thereby breaching the constitutional order of the country. The RS Assembly passed legislation permitting the non-publication of decisions made by the High Representative and the non-implementation of Constitutional Court rulings.

B&H's country score dropped a point from the 2023 VIBE study, with decreases in all principles, except for Principle 4 (Transformative Action) which remained at its 2023 level. Panelists expressed the view that media freedoms are under threat and showing signs of deterioration; they also observed increased polarization due to political influence in the media sector. The production, spread, consumption, and use of information is divided along ethno-national and political lines. Media outlets that breach ethical standards do not face any consequences, and there is an urgent need to secure financial and operational independence of the Communication Regulatory Agency (CRA). The advertising market is weak, and journalists are inadequately paid, while high ranking political leaders are increasingly using press conferences and social media accounts to attack journalists and to lower the public's trust in independent media reporting. During 2023, there were numerous online scams, including identity theft for advertising purposes, and media outlets experience regular cyber attacks. The country urgently needs to adopt a media ownership transparency law, a strategic approach to improve media and information literacy, and secure independent and sustainable financing of the public service broadcasters.



The media report on a variety of topics, mostly focusing on current local and regional social and political events. However, the coverage frequently lacks crucial context and background information. Despite numerous breaches of ethical standards and the spread of manipulative information aimed at deceiving the public, the media often operate without facing consequences. Instances of hate speech and smear campaigns online are rarely addressed and are often overlooked, with no indictments initiated by the end of 2023 for the glorification of war criminals or denial of genocide.

Panelists rated Indicator 1, quality of information, with the highest score (21) in the principle, due to the variety of sources and topics and the presence of media outlets dedicated to serving the public interest. Indicator 5 received the lowest score (11) of this principle, due to several factors including poor marketing revenues, low salaries in the media industry and a lack of transparency in media financing from public budgets, where media financing frequently dictates editorial policies. BHRT, the state-level public service broadcaster, continues to be mired, in a dire political situation.

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

Panelists agreed that the infrastructure supporting the production of varied content is adequate; however, access to resources for content production is unequal between urban and rural areas. In addition to over

ten university-level departments offering journalism and communication studies, CSOs provide sporadic short-term professional training courses for journalists. Borka Rudić, secretary general of the BH Journalists Association, highlighted the increase in training courses for journalists compared to previous years, especially after the criminalization of libel in RS led to more foreign funding allocated for journalists' protection.

Elvira Aganović, a journalist from the city of Goražde, affirmed there were adequate trainings for professional journalists, but noted that "larger cities have an advantage over rural areas, which also affects the quality of information." The editor of eTrafika in Banja Luka, Vanja Stokić, noted that professional training courses are mostly attended by the same group of media workers, since most journalists believe that they do not require any further education.

The media in B&H, as in previous years, reports on a variety of topics, mostly focused on current local and regional social and political events. Reporting, however, often lacks in-depth context and background information. This is especially evident in online media coverage of global events, where the contribution of foreign news agencies plays an important role. A [recent article](#) published by Mediacentar Sarajevo showed that media coverage of international news, such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, is influenced by the foreign news agencies that the media use as sources. Azem Kurtić, a Balkan Insight journalist, noted different stances in the country's media coverage of the war in Gaza: the media in RS affiliated with the leading political party showed more favorable reporting towards Israel, whereas those in the Federation of B&H likened the war in Gaza to the war that occurred in B&H from 1992 to 1995.

In 2023, B&H was struck by numerous femicide cases, as well as other acts of violence against women, and a mass shooting in an elementary school in Belgrade in Serbia in May, which received extensive media coverage throughout the whole region. Online media and anonymous online portals frequently violated ethical standards in their coverage of these cases. They published sensationalistic details and unverified information that were not in the public interest, used inappropriate terms and descriptions, insinuated motives for violence and disclosed

the name of the underage perpetrator in the case of the school mass shooting. According to Tijana Cvjetičanin, editor at the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje, these cases “demonstrated a total lack of respect, not only for professional standards, but for the victims involved in situations such as these.”

A group of more than fifty journalists signed a letter of appeal, in November 2023, calling journalists and media outlets to respect ethical standards in the media coverage of femicide and violence against women. However, none of the media outlets faced any consequences, such as loss of membership to professional bodies. “The most devastating thing is that journalists who grossly violate professional standards face no sanctions, not even a ‘reprimand’ from professional associations,” expressed Stokić.

Journalists report on the words and actions of political representatives, but many do so by publishing their speeches without conducting any research or providing a critique. Some panelists felt that political pressure on the media increased in 2023. Damir Đapo, director at television channel RTV Slon from Tuzla, said that independent media outlets are practically non-existent. Media outlets financed through subsidies and grants from public budgets are often beholden to the ruling political parties, and, therefore, according to Đapo, this leads to increasing affiliations between media outlets and specific political agendas. “In the online media space, we note a large number of portals created by parties that only serve political purposes,” Đapo stated.

N1 television station, a CNN International affiliate, refused to broadcast an investigative TV report on the leader of the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) political party, Dragan Čović, stating that the report did not meet their standards. Panelists believed that this decision was made after the outlet was placed under political pressure. Boro Kontić, director of Mediacentar Sarajevo, said that self-censorship driven by the fear of losing marketing revenue is widespread among media outlets in the country, but this case was particularly significant because N1 is one

“**Journalists report on the words and actions of political representatives, but many do so by publishing their speeches without conducting any research or providing a critique.**”

of the rare media companies that is financially sustainable. “We never received an honest explanation from that media outlet as to why that film documentary was removed,” Rudić explained.

Despite the prevalence of biased reporting, there have been no consequences faced by the media. Azra Maslo-- program standards coordinator at the CRA, B&H’s regulator for television and radio broadcasters--said that there are cases in which its rules were not violated but may still raise questions regarding professional and ethical journalism standards. The most frequently violated regulation of the CRA over the past three years was the right to reply. Panelists believed that the regulator, however, should respond and sanction other gross breaches of professional standards, such as violations of fairness and impartiality. Maida Bahtović, project coordinator of the Press Council, self-regulatory body for print and online media, said that despite the growing pressure, media still manage to adhere to the main principles of professional standards.

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

Manipulative information is disseminated in the mainstream media and via different types of content producers for commercial interests, and to spread political propaganda, in certain cases. Maslo observed that, while professional content producers typically consult relevant sources and publish verified information, maintaining objectivity in their reporting is not always guaranteed. According to Maslo, false and misleading information spread by professional content producers is not published intentionally but is disseminated because journalists do not evaluate the credibility of their sources and do not fact-check information. Aganović said that due to the fast-paced nature of news production and the pressure to publish exclusive information first, journalists often fail to consult adequate sources or resort to copying and pasting content without verification.

Panelists noted that professional media, notably referring to the RS public service broadcaster Radio Television of Republika Srpska (RTRS), have been intentionally publishing manipulative information to deceive the public. “The public service sector is the biggest concern when it comes to knowingly misleading the audience. Most media outlets do not do that, but the problem is the public service broadcaster’s extensive reach”, explained Stokić.

The repercussions for spreading such content are minimal. The CRA’s Code on Program Content does not include a specific definition of manipulative information but contains provisions emphasizing accurate, unbiased, and fair media reporting, which are rarely applied. The effort to combat manipulative information has mainly relied on self-regulation mechanisms.

The Code of the Press Council stipulates that transmitting manipulative information from another media source does not absolve editors of their responsibility. Journalists and editors, however, justify the publication of manipulative information by citing limited capacities and a small workforce, which hinders their ability to fact-check all content. Maslo states that the level of awareness regarding the principles of self-regulation and responsibility is at an all-time low. A [recent study](#) on media self-regulation in B&H showed that self-regulation is especially ineffective when it comes to anonymous online portals, which lack any kind of editorial responsibility. However, according to the same study some journalists are more cautious when publishing content, knowing that manipulative information can reduce the reach of their content on Facebook.

Kurtić emphasized that journalists need to fact-check information coming from official resources as they also sometimes spread manipulative information. Following the recent arrests of the former director of B&H’s State Intelligence Agency, Osman Mehmedagić, and the state’s court president, Ranko Debevac, for suspected abuse of office, B&H’s minister of security, Nenad Nešić, informed the media that lawyer Senka Nožica had also been arrested –which later proved to be false. The fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje debunks content online, but fact-

checking official resources remains a difficult task for journalists due to lack of transparency, difficulty in accessing information and lack of time.

Manipulative information, according to Kurtić, also comes from foreign actors, such as the Russian government that targets the audience in RS. Russia Today, for example, aired a documentary titled “Bosnia and Herzegovina: Rise of the Caliphate,” which denies certain facts about the war in 1992-1995. The documentary claims that there has been a push within the country to establish an Islamic caliphate and alleges that foreign states, specifically the US and the UK, have been conspiring against the Serbs. Such claims, according to [an analysis](#) by the media outlet Detektor, are similar to those propagated by the leading political parties in RS.

Media outlets do not generally moderate user-generated content that contains manipulative information. Influencer Josip Milanović said that there are examples of manipulative information being disseminated by social media users, bloggers, YouTubers and influencers, even though they are requested not to.

The fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje debunked numerous examples of false and misleading content in 2023, from manipulative information on vaccines to the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. In 2023, numerous fake interviews featuring purportedly real doctors and individuals claiming miraculous recoveries from serious illnesses were published online, aimed at promoting products and drugs. Those who promoted unregistered drugs and products did not face any legal consequences.

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

Despite frequent genocide and war crime denials and instances of glorification of war criminals, 2023 saw no indictments that were initiated based on the amendments to the Criminal Code that were introduced in 2021.

Hate speech trials continue to be very rare, with a large percentage resulting in acquittals, and there have been no indictments against high-ranking politicians. Journalists filed complaints with the prosecutor's office for online smear campaigns against them, but the intimidation of journalists and other individuals, including representatives of certain political parties, has continued. "It is sad that explicit hate speech remains unprosecuted, whether disseminated by the media through statements of politicians or spread by so-called unprofessional content producers on social networks," explained Rudić.

Aganović asserted that mal-information and hate speech are present on social networks and in user-generated comments. Some online media have established better moderation mechanisms for user-generated hate speech, but in many cases such content remains visible online.

In August 2023, the murder of a woman from a town in B&H was livestreamed on Instagram by her partner, inciting hate speech comments and sparking outrage from many women's organizations. The video of the murder remained online for three hours before its removal, subsequently being shared on other platforms and clearly exposing the complete ineffectiveness of content moderation. Aiming to prevent the spread of harmful content and to safeguard freedom of expression, a group of CSOs and experts formed a Coalition for Freedom of Expression and Content Moderation in 2023, which will act as a mediator for social media companies. The Coalition has already established contacts with several social networks.

According to Maslo, professional media outlets do not intend to propagate hate speech. Still, malicious information circulates, sourced from politicians and government representatives. Panelist Bahto Kestendžić agrees the main sources of hate speech are public figures and government representatives, while media reporting strives to adhere to professional standards.

“ Inclusive media reporting is sporadic and most media cover minority issues only to mark certain anniversaries or special events.

Prominent political leaders--primarily the president of RS, Milorad Dodik, and the mayor of the city of Banja Luka, Draško Stanivuković--spread inflammatory speech against the LGBTQ+ community prior to the physical assault of LGBTQ+ activists by a group of hooligans in Banja Luka in March 2023. The Organizing Committee of BH Pride said that the attack constituted a hate crime based on sexual orientation and gender identity and that it was targeted, deliberate, and organized. "The attack was preceded by the media campaign that targeted the LGBTQ+ community, in which RTRS, extremist groups, and politicians actively participated," explained Stokić. During the assault, the police did not protect the activists and, by the end of 2023, no one was found guilty or responsible.

Mersad Gušić, editor at Klix.ba, highlighted that statements claiming Sarajevo is not a safe city for Serbs intensified during the Sarajevo trial that charged Dodik, president of RS, with defying the rulings of the High Representative. Such statements regarding the city's safety are unfounded and, according to Gušić, cultivate a sense of insecurity. Kontić commented that similar sentiments were broadcast prior to the war in 1992 and that he saw these statements as a sign of pre-war tension.

Rudić claims that the news content of RTRS regularly contains fabricated and malicious information: "It is no longer just an isolated incident, a one-off news report or the mistake of a journalist or editor; it is now part of their editorial policy that is not sanctioned by the CRA".

Dejan Petrović, journalist from BHRT, said that the reactions of the CRA regarding malicious media content are inadequate and that the regulator should be more independent. In 2023, BHRT was criticized for spreading hate speech and slander against Dodik after one of their guests said that the citizens in RS needed to act. The broadcaster was required to send a recording of the show to the regulator. However, no further actions have since been taken. Petrović claims that the regulator is highly selective when it comes to processing cases.

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

There are multiple news sources; however, this abundance stems from general political and ethno-national polarization rather than genuine media diversity. Many traditional media sources broadcast the views of one ethno-national group and the ideologies of their political leaders. These news sources often lack a diversity of views and stances.

According to Kurtić, inclusive media reporting is sporadic and most media cover minority issues only to mark certain anniversaries or special events. More inclusive and in-depth reporting on minorities can be found in specialized media, mainly via online websites of non-profit organizations which advocate for their rights. Stokić commented that the media is willing to mention certain groups while others are ignored: “Everyone readily supports and reports on sick children, pregnant women, their own ethno-national groups, and the socially vulnerable. However, certain groups are only mentioned to be blamed or harmed, such as the LGBTQ+ community and migrants.” According to her, homeless people, and the issues they face are rarely reported in the media.

More voices can be heard on social networks and, according to Milanović, there are both positive and negative examples. Kurtić, however, raised concerns about certain podcasts that are led by people who lack sensitivity regarding minority issues and therefore cause more harm than good.

The CRA requires the public service broadcaster to air programs intended for members of national minorities for at least one hour per week, ensuring equal representation is considered. However, Petrović said that the public service broadcaster struggles to meet this mandate due to the lack of financial resources and a shortage of staff with specific expertise. Additionally, while BHRT has started broadcasting national news on weekends with a sign language interpreter, Petrović explained that there are very few sign language interpreters in the country, making it difficult for media to offer them competitive salaries.

In 2023, the public service broadcaster also provided live coverage of the BH Pride March for the first time. However, Petrović highlighted that there were comments of disapproval among the employees. BHRT faced issues persuading representatives of certain institutions to participate in the program but, overall, the initiative of live broadcasting was a step forward for the broadcaster.

According to data provided by the CRA, out of the 266 radio and television stations in the country in 2023, 30.8 percent of directors and 41.7 percent of editors-in-chief are women. Women are directors of 24.1 percent of all television stations and 35.7 percent of all radio stations. These figures remain similar to those of previous years, and the CRA representatives want to see improvements in these statistics.

Due to numerous of femicide cases and acts of gender-based violence, combined with the efforts of CSOs and media organizations, violence against women was a more frequently reported topic in 2023. Research was carried out on topics such as prevention and protection mechanisms, police work, the use of illegal firearms, the role of safe houses, and, together with CSOs more pressure was placed on institutions to provide adequate prevention and protection. Mediacentar Sarajevo, for example, organized an internship for journalist students that focused on media reporting of gender-based violence and the organization also published many educative articles on the topic.

Bahto Kestendžić stated that it is important to back CSOs so they have a greater capacity to report on violations of human rights in the media and also non-professional media reporting, especially since they tend to be more aware of what constitutes human rights violations.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The main sources of revenue for the media come from public budgets, marketing, and foreign donors. Panelists stated that subsidies and grants from municipalities and towns, along with commercial contracts with public enterprises, are being allocated to the media but in a non-transparent manner. There is no available information in recent years regarding the sums involved.

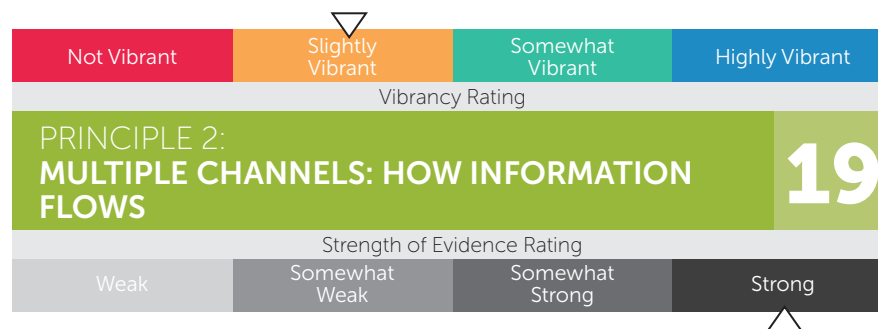
Petrović criticized local governments for their commercial contracts with local media, which are used to ensure favorable reporting on the activities of the mayor and the local assembly. According to Đapo, commercial media outlets are confronted with a poor, instable advertising market, which still suffers the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Đapo also stated that marketing revenue had further eroded this year due to inflation and higher prices. Senad Zaimović, director of the marketing agency Fabrika, explained that large companies opt to advertise their products on the television stations of neighboring countries due to the limited reach of B&H TV stations. He also highlighted the issue of inadequate audience measurement data in recent years.

Marketing revenues have also migrated online, where advertisement prices are lower and audiences are larger. Cvjetičanin reminded panelists of the impact social media companies have had on the advertising market and the need to regulate content curation and give precedence to quality media reporting. Kurtić highlighted the support given by foreign donors, embassies, and international organizations that are also directly supporting the media in B&H, with Rudić adding that a large amount of donor support is still being allocated to CSOs and trainings. However, Petrović felt that media outlets lack the expertise that would allow them to participate in certain projects.

Kurtić, conversely, pointed out that media outlets need to diversify their streams of revenue to achieve financial resilience. Only a few media outlets in the country have experimented with crowd funding and subscriptions despite these funding methods gaining popularity.

As the year came to an end, BHRT and the entity-level broadcaster, FTV, refused to sign the yearly agreement with the Public Enterprise Electric Utility of B&H for the collection of citizens fees, due to a disagreement regarding the allocation of funds. The Independent Syndicate of Workers of BHRT held press conferences to communicate the state public service broadcaster’s dire financial situation. They emphasized low salaries, outdated equipment, and warned of the imminent risk of the broadcaster shutting down within months. In 2024, the Council of Ministers decided to allocate €2 million (\$2.1 million) to the state

broadcaster; however, independent experts believe that this issue requires a sustainable solution. One of the reasons for this struggle that has remained unchanged for years is that entity broadcasters, RTRS and FTV, do not allocate portions of subscription fees and marketing revenue to the state-level broadcaster, as required by law.



Reinstating libel as a criminal offence and the adoption of other laws in RS will undoubtedly have an impact on media freedoms and freedom of expression. The draft “foreign agents” law that was passed in RS will lead to discrimination against and stigmatization of NGOs receiving foreign funding. The new law on the freedom to access information at the state level has been strongly criticized as it contains numerous exemptions for B&H institutions. During 2023, journalists suffered numerous verbal attacks and threats, including during press conferences.

Panelists rated Indicator 7 covering adequate access to information with the highest score of the principle (26) due to existing laws and some journalists reporting positive experiences regarding the obtention of information. Given that panelists said the media is significantly politically influenced, Indicator 10 on independence of information channels received the lowest score (14) of this principle, highlighting that public service media outlets receive inadequate support from public budgets. Panelists also stressed the need to preserve the financial and operational independence of the CRA.

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

The year of 2023 was marked by the introduction of, and the attempts to enforce, repressive laws likely to curb freedom of expression. Despite the protests of journalists and loud disapproval of international and local organizations, the government of RS amended criminal laws and reintroduced libel as a criminal offence. Panelists considered that these amendments have the potential to further suppress media freedoms and be used against those who criticize the ruling coalition and the political party in RS. Since the introduction of these amendments—which apply to all citizens, not just the media—journalists in RS working on investigative stories struggled to find informants, with many potential sources now fearing retribution.

Moreover, Rudić explained that the prosecutor's office in RS by January 2024 already received 44 complaints for libel. Most of these complaints are lodged against citizens and five are against journalists. One complaint was lodged for publishing information about “personal and family circumstances,” another amendment of the Criminal Code which was adopted together with the criminalization of libel. Panelist Bahto Kestendžić expressed her concern that these amendments risk being adopted by the Federation of B&H.

In 2023, the BH Journalists Association free helpline registered 87 violations of journalists' rights, including numerous instances of political pressure, verbal threats, hate speech, death threats, and libel suits against journalists under civil law. Rudić also mentioned that 2023 was marked by an increasing number of cases in which lawyers requested the media to delete articles from their portals and servers, threatening them with lawsuits.

The RS Assembly adopted the Draft Law on Special Registry and Publicity of the Work of Non-Profit Organizations. According to this law, dubbed by the media as the “Foreign Agents Law,” non-profit organizations

receiving foreign funding would be subject to special financial reporting obligations and would need to include a special NGO mark on the material that they produce. These organizations would not be allowed to conduct political activities, and the government has the power to shut them down should they consider their activities illegal.

Rudić also mentioned the Federation of B&H's worrying attempts to introduce amendments to laws on public order which would make it possible to fine people for publishing manipulated information and fake news online. Targeting dissidents, journalists and representatives of civil society and labeling them as agents of foreign actors is a tactic that has been frequently employed by political leaders to discredit the work of the media and civil society. RS president, Dodik, repeatedly claimed that journalists were traitors, supported by foreign actors conspiring against RS, during press conferences throughout the year. After one press

conference in November 2023, he made a phone call to N1 Television journalist, Snežana Mitrović, and continued to harass her with threats.

Rather than providing answers to journalists' legitimate questions, many political figures – such as Elmedin Konaković, minister of foreign affairs; Samir

Suljagić, director of the Pazarić Institute; and Adnan Delić, the minister of labor and social policy of the Federation of B&H – opted to verbally attack them at press conferences in the Federation of B&H. Petrović mentioned that politicians also insult journalists during TV shows and guest appearances.

Following the January 2024 final verdict in a court case regarding the purchase and importation of Chinese ventilators during the coronavirus pandemic, former federal prime minister, Fadil Novalić - who was sentenced to four years in prison for abuse of position and authority - repeatedly accused the media of having fabricated the entire case.

Kurtić highlighted that statements made against journalists can yield serious consequences. In March 2023, a day after Dodik described

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journalists using offensive words, the cars of Aleksandar Trifunović, an editor of online portal Buka, and EuroBlic journalist Nikola Morača were vandalized. [Research](#) conducted in B&H by the BH Journalists Association in 2023 revealed that one in four citizens believe it is justifiable to attack journalists.

Laws safeguarding the confidentiality of sources are in effect. In 2023, Banja Luka-based journalist Morača was detained and pressured by the police to reveal the source for his story on a rape case. He was accused of breaching the confidentiality of proceedings, leading to the confiscation of his mobile phone for three months. However, investigations against him and another journalist were subsequently dropped.

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

There are currently 109 TV stations, 151 radio stations, 12 on-demand audiovisual media service providers, and 3 public RTV services which are available to the public. In addition to the domestic channels, a large number of foreign channels are available to the public through the distribution system, and there are 29 licensees for content distribution. According to research conducted by Center for the Promotion of Civil Society (CPDC) as part of the USAID-funded Independent Media Empowerment Program, there are 615 online news media.

The internet usage rate in B&H for the last quarter of 2023 is above 100 percent, according to the CRA. The technological infrastructure is not, however, adapted to the needs of people with disabilities. The use of broadband internet in B&H continues to rise, contributing to improving the service offerings available to end users. Panelist Maslo noted that the service packages combining several electronic communication services offered by companies has improved.

Panelist agree that telecommunications and internet infrastructure extend to all geographic areas, both urban and rural. People throughout the country have the means to access most information channels, and various communities or groups of people are not precluded from accessing information due to social norms.

Most online platforms providing access to content are poorly adapted to people with disabilities. Ensuring accessibility to content and programs for people with disabilities stands as a priority issue in the European integration process.

In 2020, certain steps were taken to enhance content accessibility for people with disabilities, including the introduction of mandatory quotas for accessible content in public broadcasting services, aligning with the requirements set by the international legal framework for audiovisual media services. Monitoring carried out by the CRA throughout 2023 showed that some progress had been made in adapting the program content of public service broadcasters to people with disabilities. According to the new regulation regarding the provision of audiovisual media services, adopted in June 2023 – part of the process of harmonizing with the EU regulatory framework – all television stations, both public and private, are obliged to ensure the accessibility of program content to people with disabilities.

In the event of a disruption to a telecommunications infrastructure, such as the internet or television, the population can rely on an alternative information system or device, such as the radio.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

Laws protecting the freedom to access information are in effect and no groups are excluded from accessing information. However, these laws are still not adequately implemented, and citizens and journalists face difficulties in obtaining information.

A new law on the freedom to access information was implemented at state level in B&H in 2023, despite criticism from CSOs. The law contains numerous restrictions on the right to free access to information and insufficiently harsh sanctions. The law designated a body within the Council of Ministers as the body for appeals, which the panelists saw as a conflict of interest and could be used to politicize the whole process. Rudić claimed that the law was adopted as part of a trade within the ruling coalition Troika – an alliance of three political parties: the Social

Democratic Party (SDP), People and Justice Party (NIP), and Our Party (Naša Stranka) – as well as an attempt to demonstrate that B&H is making progress towards European integration.

No research has been conducted investigating to what extent people are aware of the existence of the laws on free access to information. Panelists believed that awareness among the population regarding their right to seek information is low.

Journalists have varying experiences accessing information, depending on the institution and the spokesperson. Đapo commented that in the Canton of Tuzla, journalists do not face difficulties in obtaining information, but the bigger issue is the quality of information. “Sometimes they pretend to not know what we are talking about,” he explained.

Kurtić continues to struggle with obtaining information from the courts in B&H and, he added, that one needs to be on good terms with the spokesperson to obtain information. He mentioned that the government of RS improved their communication and sometimes he receives an answer to his queries within 20 minutes. “Sometimes I send an inquiry to the press office of the RS government, which they automatically forward to the relevant ministry, and then a spokesperson from the relevant ministry calls me and provides me with the information I need,” Kurtić explained. However, for journalists working for daily news outlets, obtaining information is more of a challenge as they rarely receive responses quickly enough.

Panelist Stokić explained that she rarely had positive experiences trying to obtain information and organize interviews with institutions. Many avoid recorded interviews and prefer to answer questions via e-mail with answers containing very little useful information for a journalist’s story. This was the case when she was trying to record interviews for a documentary with the Center for Social Work or the Service for Foreign Affairs.

Communication with some institutions has been improving. Some institutions publish laws and important information on their websites while others do not. Public discussions regarding draft laws are most

often held as a formality, with very little impact on the decision-making process.

People in local communities have sought different ways to communicate about local issues. Kurtić described a Facebook group in a village used for communicating about infrastructural projects and other work relevant to that community. “It is a significant change for people to know the amount of money invested in each local community, how much money is available, and how it is allocated--and to be able to offer suggestions during the planning of municipal budgets,” Kurtić said.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

The media sector has a serious issue with the lack of legislation on media ownership transparency and media concentration. According to Maslo from the CRA, a law on media ownership transparency should be part of a legal framework that establishes a detailed register of media ownership to enable systemic insight into ownership structures. This would, therefore, help prevent the risk of hidden media concentration and help determine the media’s obligations regarding the disclosure of ownership information. However, a law on media ownership transparency has not been introduced, despite it being one of the requirements for the EU integration process.

At the close of 2023, Minister of Communication and Transport Edin Forto stated that his cabinet would endeavor to adopt the law. However, according to the latest information from the Ministry, they are planning to incorporate provisions on media ownership transparency into the upcoming Law on Electronic Media.

Representatives of the CRA and civil society feel that incorporating a few provisions on media ownership transparency in a law related to electronic media would not solve the complex issue of media concentration and media ownership and that a separate, comprehensive law is needed. Furthermore, as highlighted by Maslo, introducing provisions to a law on electronic media would not include all the different forms of media, especially online media, which is the most problematic in terms of accountability and transparency.

To obtain a permit for radio and television broadcasting, media outlets need to have their company registered with the courts. Those who hold a broadcasting license must report any change in the ownership structure; moreover, they cannot sell the license themselves or transfer it from one owner to another without approval from the CRA.

The CRA maintains a register of license holders in the broadcasting sector, but information on indirect and related owners is not included in those registers. An initiative of the CRA, which aimed to collect this missing data and publish the register of direct and indirect media owners, was halted by the Agency for the Protection of Personal Data of B&H. The government agency referred to the European Convention on Human Rights, which stipulates that state interference regarding the right to privacy and the processing of personal data is permissible only if three prerequisites are met: the existence of a legal regulation, a legitimate goal, and necessity in a democratic society. Maslo highlighted the necessity of introducing legislation on media ownership transparency to disclose information on direct and indirect media owners.

Due to the ongoing transition to digital terrestrial broadcasting, the CRA stopped granting licenses for television broadcasting based on public calls for applications. Licenses for television broadcasting are now only licenses to provide program content, regardless of the way in which the program is delivered to users, so it is a technologically neutral license that is issued on a non-exclusive basis. However, radio broadcasting licenses will continue to be granted based on a public call for applications, given that analogue frequencies are still used for radio broadcasting. The introduction of digital radio (DAB) is included in the CRA's plan for 2024.

As far as cable distribution is concerned, there are 29 audiovisual media service and radio media service distribution operators operating in the country. The CRA has identified eight of the largest operators according to the number of subscribers. Some of them, according to Zaimović, are

acquiring more users in one entity, 40 to 50 percent, but not in the whole country.

There are three public service broadcasters – BHRT, FTV and RTRS – and many public radio and television stations. Public service broadcasters include different programs, and according to Maslo, the agency did not encounter major deviations in terms of meeting the program quotas determined by the license. However, panelists considered that public service broadcasters do not serve all members of the public. This relates specifically to RTRS, which promotes the interests of the ruling coalition in RS and representatives of opposition parties do not get the same level of coverage. “The parties are increasingly trying to influence the public media and control them,” Petrović expressed.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Media organizations are largely influenced by their ownership and funding sources, including advertising revenue and funding from public budgets. Đapo believes the editorial policies of a media outlet are dictated by the needs of its financial backers. Commercial media depend on advertising, and journalists self-censor their reporting in order not to criticize a company that advertises its services and products in the media. Đapo recounted how RTV Slon reported on a strike in a factory

owned by a major corporation in Tuzla, after which the corporation ceased to advertise its services in their media. “We may have damaged their reputation, but in reality, we simply reported objectively that there was a strike, and the workers took to the streets,” Đapo explained.

Kurtić said that media supported by foreign funding are also to some extent dependent, despite being considered the most professional and independent media. “Donors from outside the country have their own programs, goals, and reasons for providing those funds”, Kurtić stated. Stokić, who works for foreign-funded non-profit eTrafika, claimed that donors never meddle with the editorial content of the media. In her 12 years working for the organization, she encountered only a few instances

“**The media sector has a serious issue with the lack of legislation on media ownership, transparency and media concentration.**”

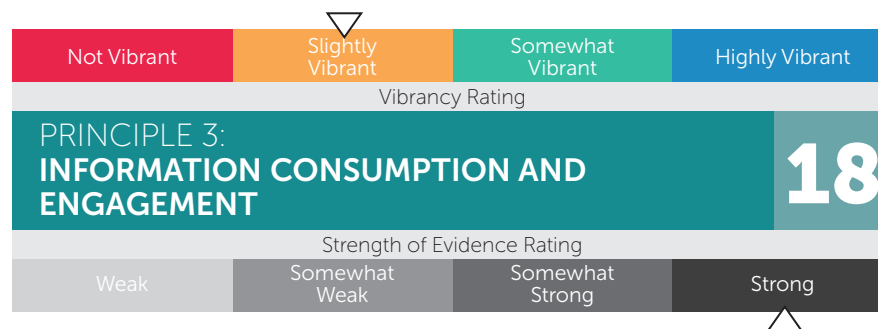
where a funder attempted to influence their content and consequently her media outlet decided to cease collaboration. However, panelists agreed that the extent of interference with editorial affairs also varies depending on the type of media outlet and the nature of their stories; media outlets covering politics and investigative reporting are often subject to greater external influence.

Political interference with the management and the content of media is especially present in public media financed by public budgets, where the mayor and the ruling party assembly determine the amount of funding. Most public media favorably report on the ruling political party in their local community. Panelists stated that public media broadcasters also have better access to information from the public administration in the municipality and town they report on in comparison with commercial ones.

In 2023, the BH Journalists Association responded on numerous occasions to the decisions of Zenica City Council, which declared that only the local public television station could cover and follow the meetings of the city assembly, excluding other journalists and correspondents. Đapo highlighted that in Tuzla the public television station covers all the meetings and gains exclusive access to information, which is later disseminated with the commercial media. Panelist Gušić said that those based in the city do not face issues accessing information, but it is more of a challenge for their correspondents in smaller towns. “The quality of the information provided is another matter,” Gušić concluded.

According to the [EU progress report on B&H](#), the CRA is not yet financially independent, and no efforts have been made to improve the process of appointing its leadership to ensure full political independence. Maslo said that it is especially important to secure and protect the financial and operational independence of the agency. The director of the CRA is the former director of RTRS, and panelists felt that he operates in the interest of the ruling party in RS, the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD). Panelists praised, however, the work of experts working within the Agency. Rudić remarked that the strong integrity of highly professional CRA staff results in an internal struggle to maintain

the agency’s credibility. “It becomes very challenging when you are faced with an inactive politicized council that demonstrates opportunistic behavior, along with a director from the RS president’s cabinet,” Rudić noted. The Council of the CRA remained unchanged for years, and the agency has recently finalized the call for the election of new members.



The country lacks a strategic and legal framework for cyber security, and its institutions, media outlets, and citizens have often been victim to cyberattacks. Distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks are frequent on media outlets, but their staff members often lack the capacity to strengthen their digital security. There have been numerous online scams including identity theft for advertising purposes. Panelists rated Indicator 15 on community media with the highest score of the principle (22). Although there are only two radio community stations in the country, they satisfy the needs of their audience. They rated Indicator 12 with the lowest score of this principle (15) due to the lack of a strategic approach to media literacy and the low media literacy skills of the population.

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

The country does not have a strategic and legal framework for cybersecurity and its citizens, companies and institutions are vulnerable to cyberattacks. More than 15.4 million cyber security threats occurred in the period from January to August 2023, according to the second *Report on Cyber Security Threats in B&H*. The Office for the Audit of B&H

Institutions conducted an audit of the country's institutions regarding cybersecurity activities. Their [findings](#) revealed that these institutions were ineffective in implementing activities aimed at ensuring the basic prerequisites for cybersecurity. At the beginning of 2024, there were cyberattacks against the Health Insurance Fund and Tax Administration of RS, and their users' data were sold on the black market. The victims of cyberattacks are often frustrated by the slow response of the authorities.

Panelists agreed that the population lacks digital literacy skills and knowledge regarding the protection of their online data. The past year witnessed the widespread adoption of generative artificial intelligence (AI); however, there is a lack of understanding regarding its ethical implications since there are no established legal and self-regulatory frameworks governing its use. "Artificial intelligence has entered our market so quickly that we are not yet ready for it and have no way of recognizing this content and have not established any ethical standards when it comes to using it," explained Kurtić. Bahto Kestendžić highlighted that it is important to create a set of standards regarding the use of generative AI in newsrooms and in daily work.

Online scams and thefts of personal data through different online games are frequent, but there is very little awareness regarding these offences. Cvjetićanin explained that, in 2023, identity theft was a recurrent problem, especially when used as a marketing ploy. The identities of medical doctors, journalists and actors were all stolen for online advertisements promoting a range of products. Despite these cases being reported to the police, no action has been taken to identify the perpetrators or to prevent such scams from recurring. Another recurrent issue is the so-called pyramid scam in which individuals are promised quick and easy earnings from a fictitious business by completing tasks that involve "clicking" on online advertisements and recruiting new members.

Facebook accounts were hacked, and people faced difficulties regaining access to their accounts. "You get a message that looks like a Facebook

security alert, you click on the link, and they hack your profile," Cvjetićanin explained. She added that platforms lack mechanisms to recognize and prevent such occurrences.

Panelist Maslo stated that, to secure personal data, B&H needs to adopt legal solutions akin to those adopted in the EU, primarily the Digital Service Act. Media outlets and other professional content producers have access to digital security training, and there are also numerous training courses online. Some international organizations, such as Internews, are providing digital security training to their media partners. However, some panelists mentioned security training courses such as these are not available

to all the media, and small newsrooms have neither the resources nor time to follow the latest trends related to digital security. Rudić said certain media outlets do not recognize digital security as an important component of their work and Bahto Kestendžić added mechanisms need to be introduced; all media outlets should be offered digital security training courses, without discrimination.

Larger media outlets have better digital hygiene practices as they can invest more resources in their protection. Media outlets often face DDoS attacks. Last year, for example, a popular online portal from Banja Luka, Buka, faced frequent, organized hacker attacks resulting in significant damages. These attacks are often reported to the cybersecurity department in RS, but so far, no perpetrators have been found. "Primarily, critical media outlets that do not align with the government are targeted by DDoS attacks. Unfortunately, their resources are becoming increasingly insufficient to combat them," explained Kurtić.

In a 2023 press conference, RS President Dodik admitted that he employs a service that follows the media closely and targets the media outlets that report critically on him. The BH Journalists Association called investigative authorities to verify these allegations, but no action has been taken so far. In addition, in 2023, Morača was detained and pressured by the police to reveal his journalistic source. Rudić described these violations as "a big problem that we need to tackle more seriously."

Panelists agreed that the population lacks digital literacy skills and knowledge regarding the protection of their online data.

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

There is a lack of a strategic approach to the development and promotion of media and information literacy, and no steps have been taken to develop and adopt a media and information literacy strategy at the state level. School curricula do not include formal media literacy courses, but some enthusiastic teachers have tried to teach media literacy as part of their lessons.

Various institutions and organizations carry out numerous activities aimed at developing the country's media literacy skills. The CRA leads an informal network of media literacy experts, and in October 2023 organized a Media Literacy Fair in Sarajevo, in which organizations presented their projects, activities and materials, attended by teachers, pupils and students.

CSOs have been particularly active in media literacy efforts. The Step By Step association continues to educate and work with teachers; Mediacentar Sarajevo has organized youth camps on media and information literacy for young people; and the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje created an app on media and information literacy for young people.

Panelists, however, agreed that there is a need for a strategic approach to media literacy and its inclusion in school curricula. Maslo noted that many activities repeat the same topics and that there is a need for monitoring and fresh research on a regular basis. In addition, most of the activities target young people, while are very few workshops for older generations. The last data about audience habits come from a study on the [Media Habits of Adults in B&H](#), conducted by the CRA and Council of Europe in 2021. Panelists agreed that there is a need for comprehensive, in-depth research on media literacy skills on an annual basis.

Despite the lack of supporting data, panelists claimed anecdotally that the level of media literacy of the public is low. Đapo believes that many people are unable to discern professional media from a Facebook page. He added that the general lack of media and information literacy skills

threatens the professional media as citizens do not value professional media content.

Cvjetičanin said online content creators, who aim to monetize their content or spread conspiracy theories, intentionally brand themselves as truth-tellers which attracts users due to the low levels of trust in official sources. She also explained that the COVID-19 pandemic strongly impacted citizens and conspiracy theories are still very popular: "The negative trends that gained enormous momentum during the pandemic have never gone away. It's a terrible problem. Now we have new ways to spread them, faster and with more ease, using tools such as AI deepfakes."

The fact-checking platform regularly receives reports from their followers regarding problematic content online, which shows that there is a group of citizens that can discern non-reliable sources and fake content. Bahto Kestendžić from the Press Council also added that citizens are increasingly using the mechanism of self-regulation and reporting problematic content to the Press Council. In 2023, the Press Council received 689 complaints, out of which 378 were resolved through the mediation procedure, i.e. journalists complied with the requests of those who complained and published denials, reactions, and removed comments that represent hate speech. The Press Council published a [research study](#) towards the end of 2023 on journalists' experiences with manipulative information, where they stated that more training courses should also be provided to journalists.

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

Journalists, civil society activists and the general population exercise their freedoms of speech and rights to information. However, as Maslo highlighted, there is a need to increase the population's awareness about the right to access information and the mechanisms for exercising this right.

Some people face negative consequences and online harassment for openly stating their opinions, especially concerning topics related to

politics and war events. Female journalists are the frequent targets of online harassment. In addition, the criminalization of libel in RS could prevent people from freely expressing their opinions online.

Conferences and academic discussions are organized but often gather like-minded people. Some TV and radio stations have call-in shows, but they rarely focus on political topics. People mostly engage in conversations online; however, as highlighted by Kurtić, the quality of the debate is notably low, and lacking nuance.

Even though Facebook is still the most popular social network in B&H, it is becoming less popular among youth. An increasing number of young people are using Tik Tok, which has been known for problematic content, especially the glorification of war criminals. Cvjetičanin highlighted that the perpetrator of the Serbian mass shooting, a minor, had triggered a personality cult on the social networks. “Without some serious regulation, without the platform making efforts to change it to systematically prevent this situation, literally nothing can be done”, Cvjetičanin stated.

In 2023, according to [research](#) conducted by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), 157 cases of violation of digital rights were registered in B&H, which is 50 percent more than in last year’s VIBE study. The most common forms of violation of digital rights are hate speech, discrimination, and posting threatening content and threats to security. Ethno-national groups, women, and the LGBTQ+ community are the main targets of hate speech online.

According to [research](#) on the media habits of adults in B&H carried out by the CRA in collaboration with the Council of Europe in 2021, few people use the mechanisms for reporting inappropriate content. Just under one-fifth of B&H residents have ever reported inappropriate content they have encountered when using media or information and communication technologies. Of those, most reported it directly to the content provider,

and significantly fewer went to law enforcement, the Press Council, or the CRA.

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

Media and content producers do not seek to understand their potential audience’s needs and interests through qualitative research. They mostly focus on quantitative data such as Google Analytics and prioritize publishing the most popular content. Stokić confirmed the country’s media know little about their public’s needs explaining, “They make assumptions about their needs and impose content accordingly. Most of them are satisfied with basing this content on information about the gender and age of the audience, which is not sufficient to understand their habits.” Đapo said the media do not research their audience’s needs because they lack the resources to produce content tailored to public interest, and many media exist only to satisfy the needs of those in power and to propagate their information.

Most media have fair and open processes for audiences to provide feedback, such as letters to the editor or moderated online comment sections. Bahto Kestendžić commented that audiences can easily react to media content via e-mails or social networks, but that a more proactive approach would increase trust in the media.

Most media service providers have audience contact scheduled into their programs, and contact information is often provided to allow communication between editors and the audience. In accordance with the Code of Program Content of the CRA, media service providers must rectify identified errors regarding the accuracy, fairness and impartiality of the information presented, and publish the natural or legal person’s response to the information aired or published in the audiovisual or radio program that violated their rights or interests. Cooperation between the media, content producers, CSOs, and state institutions for

Some people face negative consequences and online harassment for openly stating their opinions, especially concerning topics related to politics and war events.

more productive information-sharing exists, but there is need for further improvement. Journalists from different media outlets work together to share contacts and information but cooperation between media outlets, especially commercial ones, is rare.

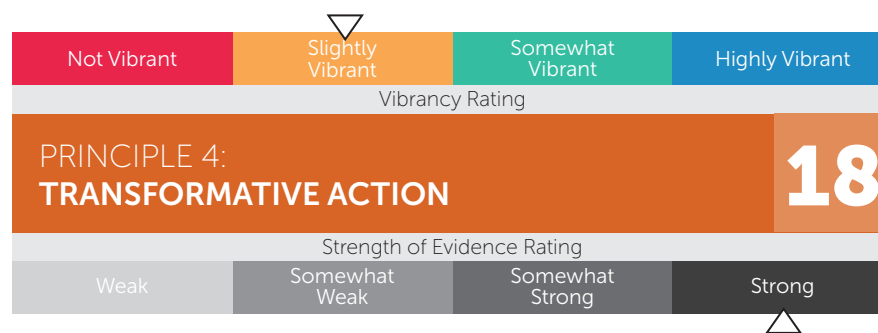
Petrović claimed that BHRT attempts to answer letters and emails received from their followers including those located in rural areas. To engage the public, the public service broadcaster introduced polls with citizens to their central news program, which allows citizens to ask questions via e-mail and the guests on the program are required to answer them. Kurtić said at Balkan Insight they try to adapt complex research on war criminals, for example, or political analyses to make them accessible to young audiences. The regional media outlet where he works publishes a “Letters to Editors” section which details the “netiquette”, or rules for online conduct that their followers must respect to avoid hate speech and the spread of manipulative information.

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

Non-profit radio stations are able to operate as a form of “community media” in B&H. The rules of the CRA transparently and clearly define the conditions for issuing a license for non-profit radio for non-profit organizations in order to meet the specific needs of a certain social group on a non-profit basis.

In accordance with the prescribed conditions of the license, their mandate is clearly different from that of public services, public RTV stations, and commercial stations. Maslo from the CRA said, regardless of the minimum conditions for obtaining this license, the number of non-profit radio stations in B&H is low and now only two such radio stations are registered: Radio Active and Radio Marija. These stations provide their listeners with information relevant to them and address their problems, giving marginalized groups the possibility to participate in public communication and social debate. The CRA had no complaints regarding the dissemination of incorrect information by these permit users.

Kontić noted there are numerous public radio and TV stations in B&H that could be considered replacements for community media. Stokić mentioned that there are also several portals dedicated to minorities, the LGBTQ+ community, and the Roma population run by non-profit organizations, yet they are scarce in number.



The media and audiences in B&H remain deeply divided along ethno-national and political lines. There are spaces where people can exchange opinions, but online discussions often take the form of insults. The number of TV debates is decreasing as political representatives prefer to participate in one-on-one interviews. Panelists gave their highest score in this principle to Indicator 18 (27), referring to the work of CSOs, especially those dealing with human rights. They advised, however, that some CSOs spread hatred towards other groups. The lowest score in this principle was given to Indicator 20, which indicates that information does not strongly support good governance and democratic rights (13).

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

There are various sources of information, but the media and audiences in B&H continue to be deeply divided along ideological, ethno-national, and political lines. Panelists stated that this polarization has become more pronounced in 2023. Kurtić stated that, in 2023, the media frequently published Dodik’s divisive and inflammatory statements

and his calls for secession and that “this has further radicalized media reporting compared to 2022.”

Research has shown that the country’s audiences often follow only certain channels of communication, especially those that cater to their ideological and political beliefs.

Stokić believes that people do not follow media that may challenge their stance, preferring to follow those that support their views. She noted that discussions online are not exchanges of opinions but are based on humiliation and insults. “I don’t see a civilized approach,” she explained. Bahto Kestendžić said that a culture of meaningful dialogue is lacking, which is evident on social networks.

The number of TV debates with guests from different ideological and political backgrounds is decreasing. Rudić states that there are no real debates on questions related to the media community, political topics, or social topics. Politicians on TV programs increasingly display aggressive behavior towards journalists, often appearing insolent and inarticulate. “We have a real crisis regarding critical reflection, the willingness to engage in dialogue with those who think differently, and maintaining civil discourse in public spaces,” explained Rudić.

Petrović confirmed that guests, mainly political representatives from different parties, refuse to sit side-by-side in the studio, but willingly agree to participate in one-on-one interviews. He said that interviewees demand that concepts and questions be sent prior to the show and added, “It is hard to describe the degree of intolerance among the interlocutors. This intolerance is so disturbing that they can end up cancelling the guest appearance half an hour before the show.”

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

Panelists claimed that the quality of information in B&H often has no role in shaping citizens’ attitudes or voting habits. Bahto Kestendžić

“ There are various sources of information, but the media and audiences in B&H continue to be deeply divided along ideological, ethno-national, and political lines.

from the Press Council said that fact-checked and credible information impact the process of decision-making on important topics for only a small number of people, while most citizens are susceptible to political agendas, sensationalist content, and manipulated or unverified information.

Conspiracy theories are very popular, and there were even cases where patients died because they followed alternative medicine advice. For example, in 2023 BIRN published a story about an individual who died because she rejected medical treatment and followed the advice of a guru. An increasing number of parents do not want to vaccinate their children and, consequently, B&H proclaimed a measles epidemic in several of the country’s cities at the beginning of 2024. There is a high level of distrust towards institutions, leading people to seek information from other sources. Petrović highlighted that citizens do not check information, meaning they can easily be persuaded by manipulated information.

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

B&H has numerous CSOs. Panelists agreed that people working in CSOs, especially on human rights, are dedicated experts who do not spread manipulated information or problematic content. However, there are also many organizations who are ideologically and politically biased and promote divisive narratives. According to Rudić, these include certain organizations supporting war victims and veterans, as well as sports associations that can be very extreme in their political views.

Stokić elaborated that in Banja Luka there are around 15 organizations that claim to be humanitarian – advocating for family, children and preserving traditions – however, they align with the stances of the ruling political party and mobilize against the LGBTQ+ community at any given opportunity.

She mentioned Duga, a women’s humanitarian organization from Banja Luka, which supposedly fights for the improvement of conditions

for women, but it also very actively protested LGBTQ+ activists in 2023. The same association is rallying against the introduction of the term “femicide” in the legal code because they see it as an attack on traditional values.

Media CSOs publish research reports and work to reduce manipulated information in the media and online. Media outlets work and cooperate with CSOs, which are good sources of information on a variety of topics. Petrović confirms that BHRT, the public service broadcaster, has good relations and cooperates regularly with the civil society sector on many different projects and topics. However, panelists agreed that CSOs need to increase their collaboration with the media.

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

There are mechanisms in place for government actors to engage with civil society and media, but these are rarely used. Governments rarely involve experts from civil society to participate in working groups on draft laws. The Law on Electronic Media, for example, is being drafted without the participation of civil society groups, and there is a lack of transparency in the overall procedure.

Public discussions on draft laws are mainly held as a formality, without any impact. However, Stokić highlighted that public discussions regarding the criminalization of libel held in various towns in RS brought about some changes to the amendments, even if this was not enough to prevent the introduction of amendments to the Criminal Code that civil society advised against. Ecology activists and groups have been, according to Stokić, constantly trying to discuss issues with decision makers, without any success.

Government communication with civil society and the media is mostly limited to press conferences or press releases. Following numerous femicide cases, the police tried to organize press conferences to calm the

public, but journalists claimed that it was too late considering the large amount of manipulated information that had already been published. Bahto Kestendžić from the Press Council pointed out that government actors often spread manipulated information to justify their actions or to bring about new decisions.

Panelists noted that government officials cite quality news media or information from civil society selectively, when it suits their needs or to discredit their political opponents, and sometimes even use manipulated information when justifying their decisions.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

When information sources reveal corruption or human rights violations, B&H’s legal system fails to respond appropriately. Bahto Kestendžić noted that, apart from some rare exceptions, the discovery of corruption by the media most often never ends up being investigated and the public loses interest in the story over time.

The findings of investigative journalists rarely result in indictments. “It is disappointing and demotivating for those who are engaged in serious

investigative journalism, when it does not have the impact that it would if the judiciary system were more functional,” Cvjetičanin stated. BIRN’s report on a group of people claiming to cure cancer using alternative medicine did not provoke any investigation by the prosecutor’s office.

However, there are some good examples in which journalists’ investigative stories brought perpetrators to trial, such as the conviction of Fadil Novalić, former prime minister of the Federation of B&H, regarding the procurement of ventilators from China during the COVID-19 pandemic. Journalistic stories about corrupt practices of certain politicians, however, do not impact election results as people mostly vote based on partisan preferences rather than fulfilment of promises and programs of political candidates during election years.

“Conspiracy theories are very popular, and there were even cases where patients died because they followed alternative medicine advice.”

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