

TURKMENISTAN

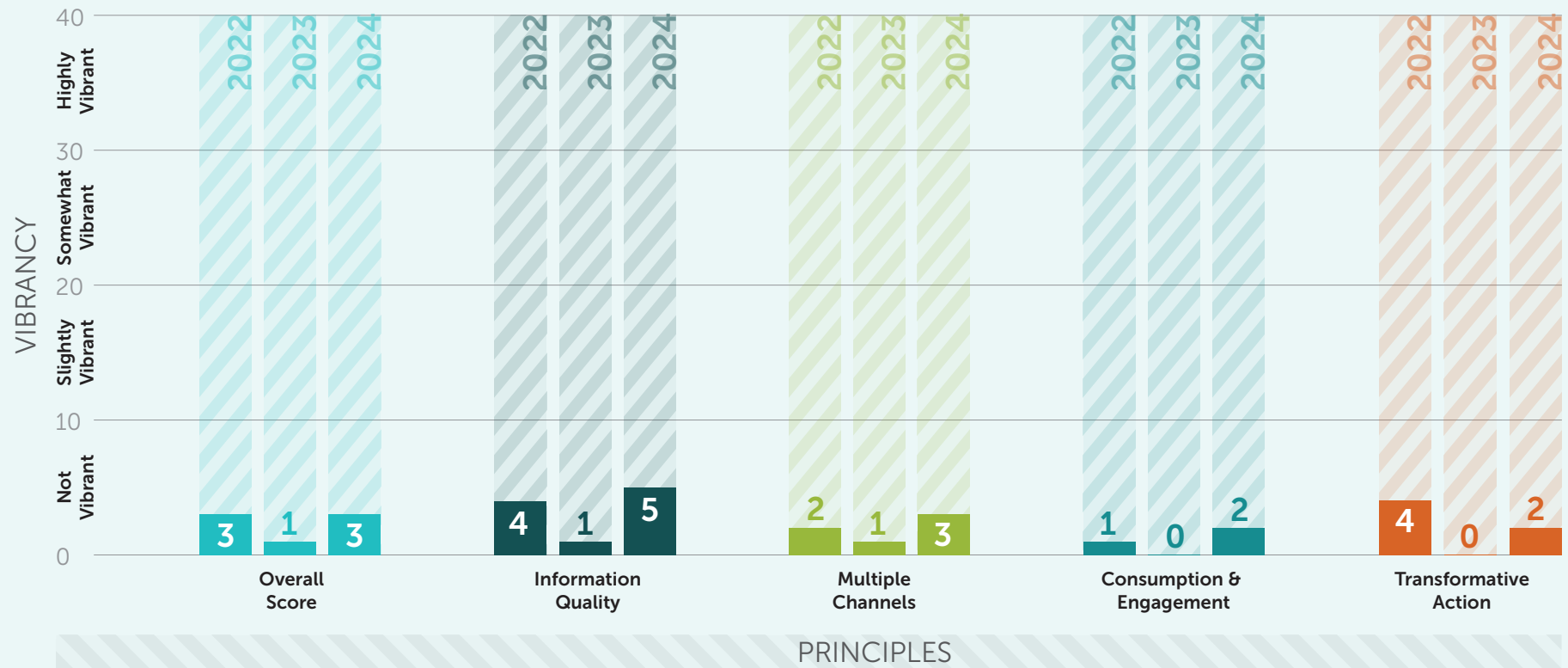
Vibrant Information Barometer

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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

3

With its repressive political system and pervasive cult of the leader, Turkmenistan ranks among the most closed and least free countries in the world. It has no freedom of speech or press, let alone independent media, and some of the harshest censorship on Earth. [Reporters Without Borders](#) noted continued censorship and surveillance of journalists in its 2024 survey of press freedom, which placed Turkmenistan 175th of 180 countries, echoing assessments by Freedom House, which deems it “not free.”

President Serdar Berdymukhammedov took office in March 2022, succeeding his father, Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, via a widely derided election. Berdymukhammedov senior became the chairman of the new People’s Council (Halk Maslahaty), the country’s highest body. He remains the ultimate decision-maker and the most powerful figure in the country.

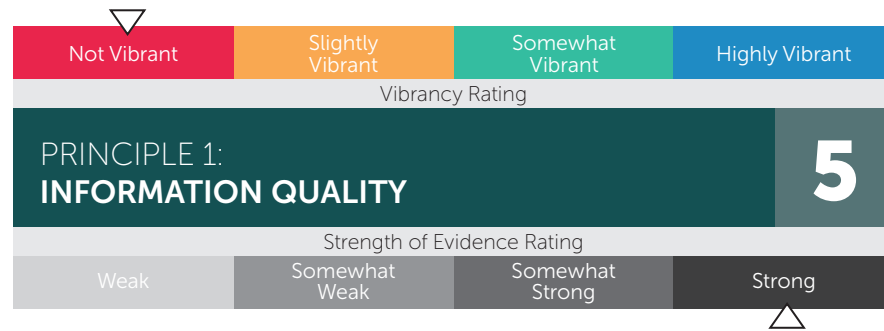
State-controlled media focus on both leaders’ activities and achievements, ignoring a yearslong decline in living standards. The official narrative of “happy people, prosperous land, and wise leadership” fundamentally shirks the principal duty of the media to inform, expose wrongdoing, and help people make informed decisions by presenting facts and alternative views.

Turkmenistan’s authorities closely monitor citizens’ social media activities to ensure that only content that hails official policies and puts the country in a positive light gets posted. The government tightly controls mass

media, heavily restricts internet access, and blocks social networks, opposition websites, and general news websites. A recent [study](#) found that more than 120,000 domains are blocked in Turkmenistan.

As in last year’s VIBE study, panelists deemed each of the four principles in this year’s VIBE report on Turkmenistan “not vibrant,” with no signs of light in the black hole of the country’s system of state-controlled media and censorship. The overall country average is 3, up two points from the year before.

Panelists gave higher scores for minor bright spots, including at least the existence of a liberal media law and the lack of hate speech in the domestic media, but they conferred scores of 0 on indicators on the use of the media for propaganda, the flow of important information to the public, internet censorship, and government surveillance of social media users.



The country's eight television channels, five radio stations, 25 newspapers, 26 magazines, and more than a dozen news websites are state-controlled. They lack diversity and often repeat one another, and there are no truly independent media to counter them. The persistently low-quality content, heavy censorship, and government control over journalists translated into low scores particularly for indicators on media ethics, fact-based reporting, and the diversity and inclusivity of information.

In Principle 1, average scores on indicators ranged from 4 to 7. Indicator 3 (information is not intended to harm) fared the best, with a score of 7, since the level of control the government exercises over information in Turkmenistan prohibits hate speech. Panelists scored Indicators 1 (quality information), 2 (fact-based information), 4 (inclusive and diverse content), and 5 (sufficient resources) with 4s, reflecting the efforts of exile Turkmenistani media operating from abroad.

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

Panelists noted that almost all content created within the country comes from state media, which must parrot state ideology, praise the government, and avoid sensitive issues and words on a government blacklist. Reports contain only one or two official sources. Prior to release, content must be approved by government censors.

Given that content producers are state-controlled, most panelists agreed that they have adequate infrastructure for gathering, producing, and distributing varied content, considering the government's resources. A state news agency exists, but it produces only state propaganda, so those resources are squandered on low-quality information. A typical evening news program on state television begins with the [presenter](#) intoning, "In the revival period of the new era of stable state, our country's achievements are reaching a new level."

Panelists cited internet censorship, blockages, and slowdowns as fundamental shortcomings of the infrastructure.

Every print or online newspaper features large, doctored images of the president and his father, widely called the chairman, with messages of thanks and congratulations to the country's top leaders. Although these digital platforms also offer content in Russian, English, and Turkish, it is repetitive across all platforms, presenting Turkmenistan as a country of peace, happiness, and stability.

Panelists said a few online media outlets operating from abroad stand out for covering a variety of topics and attempting to meet ethical standards. Relying on stringers inside the country, exile media offer informative stories of public interest and alternative perspectives under very difficult conditions, constantly in fear of retaliation from the government. They struggle, however, to double-check news for accuracy, and, as one panelist noted, internet blockages limit their reach inside Turkmenistan. The reach, and therefore influence, of the ubiquitous government-loyal media is much greater, the panelist said.

Turkmenistan's media consumers are stuck with content from state-controlled media that does not report realities on the ground, cover regional and local events, carry alternative views, or differentiate fact from fiction.

The country offers some journalism training, including at the faculty of international journalism of the Institute of International Relations, the International University for Humanities and Development, and Magtymguly State University. Panelists noted, though, that these are state institutions, lacking in academic freedom.

“The journalism training that exists in Turkmenistan can’t be considered an adequate means of training content producers on how to create ethical, evidence-based, and coherent content,” a panelist said. While the government occasionally permits OSCE to hold media training in the capital, participants tend to be carefully selected state officials being trained as the next generation of propagandists.

“Content-producer training mainly relies on entertainment and commercial productions, which include only hands-on experience rather than conceptual training,” one panelist said, “The lack of high-quality journalism and education results in a poor understanding of how to tell stories.”

Moreover, one panelist observed that journalism within Turkmenistan completely lacks storytelling about individuals, since the overwhelming emphasis is on popular support for the government.

Far from suffering consequences if they do not function ethically, content producers risk consequences if they do. Their primary concerns are to please the authorities, keep their jobs, or make money. To do otherwise could trigger a rebuke, penalty, dismissal, arrest, imprisonment, or torture.

“None of the training and workshops being offered matters, as the primary task of journalists is to present a positive image of life in Turkmenistan, and all of the country’s journalists understand that is their role,” one panelist said.

At a media [roundtable](#) on fake news and social media, held in Ashgabat in April 2023, Deputy Foreign Minister Mahri Bashimova decried what she called “the illegal use of information technology, the implantation from the outside of ideas and attitudes that run counter to the historical traditions of the peoples of Central Asia.”

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

In this indicator, panelists described missing, manipulated, or distorted information, and fiction in reporting, as the norm.

Instead of sticking to facts, content creators in Turkmenistan are expected to find the good and hide the bad. Instead of resisting financial and political pressure, delving into events happening inside the country, exercising creativity, or offering alternative or opposing views, they accept uniformity and conformity. Journalists’ remit to put the country in a positive light and continuously hail the government for its alleged achievements often leads them to resort to baseless fiction.

“Mostly exaggerated or even completely false information has become the norm in Turkmenistan,” one panelist said. Even natural disasters, such as dust storms, droughts, and mudslides, as well as corruption, domestic violence, and infectious diseases, which could cloud the image of a perfect country, are taboo. The government has also denied that a single case of COVID-19 has occurred in the country.

“At least Turkmenistan state media could inform the public about events that the government can’t be blamed for,” the same panelist observed, “If they can’t report bad things happening that the people can clearly see, that hurts everybody and discredits the media as a source of information.”

In a show of omission, shortly after Turkey canceled visa-free travel for visitors from Turkmenistan in September 2022, the pro-government [salamnews.tm](#) published a list of 13 countries that Turkmenistanis could visit, mostly irrelevant as destinations, while failing to mention that citizens would now need a visa for traveling to Turkey, where more than 100,000 workers from Turkmenistan already lived.

“Media focus on the achievements and the progress the country is making under its reportedly capable leadership. The reality of the

country, however—lines forming outside state stores hours before opening time, children begging, people rummaging through the garbage for something to sell or, in dire cases, eat—don't receive any coverage at all. Misinformation is the norm," one panelist said.

Widely disseminated, misleading information includes rosy economic news, such as growth figures reported unquestioningly; reports that the woeful parliamentary elections in March 2023 were free and fair; reports that citizens around the country are living in plenty, with no mention of food shortages or skyrocketing inflation and the resulting food protests; and praise of the deteriorating health-care system.

Social media, which only a tiny share of Turkmenistanis use, is not much of a factor. Domestic sites have come and gone, while foreign sites are accessible only via a virtual private network, or VPN, the use of which is subject to large fines or other penalties. Rare dissenting posts do surface, and critical content may appear on Instagram or the IMO messenger couched in humor or irony, but, as one panelist noted, "There are severe consequences for posting alternative information." Criticism of the government on social media can lead to prison sentences.

One panelist said he doubted that professional content producers intentionally distort information but that some local news outlets publish reports to counter reporting by exile Turkmen media. For example, the panelist said, "The opposition media may report that women are not allowed to drive, while local news media may produce reportage with women drivers to discredit such sources." Sometimes, he added, nonprofessional content producers unintentionally spread bad information because they can neither spot it nor verify it.

State employees in Turkmenistan are forced to subscribe to official newspapers; teachers must pay for new equipment, books, and repairs at schools; students are regularly summoned to participate in

mass public events; villagers are forced to pick cotton; and medical workers must deny deteriorating public health conditions. Meanwhile, the government reports rich harvests each year, a carryover of Soviet practice, without any figures made public, although exiled independent news outlets [azathabar.com](#), [Turkmen.news](#), [hronikam.com](#), and [gundogar.org](#) report a different picture on the ground.

One panelist cited Turkmen Owazy TV channel's promotion of medicinal herbs as a remedy for female infertility, based on a book by Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, as an example of false information.

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

The government's strict control of information makes it difficult for foreign governments or news agencies, which are loath to lose their accreditation, to gather and disseminate information inside the country.

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Russia and China enjoy close relations with the government of Turkmenistan, with plans to expand cooperation on key areas such as cybersecurity. So far, there is no evidence that they spread information within Turkmenistan that is intended to harm, as they have no interest in destabilizing the country.

Hate speech is not an issue in Turkmenistan, as no journalist or social media user would dare to engage in it unless it was government sanctioned. The government does not allow hate speech on state media, lest it provoke unrest and taint the image of national harmony and unity.

As one panelist put it, there are no ramifications for creating or disseminating false news as long as it is government sanctioned. There are consequences only for not promoting the government's narrative of events or image of Turkmenistan.

The government generally does not target relatively small ethnic minorities or religious groups, nor does it address pressing issues of concern to them.

One panelist criticized the lack of self-regulation in place to prevent, regulate, control, or monitor hate speech and bad information.

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

This indicator earned a low score for the lack of information in most minority languages and the media's neglect of issues of concern to women or minority groups.

Almost all information is in the Turkmen language, although the country has a few Russian-language newspapers, including *Neytralny Turkmenistan*, and websites with Russian-language content. There are no news outlets in Uzbek, a small language minority, and no regional press in Russian. Due to the relative scarcity of other nationalities, the government has been able to virtually seal off the country from outside influence.

The government released only basic data from the December 2022 [census](#), excluding any information on the country's ethnic composition, although Turkmen form the large majority of the population.

"There is limited information for non-Turkmen speakers, all devoid of actual content and information," one panelist said. The state media do not cover ethnic minorities, although independent media in [exile](#) do. Similarly, domestic media never mention the large Turkmenistani diaspora in exile, while international media or independent exiled media do. Religious groups are altogether ignored in the domestic media.

Magazines in Turkmenistan that are geared to women ignore substantive issues such as domestic violence, gender equality, and women's health, while the independent diaspora website saglyk.org (Health) regularly raises awareness of women's health issues. In 2023, Turkmenistan's media continued to ignore new restrictions on women's appearance

and conduct, which include bans on some salon services and cosmetic procedures, and limits on freedom of movement.

The constitution grants women equality with men in all spheres of life, but women face routine political and societal discrimination. "The viewpoints of any gender other than male are covered only by online media in exile, which cover stories related to infringements of women's [rights](#) in Turkmenistan," one panelist said.

Media management, journalists, and other content producers are mostly ethnically Turkmen men. Media staff are typically hired for their connections to the government and their command of the Turkmen language. "Regardless of whether there is diversity in newsrooms and among professional content producers, all publicly disseminated content complies with a government-approved agenda. It doesn't include a variety of ideologies," one panelist said.

Indicator 5: Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Since almost all media are officially state media in Turkmenistan, television, radio, print, and online outlets receive funding from the government. Professional content producers likely have sufficient financial resources and state-of-the-art equipment to accomplish their mission of portraying the country in a positive light and presenting the government's point of view. Additionally, newspapers and magazines benefit from compulsory subscriptions by state workers.

As one panelist remarked, a narrow circle of ruling elites spends seemingly unlimited resources on propaganda where and how it sees fit, even as the state media uniformly produce repetitive, stilted information.

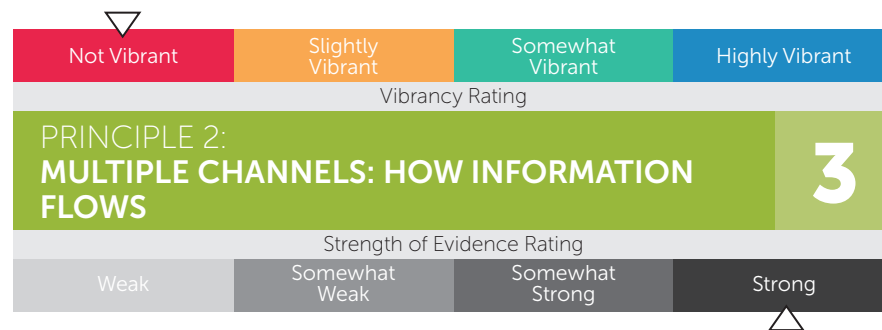
All of the country's scant advertising goes into state media. Advertising placement and content is treated much the same way as news content, heavily politicized—not every company can advertise as it wishes—and often managing to glorify the president.

Because Turkmenistan's state budget is opaque, one panelist noted it is unclear if advertisers pay media outlets directly or if the money goes

to the state and is redistributed among media outlets. The process of selecting which companies are allowed to advertise is also opaque, though presumably some government body, not the media themselves, make these decisions. Media outlets cannot seek funding on their own from sources other than the state.

The salaries of state journalists are not public information, but the government treats state-controlled journalists simply as mouthpieces used to ensure a pliant population. The relationship between government officials and state journalists can be described as boss and servant. Media workers' salaries are likely in line with those of other state employees, although selected journalists may receive state subsidies. One panelist said salaries are not high and journalists usually work for several media outlets to make their living or try to find side hustles.

Younger content creators seem drawn to public relations, where they can hope to work in a less oppressive atmosphere and earn more money.



A 2013 law forbids censorship and interference in the activities of the media and allows practically anyone to open a media outlet. However, that is only on paper. Censorship is extensive, and not a single independent media outlet has been legally registered in the country. Freedom of expression is severely curtailed, and the secret services surveil journalists and social media users.

In this principle, Indicator 7 (adequate access to channels of information) and Indicator 8 (appropriate channels for information) each received a score of 5, reflecting the existence of minimal norms, such as media

laws, and the availability of outlets throughout the country. Indicator 10 (information channels are independent) received a score of 0, due to the government's domination of the media sector, the absence of nongovernmental media and public service media and the role of state media as a propaganda tool.

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

Turkmenistan's constitution and laws profess the rights to freedom of speech and the press, but with all publications controlled by the government, those rights do not really exist. "In Turkmenistan, [laws are largely meaningless], and they're arbitrarily enforced in an authoritarian manner," a panelist said.

The authorities persecute reporters, journalists, and bloggers inside Turkmenistan for alternative thoughts and expressions, while [international groups](#) have also noted pressure on Turkmenistani activists who live abroad.

Because government censors review all content before it is released, journalists routinely self-censor. "Anyone working in the media knows the rules," one panelist said, "Consequences can be severe for those who air views that run contrary to the state's version of events," including being reprimanded, fined, fired, or imprisoned.

All known prosecutions of journalists have been against those working with Turkmen media abroad. For example, Soltan Achilova, an independent journalist for the Vienna-based [hronikatm.com](#) news service of the Turkmen Initiative for Human Rights, has faced threats, attacks, and harassment. Reporting on key issues such as food shortages, COVID-19, forced evictions and confiscations of property, inadequate health care, and water shortages, she was prevented from boarding a plane for Switzerland to attend a human rights meeting in November 2023. In another case, Nurgeldi Halykov, a correspondent for the Netherlands-based [Turkmen.news](#), is serving a four-year prison sentence for failing to repay a debt, following his arrest in September 2020 on false charges. The prosecution is likely retaliation for Halykov's

having earlier that year shared someone else's photo of a visiting WHO delegation to Ashgabat with Turkmen.news, as officials were insisting that the country was free of COVID-19. That investigation likely turned up evidence of Halykov's previous anonymous work for the outlet.

Most journalists reporting for foreign media have been forced to stop working or have fled the country. A few independent journalists remain, working under very harsh conditions. For example, former Radio Azatlyk (RFE/RL's Turkmen Service) correspondent Hudayberdi Allashov was arrested in northern Turkmenistan in December 2023 for an unspecified reason. He was taken to a police station, where he was beaten and tortured, seven years after enduring a similar ordeal.

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One panelist said that users of social media, which the security service heavily monitors, are careful. Otherwise, they risk becoming targets of harassment and abuse by law enforcement or ending up in the government-controlled court system.

The Ministry of Communications is the country's only internet service provider, making control and surveillance simpler for the authorities.

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

Access to the internet is severely restricted in Turkmenistan, cutting its people off from the rest of the world and promoting an apolitical society. Recent [research](#) found that more than 122,000 domains are blocked in the country.

“Controls on access, high prices, and low internet speeds are severe barriers to citizens accessing information, particularly independent information that's not disseminated through state-controlled media,” a panelist said. Indeed, Turkmenistan has one of the world's most expensive and slowest internet services. [Internetworldstats.com](https://internetworldstats.com) (July

2022) put the number of internet users in Turkmenistan at more than 1.5 million, or 25.3 percent of the population. Another [estimate](#), by the Kepios digital advisory firm, put the number in January 2023 at 2.47 million, or 38.2 percent of the population. Kepios also estimated that 184,4000 people in Turkmenistan, or 2.8 percent of the population, use social media.

The quality of the information and telecommunications infrastructure is poor in rural areas, and some corners of the country have no internet at all. The government shuts down the internet, sometimes for days, in reaction to events such as protests, natural disasters, and accidents. It also sometimes throttles services, making the popular VPNs practically unusable.

Although authorities technically allow the use of the internet for “elementary educational purposes,” supporting businesses and a tiny academic community, Turkmenistan's internet is so blocked and censored that it is hardly a useful tool for the public, let alone scholars and researchers.

Authorities have tried to build a digital moat around Turkmenistan, with the Ministry of Communications the only authorized internet provider and state-controlled media the primary, if not only, source of information for most people. Many news sites, social media platforms, instant messenger apps, and VPNs are blocked.

In April 2023, the government's Altyn Asyr (Golden Age) website [reported](#) on an official meeting in Ashgabat to discuss “actual problems of the media space,” at which there was proposed cooperation with other Central Asian leaders to combat the use of communications technology to introduce perspectives that the government sees as undermining traditional values.

Television is the most popular medium, and those with satellite dishes can access content from Russia and Turkey, including international news

programs. Not surprisingly, satellite dishes have been targeted by a so-called beautification campaign in Ashgabat that deems them unsightly, but people have found innovative ways to keep their dishes.

Paid cable television is offered in Ashgabat with carefully filtered content, aimed at limiting people's free access to foreign television and radio stations. For example, the popular Russian series *The Boy's Word* has been removed from the list of offerings because of its "street language," deemed inappropriate for Turkmenistan's youth.

Recently, Turkmen.news [reported](#) that almost half of the world's internet addresses are banned in Turkmenistan. Those who can afford them use VPNs to surf the internet freely, but many cannot. It is not known how many people use VPNs, which are recommended by word of mouth. Telephone workers sometimes charge a "special fee" for downloading VPN apps onto people's phones illegally, RFE/RL reported several years ago. Authorities block VPNs as soon as they discover them, and the security service has stepped up checks on people's connections. Some reports say that police or security officials randomly check people's phones on the street or even pay unannounced visits to schools to check students' phones for VPNs.

To get a home internet connection, residents must [swear](#) on the Quran that they will not use VPNs, and students are required to [pledge](#) not to use the internet to access banned sites. While internet cafes exist in Turkmenistan, people are required to present identification to access the web.

Teachers have faced charges for not preventing students from using them. Those caught with VPNs receive a warning for a first offense but face fines or jail for a repeat offense.

Many people in Turkmenistan have mobile phones, although the service is poor. Additionally, a number of people use two mobile phones, one with a VPN and one without, to evade the authorities, one panelist noted.

Indicator 8: There are appropriate channels for government information.

A law that grants citizens the right to receive and impart information is violated daily and exists "for external public relations purposes," one panelist remarked, to meet international norms and standards. Another panelist said the law in reality guarantees "the" right to information that is approved by government."

Another panelist noted that people can consult government websites to learn about public policies, but given how expensive and slow internet access is, most people do not. And usually, the panelist said, "What the state says or writes differs from everyday reality anyway."

If people wish to watch reporters covering every move of the president and his father, or mass celebrations on special days to glorify the state, there is plenty of that available in television coverage. On the other hand, when foreign media report on people waiting in line in front of stores

selling state-subsidized goods, state television reports an abundance of food in the country.

People will also not see "natural disasters such as dust storms, extreme drought, flooding, or earthquakes," a panelist said. The only means people have to check the news for accuracy is to see what is happening around them every day. Over the years, Turkmenistani viewers have learned to run state-controlled news through a kind of internal translator. For example, since the creation of an anti-corruption agency in 2017, when state media report on the president firing a top official for corruption, more skeptical viewers wonder about the real reason for the ouster.

Government bodies do not have spokespeople or information offices. There are no press conferences except at key international events, such as oil and gas forums. People do not seek out information, for fear of

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repercussions, and government officials are not visible or accessible to the media or the public, and they do not convey reliable information.

Although the government insists that it works for the people, ordinary citizens are not in a position to approach authorities to ask questions about government decisions. Doing so would immediately arouse suspicion and lead to various forms of persecution.

Indicator 9: There are diverse channels for information flow.

There is no foreign ownership of media outlets in Turkmenistan, nor laws governing concentration or transparency of media ownership. There are no public service media, as the government controls all outlets, and the public is poorly served by partisan media representing only government interests. Standards are low, as the media's role is to create an apathetic, apolitical society.

No laws in Turkmenistan prohibit the establishment of nonstate, private media, but as one panelist said, numerous obstacles to registration ensure that nothing but state media can exist. "It's impossible for a private citizen to open a media outlet," the panelist said. Any attempt would likely backfire and arouse the suspicion of the authorities.

Indicator 10: Information channels are independent.

Virtually all domestic media are state-controlled, directly or indirectly, and state-funded. A few newer websites claim to be privately held, but their ownership is unclear, and they post the same pro-government content as all other outlets.

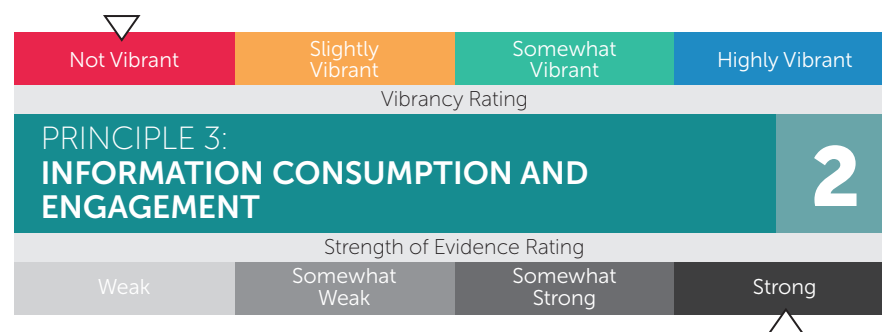
The licensing process virtually bars outlets that do not reflect pro-government views. Political interference is rife: chief editors are hired and fired by presidential decree, and the Ministry of National Security and state censors make virtually all editorial decisions. There are no avenues for private funding, and there is no editorial independence.

The state has a literal monopoly on information. "Only the government has access to statistical data, and the government's public claims, faithfully reported by the media, of record harvests, or more recently, the

population census showing Turkmenistan's population is more than 7 million people, are clearly untrue," one panelist said.

Although a 2013 law allows Turkmenistan's citizens access to foreign media, the internet is tightly controlled and censored. Authorities have never made public a list of banned sites, but they include foreign news outlets, the websites of human rights organizations, YouTube, and social media and messaging platforms Facebook, Instagram, X, Telegram, VKontakte, Odnoklassniki, TikTok, WeChat, ICQ, Line, and WhatsApp.

IMO, an online messenger that had become popular for not requiring a VPN, became [unusable](#) in summer 2023 due to a particularly serious internet slowdown. Link Messenger is accessible, but that could change at a moment's notice.



Panelists said people's privacy is uniformly violated, access to the internet severely restricted, and websites and VPNs blocked. As noted earlier, there have been reports of security agents tracking down those with VPNs, summoning people caught using them to discuss their online activities, and paying random visits to schools to check on people's phones. Surveillance cameras monitor public places.

In this principle, individual indicator scores ranged from 1 to 3. Indicator 11 (on privacy protections and security tools) and Indicator 14 (media engagement with audience needs) each scored a 3, as panelists said people cannot safely use the internet due to lack of privacy protections and security tools. Likewise, media and information producers do not engage with their audiences' needs. Indicators 12 (media literacy), 13

(productive engagement with information), and 15 (community media) each scored a 1 for a widespread lack of basic media literacy, low levels of public debate or discourse, absence of community media, or any attempt by content creators to engage with the public.

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

Although the right to privacy exists, it is widely ignored. Turkmenistan's intelligence agency, the Ministry of National Security (MNS), routinely monitors media workers' and private citizens' activities.

Digital security training, if any, may target only a handful of people who need it to spread government propaganda.

Limited data protection exists in law, but a subservient court system does not enforce it, one panelist said. "The pervasive state doesn't observe or protect citizens' digital rights and uses technology to infringe those rights. The public is poorly informed about their online rights, digital protections, and issues such as the algorithms driving social media and the mechanics of advertisement targeting," the panelist said.

To intensify cyber-policing, Turkmenistani officials are planning more [cooperation](#) with China in the near future. At the same time, the security service employs a combination of online and offline methods to spy on citizens.

The MNS and the government agency for cybersecurity closely monitor internet activity. Security agents make random checks on people's mobile phones looking for VPNs, and teachers warn their pupils to avoid "harmful" sites operating outside the country. People caught using VPNs, and specialists offering those services privately, can be warned, fined, or prosecuted.

Ordinary people lack a concept of cybersecurity; as such, information and training are extremely difficult to obtain and risky. Turkmenistan's

punishingly slow, expensive internet is mostly used for basic needs, such as email and messaging and "news to use," but not primarily for finding or verifying information. The fact that an estimated 70 percent of the population has no internet access makes digital literacy a pipe dream.

Politically active, online Turkmenistanis, especially activists, dissidents, and critics of government policies, are under constant threat of distributed denial-of-service attacks.

Exile media appear to have acquired a certain degree of cybersecurity protection and proficiency.

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

Media literacy, meaning the ability to critically assess, engage with, and create media, is scarce in Turkmenistan.

Politically active, online Turkmenistanis, especially activists, dissidents, and critics of government policies, are under constant threat of distributed denial-of-service attacks.

The OSCE organized a training course on the topic in October 2023 in Ashgabat, but generally, journalists and citizens alike are not trained to use media literacy tools, nor is there even much awareness of the concept. Schools do not offer such lessons.

"The government has a vested interest in not promoting media literacy so that most citizens swallow state propaganda without question," a panelist said.

Media training in Turkmenistan is different from in other Central Asian countries. State universities place more importance on courses such as "Treasury of the Wisdom of Magtymguly Pyragy," a formative 18th-century literary and spiritual figure. Indeed, considering that journalists for state media and social media users must tread carefully and regularly self-censor, media literacy in Turkmenistan is more about knowing what topics not to touch.

"State media is very much 'what you see is what you get,'" another panelist said, "Since no other media are available, it's difficult, if not

impossible, for Turkmenistan's citizens to distinguish between high-quality and poor-quality news, though most people probably assume that state media news is poor quality."

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

There is no freedom of speech in Turkmenistan. Panelists agreed that true and open debate in public spaces is rare to nonexistent. As a previous VIBE report noted, the authorities quickly break up any public assembly not organized by the government and detain the organizers and participants.

"To organize a public debate, there need to be public statements that contradict each other, but there's no such thing in the country," a panelist observed, "People may think and share their disagreements and ideas within a closed circle, but they're hesitant to share publicly, which shows that no one dares to use their freedom of speech."

"Turkmenistan's people understand they're not being told the truth, but complaining about misinformation to an official is likely to get the complainer into trouble," another panelist said.

One panelist suggested that an informal type of public debate, such as in-person exchanges of ideas and information among a few trusted people, still happen. This panelist said tea houses, *sadaka*—traditional charity gatherings in connection with family events, such as a marriage or the birth of a child—or mosques are the likely scenes for such conversations. However, they remain a risky thing to do, as security agents watch all public gatherings. The quality of these discussions depends on the limited information available to people.

Although laws do not ban reporting incidents of manipulated information or hate speech, it is not clear who would receive the

complaints. In any event, reports would have to be carefully worded to be in line with the state ideology. More likely, the complaint would be ignored while the person who made it could face unpleasant consequences.

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

Turkmenistan's state-run media do not connect with the people and are out of touch with the realities on the ground. Here, again, the media serve as an arm of the government. "The needs of the audience are never taken into consideration, and their opinion isn't needed," a panelist observed.

The media see the country's rulers as their audience, leading to decades of uplifting reports of abundance, dazzling economic achievements, free and fair elections, and a happy, prosperous nation led by a wise and visionary president. "Their purpose is to glorify the regime, first and foremost the president and the chairman, or the former president," a panelist said.

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Whereas in many countries, civil society, the media, and government might collaborate on public-service projects, a panelist said that in Turkmenistan, government-organized nongovernmental organizations, or GONGOs, content producers, and government institutions might collaborate to follow orders from top officials.

Under what circumstances journalists, content producers, pro-government activists, and government institutes come together and to what extent they can collaborate is unclear, as is what public good would come of it.

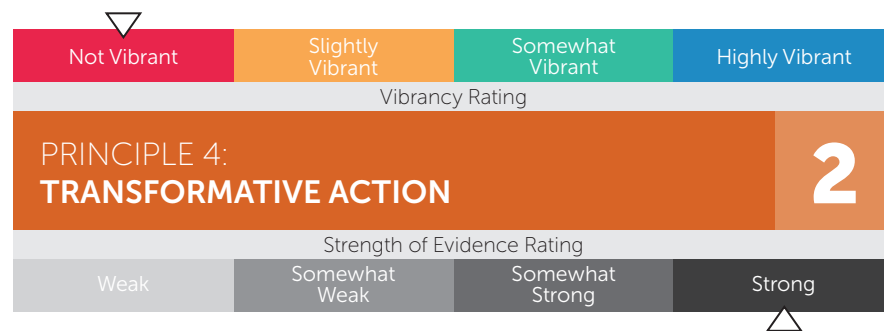
People do not have faith in media that make no effort to build trust. Instead, they tend to believe what they hear from their relatives, friends, and neighbors, which they then spread.

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

No community media exist in Turkmenistan. There is also no community news where NGOs or minorities would find a voice to express their grievances or criticisms of local officials.

“There is simply no space for community media in Turkmenistan, where the government controls all media outlets,” one panelist said.

During special events, the government uses GONGOs to stage-manage the appearance of broad-based support for it among the public.



In Turkmenistan’s repressive political climate, individuals, local media, and the government are not sources of reliable information. Individuals fear retribution from the authorities for saying something that does not jibe with government messaging, and journalists for state media do not engage with the public for fear of losing their jobs or some other punishment.

The government is unaccountable and makes no effort to engage with the public or explain its decisions. Accordingly, scores for indicators in this principle scraped the bottom of the VIBE scale. A comparatively high score of 3 was for Indicator 18 (civil society uses quality information), due to the fact that some activists or small civil society groups abroad, such as the

“With so little access to quality information, people in Turkmenistan cannot make informed decisions on political and social issues.”

[Turkmenistan Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights](#), rely on quality information. Indicator 20 (information supports good governance and democratic rights), on the other hand, received a score of 0 because state-controlled media are used rather for anti-corruption show trials than for genuine attempts to deal with this national scourge.

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

Public nonpartisan news and unbiased information sources do not exist in Turkmenistan, where all mass media are state-controlled. Every institution, organization, association, or body reports to, and is paid by, the state.

People with VPNs can access blocked sites at risk of prosecution or harassment, but there is no data on what people access via banned VPNs. The Security Ministry, which controls digital content, chokes off discussion in online platforms among young people, by intimidation and blocking. “The only platforms where young people in Turkmenistan can exchange information are the websites that VPNs allow them to access,” a panelist said.

The panelists agreed that any online conversation must be strictly apolitical.

Privately, people still manage to meet and exchange ideas and criticism. “Nonpartisan news and information sources exist in the form of so-called kitchen debates among friends, relatives, or colleagues. . . on topics that might be too sensitive or dangerous to discuss in public,” a panelist said.

Another panelist said a few online news outlets and social media platforms based abroad are Turkmenistanis’ only nonpartisan news and information sources, but their reach is limited by the country’s poor internet access, website blocking, and fear of reprisal for accessing

blocked sites using VPNs. In addition, many Turkmenistanis face a language barrier trying to access foreign content.

“News or information provided by exile media can be decent quality, but it’s constrained by the difficulty of having and communicating with domestic sources, which must, by definition, be secret,” a panelist said. “And Turkmenistan’s citizens’ access to exile media is very limited.”

Nevertheless, when some key information somehow reaches Turkmenistan from the outside, it becomes the “people’s news” and quickly spreads via word of mouth.

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

With so little access to quality information, people in Turkmenistan cannot make informed decisions on political and social issues. Moreover, with no meaningful elections or other ways to hold their leaders accountable, their judgments hold little sway in any event.

Nor can people get fact-based health and safety recommendations from state media, which do not acknowledge the country’s numerous public health problems.

Doctors and others with firsthand, critical information about serious public health issues are muzzled. Local participants in international events and conferences are warned beforehand not to betray the homeland in front of foreign visitors. Only the handful of independent-minded journalists who report critically for exiled media outlets dare to share accurate and reliable information in spite of intimidation, harassment, and attacks by the authorities.

“People have acted in ways that are detrimental to their health based on misinformation from the government, including, for example, because they have been told that Turkmenistan has never registered a case of

COVID-19,” a panelist said.

Another panelist noted that some people with internet access can get fact-based health and safety recommendations from, for example, the Turkmen-language [Saglykgram](#) Instagram account of the saglyk.org website. It has 17,900 followers and is a project of the US-based Progres Foundation.

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

Turkmenistan has had no independent civil society organizations since the last ones were shut down under constant pressure and interference from the authorities in the late 1990s. Only GONGOs, trade unions, and foundations are allowed to operate.

One panelist noted that some GONGOs are engaged in nonpolitical issues, such as climate and environmental protection, and have digital platforms. “For example, [Nature helpertm](#) has an Instagram account with 2,375 followers. A content analysis of its posts shows the group’s engagement with society based on quality information sources. But, in general, CSOs are under government control and exercise self-censorship,” the panelist said.

Civil society groups and GONGOs inside Turkmenistan stick to the government’s agenda.

“It can’t be ruled out that they disseminate misinformation,” a panelist said, “They won’t share or comment on anything that’s not approved by government. For example, a registered CSO won’t call for action to stop the spread of COVID if the government deliberately misinforms the public, saying, ‘no COVID cases detected.’”

A few civil society groups outside the country do use quality information and share it with the relatively few in Turkmenistan who are able to access it online.

“Domestic media cover only positive events, ignoring human rights violations or corruption, except when the head of state gives the order to cover specific corruption cases.”

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

Panelists agreed that government officials rarely communicate their decisions to the public or engage at all with the public or the media. State media are merely a funnel for government propaganda from the president and the former president. There is no real public debate or discourse.

“Interaction between government actors and the media is, by and large, restricted to scripted performances by the president and the former president,” a panelist said.

Another panelist said that officials other than the president and the former president rarely appear in media reports. “Much of what state media broadcast about government accomplishments or programs is embellished or outright false, and it’s clear that they’re not [consulting] quality media sources outside the country,” the panelist said.

The national security, interior and defense ministries likely play important roles in the president’s decision-making, but those decisions are kept secret.

Authorities also mislead the public in explaining their actions, such as when they moved to dismantle household satellite dishes in Ashgabat in 2015, ostensibly on aesthetic grounds, but more likely to block access to international broadcasts and to seal off the population.

Indicator 20: Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Freedom House deems corruption systemic and widespread in Turkmenistan, which has no independent anti-corruption institutions. Domestic media cover only positive events, ignoring human rights violations or corruption, except when the head of state gives the order to cover specific corruption cases. Although the problem is widespread, state media have never covered corruption as a national issue.

When an official is unmasked as corrupt, people usually wonder about the real reason behind the revelation, as such crimes are typically kept quiet. Many believe such selected televised confessions are staged so that the government can pretend to fight wrongdoing. When foreign media, on the other hand, uncover corruption, the government usually ignores or denies it.

“When it’s clear that there are chronic shortages—of food, heating, or electricity, for example—the president announces that some unlucky allegedly corrupt official or officials are responsible at state meetings,” one panelist said, “The dismissals, and usually subsequent charges, against these scapegoats are meant to give citizens the idea the government feels the people’s pain and punishes those responsible.”

Turkmenistan has no free and fair elections. “During the presidential election campaign, the incumbent receives coverage, but not any of the challengers, and the domestic media environment only enables that situation by falsely reporting elections as free and fair,” a panelist said.

IREX did not conduct an in-country panel discussion because of Turkmenistan’s repressive environment. This chapter represents desk research, interviews, and the result of questionnaires filled out by several people familiar with the state of media in the country.

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