

EUROPE & EURASIA

Vibrant
Information
Barometer

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USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



VIBRANT INFORMATION BAROMETER 2021

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INTRODUCTION

It is my pleasure to introduce the first edition of the Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) for Europe and Eurasia. This inaugural publication is the result of years of thought leadership and methodology development, and it represents a different way of examining media and information systems from its precursor, the [Media Sustainability Index](#) (MSI) for Europe and Eurasia. With its last edition published in 2019, the MSI was a valuable tool for IREX, USAID, donors, and academics to track trends, make comparisons, and inform programming in the media sector. However, since its inception in 2001, the global media and information space changed dramatically. There was, and continues to be, rapid evolution in the way that information is produced, spread, consumed, and utilized. Lines have blurred between media producers and consumers; the Internet has allowed for new channels of information flow; and the viral transmission of media has created an environment where it is easier than ever to spread disinformation--and harder than ever for many people to identify fact-based content in a sea of information "pollution."

Based on IREX's [Vibrant Information Approach](#) and developed in partnership with USAID, the VIBE methodology better captures and measures the way information is produced and utilized today in 13 countries from the Balkans to the Caucasus. In a vibrant information system,

quality information should be widely available, editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Content production should be sufficiently resourced, inclusive, and diverse. People should have the rights, means, and capacity to access multiple channels of information; they should detect and reject misinformation; and they should be able to make informed choices about their information consumption. People should use quality information to inform their actions, improve their communities, and contribute to public policy decisions.



Additionally, with VIBE, IREX modified the scoring scale to allow more granularity in panelist scores and introduced a Strength of Evidence (SoE) rating. The SoE rating is meant to: identify areas where further research is needed, increase transparency about the potential subjectivity of some indicators, help VIBE audiences contextualize scores and narratives, and assist IREX with tracking progress in VIBE's methodology and evidence-base over time.

Similar to the MSI, VIBE leverages the expert panel approach, incorporating perspectives from local sector professionals that IREX assembles in each country to serve as panelists. In this 2021 edition of VIBE, panelists from across the region chronicled the impact that the COVID-19 global pandemic on their operating environments, including financial sustainability, access to information, and misinformation further polluting the information space in the region. Panelists across several countries also highlighted several additional issues, some of which had emerged with the MSI, including: hate speech on social media, lack of government accountability, and inadequate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in media coverage.

The 2021 VIBE publication is accompanied by the Vibrant Information Barometer Explorer, a platform that will allow users to analyze VIBE data and track over time. In order to ensure some continuity between MSI and VIBE, IREX has matched five MSI objectives their most similar VIBE counterparts as follows:

- MSI Overall scores → VIBE Overall scores
- Freedom of Speech → VIBE Principle 2 (Multiple Channels)
- Professional Journalism → VIBE Principle 1 (Information Quality)
- Plurality of News → VIBE Indicator 4 (Inclusive and diverse content)
- Business Management → VIBE Indicator 5 (Content production is sufficiently resourced)

The MSI Objective studying Supporting Institutions does not have a direct counterpart in VIBE; however, supporting institutions are incorporated into many VIBE indicators but do not have a stand-alone indicator.

The 2021 edition of VIBE would not have been possible in a vacuum. To develop the VIBE methodology, IREX engaged external monitoring and evaluation expert Andria Hayes-Birchler, solicited peer reviews from global media and information experts, and received comprehensive input from USAID in Washington and from field missions. Critically, more than 175 sector professionals from throughout Europe and Eurasia took time from their busy schedules to reflect on their own media sector and provide the thoughtful comments that make the MSI stand out as a media development assessment tool. Discussion moderators and authors from each country organize the VIBE chapter narratives and contextualize the panelists' thoughts.

Finally, without Stephanie Hess's dedicated management support, this year's VIBE would not have been possible to produce. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has been a consistent and enthusiastic supporter of VIBE, funding the project from its inception and ensuring its ongoing implementation.

We hope you will find this report useful, and we welcome any feedback.

Sincerely,



Linda Trail
Managing Editor

BACKGROUND

Transition from Media Sustainability to Vibrant Information

From 2001 – 2019, IREX and USAID produced the [Media Sustainability Index](#) (MSI)¹ to measure five key pillars and objectives related to media sustainability: free speech, professional journalism, plurality of news sources, business management, and supporting institutions.

Over the past two decades there have been dramatic changes to the way information is produced, spread, and utilized. However, the growth of digital and social media has dramatically changed how information flows, including:

- Expansion of the volume of information and speed of global transmission (including misinformation and information intended to harm)
- Blurred lines between media producers and media consumers
- Rise of non-professional content producers (such as social media users, bloggers, and influencers)
- New challenges and opportunities in resourcing media production
- Diminishing trust in many forms of content and content producers
- New threats to individual privacy and security
- Increased need for media and digital literacy across all segments of society,
- New forms of censorship as well as new and evolving ways to circumvent censorship, and
- New methods for individuals, civil society, the private sector and corporations, and governments to utilize information for both productive and destructive means.

In recognition of these changes – as well as the way anti-democratic forces are utilizing those changes to intentionally spread disinformation - IREX undertook a multiple-year review of its approach to working with the information and media sectors, culminating in the [Vibrant Information Approach](#)². This outlines new challenges, needs, and



frameworks for thinking about information systems in the modern era. This new approach made clear that the MSI – while still effective in evaluating the structural underpinnings of the formal media sector – is limited in its ability to capture some of the more urgent, relevant, or timely aspects of how information is spread or utilized today.

Based on its Vibrant Information Approach, IREX built the **Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE)** - a new index to track the way information is produced, spread, consumed, and used in the modern era. VIBE was built to respond to lessons learned from many years of implementing the MSI, changes in the media and information spheres, and opportunities to lead the way in measuring and diagnosing the challenges and opportunities that modern media systems create. Through VIBE, IREX aims to capture a modern era when many people around the world are simultaneously producers, transmitters, consumers, and actors of the information that shapes their environments and their lives.

1 www.irex.org/msi

2 <https://www.irex.org/resource/vibrant-information-just-prosperous-and-inclusive-societies>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2021 Europe & Eurasia Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) publication stands on the shoulders of IREX's almost 20 years of the Media Sustainability Index (MSI), which was last published in 2019. Through VIBE, IREX aims to capture a modern era where many people around the world are simultaneously producers, transmitters, consumers, and actors of the information that shapes their environments and their lives.

The VIBE Methodology and Its Development

At the start of the VIBE project, IREX engaged with USAID in an extensive methodology development process, the result of which is this VIBE 2021 publication. A senior methodology consultant with an extensive background in monitoring and evaluation led the development process, which involved expertise from USAID in Washington and overseas, and peer reviews by U.S. and European media and information experts.

Building on the MSI's strengths, the VIBE methodology relies primarily on information from country experts who complete a VIBE questionnaire, provide scores for 20 indicators¹ (which are averages of panelists' scores

on supporting sub-indicators), and evidence to justify their scores; they then contribute to a panel discussion led by a moderator. In light of the global pandemic of 2020 and 2021, almost all panel discussions were held online.

In a new feature of VIBE, IREX introduced a strength of evidence (SoE) rating to each indicator, which is meant to increase transparency about the potential subjectivity of some indicators (and especially indicators measuring newer concepts or newer sources of information). For each expert-opinion indicator, moderators assigned a SoE rating—Weak, Somewhat Weak, Somewhat Strong, or Strong—based on the quality of



¹ More information about the VIBE methodology, including its indicators, can be found in the VIBE methodology section below.

evidence informing each indicator, the confidence of panelists in their scores, and the level of consensus across the panel. These indicator-level SoE ratings were averaged to determine the SoE rating at the principle level.

VIBE Scoring

With the VIBE methodology, IREX revised the scoring scale. While the MSI used a 0 – 4 scale signifying four levels of sustainability, IREX moved VIBE to a 10-point scale (0-40) to more accurately and clearly represent country progression or regression at the indicator- and principle-level scores. Similarly, while the MSI used descriptive classifications for overall country scores and objective scores (i.e., unsustainable/anti-free press, unsustainable/mixed system, near sustainability and sustainable), the VIBE scoring scale and descriptive classification has also evolved: Not Vibrant/Failing Information System (0-10), Slightly Vibrant/Weak Information System (11-20), Somewhat Vibrant/Stable Information System (21-30), and Highly Vibrant/Thriving Information System (31-40). Summary descriptive classifications are available in the methodology section below.

Panelist Scores. At the country level, the 13 country scores were almost evenly divided into two VIBE classifications: Somewhat Vibrant (Kosovo, Armenia, Moldova, Albania, Ukraine, North Macedonia, and Montenegro) and Slightly Vibrant (Russia, Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Belarus², Serbia, and Azerbaijan). Kosovo had the highest overall score of 24, followed closely by Armenia and Moldova with scores of 23 each. Azerbaijan received the lowest score of 11 putting it at the absolute bottom of the range for the Slightly Vibrant classification, while Belarus and Serbia both received scores of 15.

IREX notes that in more repressive country environments, such as Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Russia, there are fully independent vibrant media in exile. VIBE scores also take into account access to those independent media operating in exile from Belarus to Azerbaijan to Russia. IREX further notes that although media operating within the

borders of these countries may be fully under the control or influence of the government, typically intellectual elites get news and information from exiled media outlets that are beyond reach of government controlling organs.

Delving into the principles, Principle 1 (Information Quality) generally had lower averaged scores across the countries, driven in large part both by insufficient resources for content production and harmful information. The financial situation for producing media and information content in the VIBE cadre of countries continues to be a widespread issue, with long-standing issues such as declining advertising revenue exacerbated by the global economic downturn resulting from the global pandemic. Moreover, the region is awash in mal-information and hate speech, which led to lower scores from panelists across countries.

In Principle 2 (Multiple Channels), scores were mostly higher than in the other three VIBE principles. Armenia, Kosovo, Ukraine, and North Macedonia all received scores of 25 and above, buoyed by more positive assessments of adequate access to information and appropriate channels for government information. Scores related to the independence of information channels were lower, as many media outlets and other sources of information are politically or financially tied—or both—to private business interests close to the government, politicians, or actors within the government.

Compared with the other principle-level scores in this study, Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) scores were, on average, the lowest, with Kosovo and Moldova receiving the highest scores (23 each) and Azerbaijan and Belarus receiving the lowest (10 and 14, respectively). At the indicator level, the lowest scores in this principle tended to center around media literacy. Broadly, while panelists noted that international donors are supporting some media literacy initiatives, efforts of national governments to strengthen media and information literacy efforts across the region are uneven at best and non-existent at worst, with a few instances of media literacy classes offered in schools and even fewer efforts on adult media literacy. Media and information producer's engagement with their audiences also received low scores, with panelists observing that many media outlets do not have resources

² The Belarus panelists for VIBE noted that it was difficult for them to assess the country's pre-election period, which was relatively unrestricted, as it has been overshadowed by the brutal repressions and censorship that started in August 2020.

to invest in market and audience research.

In Principle 4 (Transformative Action), higher panelist scores centered around civil society's use of information to improve communities. For example, in Ukraine the panel noted that CSOs provide more balanced and reliable information, conduct high quality research, and openly share results of their studies; media often rely on them for expert commentary. However, lower scores in this principle were around information supporting good governance and democratic rights, highlighting that government responses to corruption, along with human and civil rights violations, tend to be weak. Additionally, panelists across the region noted that the polluted information space adversely impacts free and fair elections at the national and local levels.

SoE Ratings. As noted earlier, an innovation of VIBE was to introduce SoE ratings meant to identify areas that donors or researchers may want to consider for further research and to increase transparency about the potential subjectivity of some indicators (especially indicators measuring newer concepts or newer sources of information.)

For the 2021 study, the highest average SoE ratings tended to be for VIBE indicators in Principles 1 and 2, which received mostly “strong” and “somewhat strong” average ratings; there were somewhat lower average SoE ratings related to indicators in Principles 3 and 4, which received almost all “somewhat strong” ratings. Since these indicators supporting Principles 3 and 4 delve into newer and emerging concepts, it is not wholly surprising to observe these trends.

The SoE ratings in the study pointed to the least panelist confidence or lack of available data for the indicator around community media, which received an average rating across all countries of “somewhat weak.” While community media does exist in the region, it is a weaker element of media ecosystems in Europe and Eurasia in comparison with other regions such as Africa and Asia.

What is Inside the 2021 VIBE Country Chapters

IREX has analyzed major themes that emerged across the country chapters, which cover events and developments in calendar year 2020. Panelists from many VIBE countries independently pointed

to the disastrous effects of the COVID-19 global pandemic: It further undermined the media's ability to be financially independent, it restricted access to information as governments withheld facts and data related to the pandemic, and it created weeds of mis-information, dis-information, and mal-information that polluted information about the pandemic with conspiracy theories and rumors.

While our discussion below will concentrate on the concerns mentioned above, several other issues surfaced with the 2021 VIBE study: hate speech on social media, lack of government accountability, and inadequate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in media coverage. Various chapter authors provided some insight into the effects of these ongoing issues.

- Hate speech on social media: A continued problem throughout the region, social networks and user comments on news are breeding grounds for hate speech instead of healthy debate. Moreover, there are typically few or no mechanisms to combat it, as media consumers rarely report or protest hate speech. The panel in Bosnia and Herzegovina additionally noted that media newsrooms usually do not have the human or financial resources to moderate user-generated content on their articles and on their social media accounts, which are often full of hate speech and other derogatory language.
- Lack of government accountability: Coverage of corruption, human rights violations, and attacks on civil rights usually does not result in changes in governmental practice or broader reforms. While the panel in North Macedonia noted that the government takes action in the face of overwhelming public opinion and pressure from the media, elsewhere in the region, as a panelist in Serbia stated, “The government defends its own at all costs.” In contrast, the panel in Kosovo had a shared belief that high quality information can prevent or reduce the severity of corruption among officials, but the justice system is slow to act.
- Inadequate DEI in media coverage: Throughout the region, panelists generally agreed that media do not properly cover the experiences and viewpoints of people from various ethnic, racial, and religious

communities, nor are LGBTQ population and issues typically and responsibly covered in mainstream media. The Kosovo panel noted that the country's mainstream media are not inclusive of ethnic or LGBTQ groups but that these groups have some alternative platforms to express their views and opinions, whether as individuals or communities. In Ukraine, media do not actively exclude marginalized groups, but inclusivity and attention to their concerns is low. For its part, the Montenegrin media sector does not ignore any ethnic or national community, although there are always complaints about insufficient public representation (e.g., Roma population, LGBTQ community). In Azerbaijan, on the other hand, national TV channels and media will almost never report about LGBTQ or feminist protests or events since they are seen as a threat to the political system.

As with the MSI, IREX has compiled a summary of panelist and chapter author recommendations organized into several themes: 1) Support fact-checking efforts and organizations; 2) Improve media literacy efforts in schools and in the adult population; 3) Advance efforts to ensure transparency in media ownership; 4) Strengthen efforts to improve content; and 5) Help media develop models for alternative sources of revenue.

IREX hopes these will be useful to VIBE users.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The 2020 global pandemic has been a seismic event around the world in all aspects of life. It also has had a profound effect on the media and information system in Europe and Eurasia in notable ways including but not limited to: (1) In the region's formal media sector, outlets suffered financial setbacks as economies slowed and advertisers cutback or suspended their buys; (2) governments throughout the region restricted and withheld information from the media and the public about the pandemic and the governments' responses to it; and (3) rumors, conspiracy theories, and other forms of mis-information, dis-information, and mal-information related to the virus and its origins ran rampant.

As the pandemic was gathering force in Spring 2020, the media financial

ecosystem throughout Europe and Eurasia was already fragile. With some countries having never fully recovered from the 2008-2009 global financial crisis, the sector throughout the region has struggled for some years with alternative forms of revenue generation. Online and social media had already overturned traditional advertising-based models. Moreover, international social media platforms throughout the region have steadily drawn-off advertising revenue from the local market and away from national and local media outlets.

In addition, what advertising remains available on the local markets has become more and more scarce and politicized. For example, the Serbia chapter noted that while there is not yet any specific research that has studied the effect of the COVID global pandemic on Serbia, data presented in a USAID-supported forum in Fall 2020 showed that the advertising market in the first part of 2020 contracted. The increased scarcity of advertising revenue has been compounded by the politicization of it. Serbia also noted that when the government changes, leading advertisers also shift their ad placement strategy. A Montenegrin panelist observed that, "Clientelism is very much present in media advertising operations." In more repressive environments, such as Azerbaijan, the chapter noted that criticism and advertising are mutually exclusive: The more government criticism that is published, the less advertising revenue that is received.

Taken as a whole, these factors have left media even more susceptible to a "benefactor" model of financial support or investment—with politicians and businesses financially supporting media and either overtly or covertly influencing editorial content—leading to a fragmenting media market, spurring self-censorship, and further contributing to a decline in ethical standards. The Armenia chapter observed that sufficiently funded media outlets in the country are usually not editorially independent, as their funders' political agendas drive their involvement in these media.

While the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to be studied and written about for years to come, its more immediate expected impact is to further weaken the precarious financial situation of media outlets throughout the region. With a few exceptions—including

Serbia and Belarus, where some media outlets invest in crowdfunding, membership models, and subscriptions to generate revenue—many media outlets in countries throughout the region are not experimenting with alternative ways to create income.

In addition, in concert with a broad global backlash against democracy, governments throughout the region have leveraged the myriad crises of the pandemic to withhold information from the media and from the public.

Throughout the VIBE countries, panelists noted measures their governments took to squelch public health information and data. From media coverage in Serbia—where the Balkan Investigative Regional Network (BIRN) discovered that Serbian authorities hid data on the real number of people infected with the virus—to restrictions Armenia’s government enacted to control and regulate information chaos, panelists from across the region chronicled attempts to prevent media and journalists from accessing information.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, panelists observed that governments and public institutions held back information from journalists and the public over issues such as testing procedures and distribution of medical equipment. The Moldova panel discussed that throughout 2020, the public’s right to access information had been limited, while the Georgia panel noted that the country’s leading public health authorities froze out media outlets for asking critical questions and journalists’ already limited access to public information further deteriorated.

In Russia, restrictions imposed to control COVID-19 gave the authorities an excuse to limit public oversight of the constitutional vote—which proposed changes to term limits for the president, expanded parliamentary powers over forming the new government, and solidified the primacy of Russian law over international law, among other things. The government leveraged these same COVID-19 restrictions to restrict oversight of the regional and local elections held in September 2020.

As many governments throughout the region restricted or blocked information about the virus from media and the public, rumors, conspiracy theories, and mal-information spread.

For example, in Moldova the panelists observed that people repeatedly turned to bad information about COVID-19 while ignoring health and safety recommendations. One panelist summed up the situation by commenting, “...[The] authorities failed to provide complete and consistent information and created a vacuum that various actors, both foreign and domestic, rushed to fill with false information.” The same panelist identified Russian media in particular as being “actively involved in spreading conspiracy theories about the use of the virus in U.S.-funded secret laboratories and alarmist statements that the EU has lost the fight against the pandemic.”

While pandemic conspiracy theorists got airtime on prime-time television in Kosovo, the North Macedonian panel noted that despite the lack of formal data, two fact-checking operations in the country cited that approximately two-thirds of the articles they debunked in 2020 were related to COVID-19. Some of the most prominent sustained disinformation efforts tied to the COVID-19 pandemic, the panelists noted, were localized versions of global conspiracy theories, such as Bill Gates’s alleged plan to implant microchips in people through COVID-19 vaccines and the role of 5G technology as a source and vector for the virus to spread.

Similar rumors were present in Ukraine with a 2020 media consumption survey citing that more than 80 percent of respondents had heard false COVID-19 rumors—that coronavirus is a bioweapon made in a Chinese or a US laboratory, invented by the media, or caused by the launch of 5G Internet technology. Furthermore, one-third of the respondents said they believed these rumors, while more than one-third indicated that they had shared this disinformation with others.

The Kosovo panel noted that in 2020 most of the false published information was related to COVID-19’s causes and treatment and that the public broadcaster Radio Television of Kosovo (RTK) reported from an anonymous source that patient zero in Kosovo was a Russian UN employee working in northern Kosovo (The UN mission in Kosovo denied this allegation). The Kosovo chapter also cited a survey that indicated around 80 percent of citizens believed a number of falsehoods related to COVID-19—including that the Chinese government created it and that it

was a biological weapon from the United States.

Recommendations

IREX asked panelists and chapter authors to provide specific recommendations on ways to improve the performance of their media and information sectors. Below are some of this year's recommendations based on a few of the recurring themes, with a designation of the country of origin. Many of these have more universal application, however.

Support fact-checking efforts and organizations:

Serbia: Support the establishment of multiple fact checking portals, especially in local and regional areas.

Armenia: Set-up and provide long-term support of fact-checking platforms to combat misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Journalists and media outlets should be trained to fact-check information, including items coming from news agencies, to provide in-depth, constructive, and professional reporting and to understand and react to hate speech.

North Macedonia: Fact-checking and debunking organizations need to produce data and statistics, so that the public is informed which media outlets are the most frequent offenders in terms of dissemination of disinformation or hate-speech. Media need to invest more – on their own or as joint venture – in pre-publication fact-checking operations, as few media have the capacity and resources to invest in in-house fact-checking departments.

Improve media literacy efforts in schools and in the adult population:

Serbia: Introduce media literacy programs that would improve thematic diversify of media content. Introduce tailored media literacy programs that target marginalized groups and older populations.

Armenia: Media literacy, digital security, media hygiene, and digital hygiene are pressing issues today in Armenia. Trainings, both formal and

informal, integration into curricula at both school and university levels is an absolute urgency. The process needs to be initiated and expedited as soon as possible.

Kosovo: Media literacy programs and trainings should also target ordinary media users, instead of media professionals.

Montenegro: There is a general observation that the level of media literacy in Montenegro is insufficient, which allows a negative impact of propaganda, fake news and disinformation. Therefore, it is necessary to implement media literacy in the education system and at the same time encourage responsible public campaigns in order to promote media literacy.

Albania: Media literacy initiatives should have a multi-stakeholder approach, including formal, non-formal, and informal education, involving government and public institutions, civil society representatives, media and other relevant businesses, etc.

Georgia: There should be more rigorous work towards improving media literacy in the country, focusing on youth especially.

Advance efforts to ensure transparency in media ownership:

Armenia: Transparency of media ownership is still a pressing issue in the country; therefore, support for amendments to the Law on Mass Media—or, instead, drafting and adopting a new Law on Mass Media—is necessary to address the issue.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Support for the government to adopt legislation on the transparency of media ownership and media concentration to include all types of media, including online, and all media-related companies.

Moldova: The transparency of mass media funding sources should be promoted as an important factor of securing mass media credibility.

Ukraine: Panelists called for support for provisions allowing the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Council to investigate ownership, plus amendments to the current laws on funding transparency.

Strengthen efforts to improve content:

Armenia: Grants/competitions for investigative journalism, niche reporting on social, financial health, and environmental reporting.

Montenegro: Encourage media companies to invest resources to stimulate investigative and specialized journalism, which is a guarantee for strengthening the reputation and prestige of the journalism profession.

Ukraine: Conduct trainings for journalists in medical/health care, energy and other complicated topics, so that they are better aware of subject matters and do not spread their own conjectures.

Russia: Access to capacity building programs for journalists and content producers that are based on principles of fair and fact-based reporting.

Albania: Training both on basic professional skills, and other topics related to digitalization and technical developments would be beneficial for journalists.

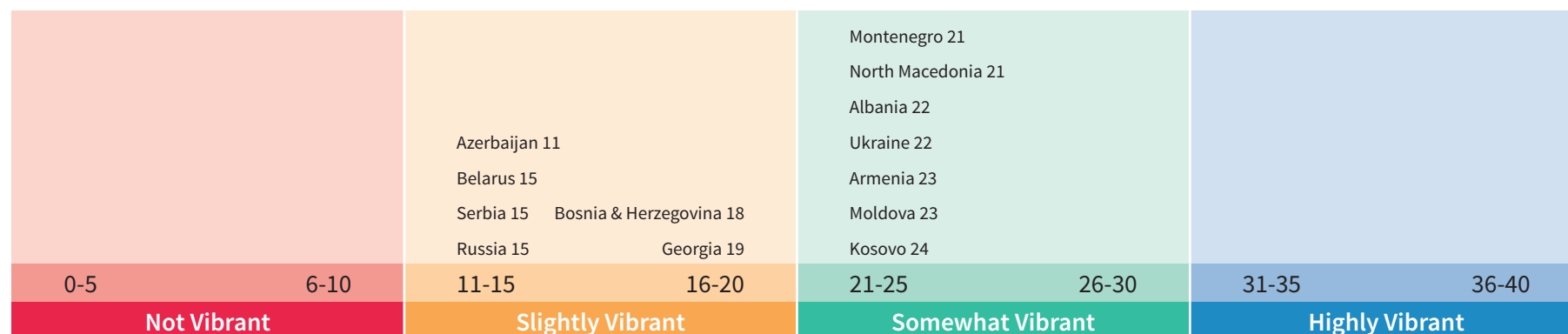
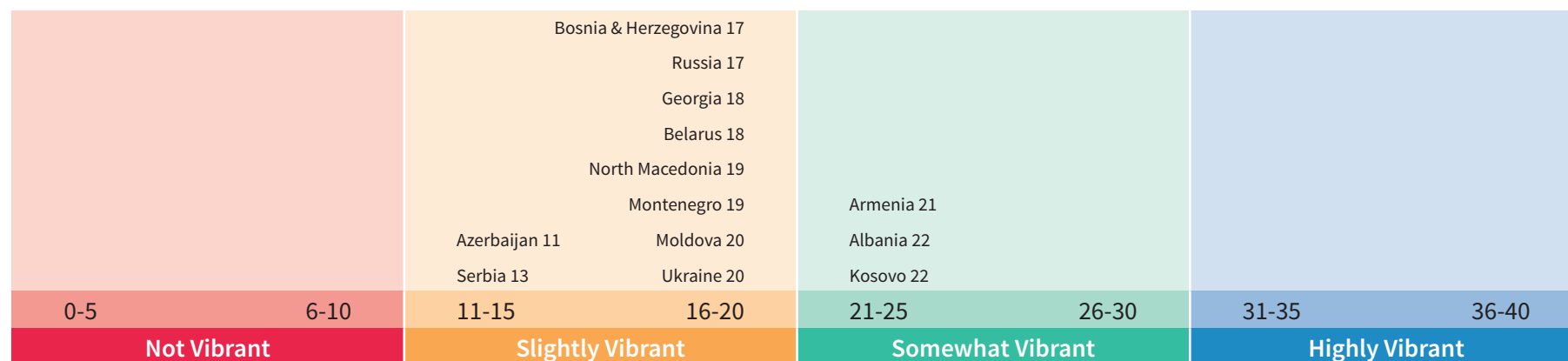
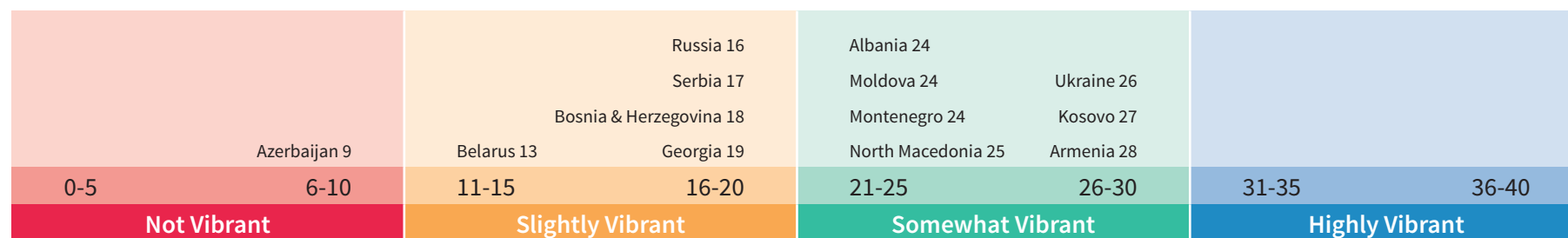
Help media develop models for alternative sources of revenue:

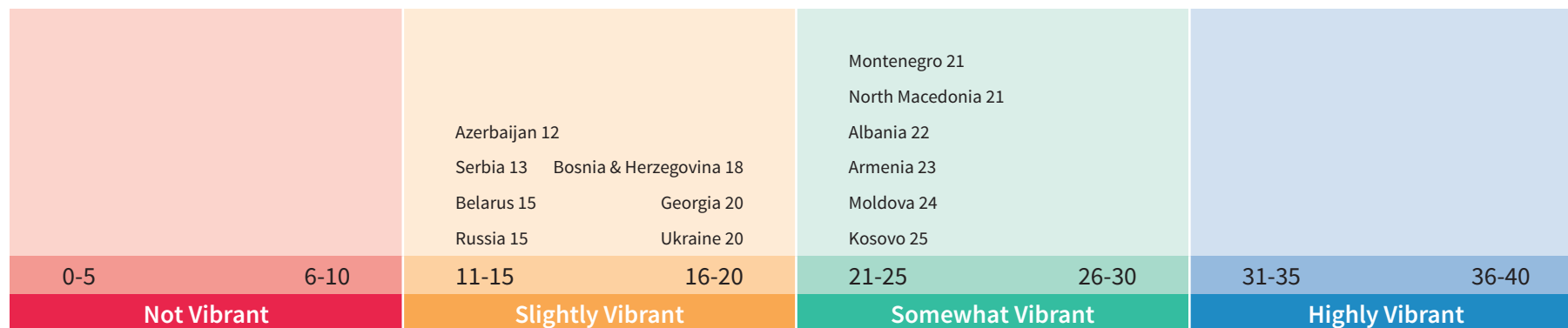
Armenia: Help outlets monetize their content, exposing them to modern tools and technology to assist them in their efforts to reach financial sustainability and independence.

Belarus: Watch for trends in financial viability and innovative approaches. While being constrained by the state, Belarus media outlets and their readers have developed web and media literacy skills. This may result in the sector finding new innovative ways for audience engagement and funding, especially in light of the narrowing space for foreign funding (e.g. due to the discussed introduction of the “foreign agent” status for media).

Russia: Access to programs building independent content producers’ capacity to work with new sources of revenue, such as the use of crowdfunding models.

Azerbaijan: Access to independent financial resources can also bring professionalism and more security to media.

VIBE 2021: Overall Average Scores**VIBE 2021: Information Quality****VIBE 2021: Multiple Channels**

VIBE 2021: Information Consumption and Engagement**VIBE 2021: Transformative Action**

METHODOLOGY

The emergence of digital and social media has fundamentally disrupted the traditional media model. Today people are simultaneously producers, transmitters, consumers, and users of information. To capture a vastly changed and fluid media environment, IREX and USAID developed the **Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE)** to better describe and measure the way information is produced and utilized, thus assessing how vibrant countries' information systems are in the modern age.

In a vibrant information system, quality information is widely available, and the vast majority of information is editorially independent, based on facts, and not intended to harm. Sufficient resources for diverse and inclusive content production should exist. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; have the ability to recognize and reject misinformation; and can make informed choices on the types of information they consume. People use quality information to inform their actions, improve their communities, and weigh in on public policy decisions. Building off almost two decades of experience with the **Media Sustainability Index**, VIBE looks at **four principles** of information vibrancy:

1) Information Quality: How information is produced by both professional and nonprofessional producers. This includes content quality, content diversity, and economic resources.

2) Multiple Channels – How Information Flows: How information is transmitted or spread by both formal and informal information channels. This includes the legal framework for free speech, protection of journalists, and access to diverse channels and types of information.



3) Information Consumption and Engagement: How information is consumed by users. This includes looking at freedom of expression, media and information literacy, digital privacy and security, the relevance of information to consumers, and public trust in media and information.

4) Transformative Action - How Information Drives Behavior: How information is used and put into action. This includes how governments, the private sector, and civil society use information to inform decisions and actions; whether information is spread across ideological lines; and whether individuals or groups feel empowered to use information to enact change.

By helping implementers, donors, policymakers, and partner governments improve the resilience and integrity of information systems in developing countries, VIBE aims to ensure that citizens, civil society, and governments have the information they need to increase governments' capacity and commitment to meeting the economic, social, and democratic needs of their people. It is an ideal tool for tracking national and regional information trends over time and informing global understanding of the way information is produced, shared, consumed, and utilized in the digital age.

Local Panels for Expert Assessment

VIBE aims to describe entire countries' information systems by drawing together experts from the country's media outlets, NGOs, professional associations, polling firms, and academic institutions to participate in panel discussions. This may include editors, reporters, media managers or owners, advertising and marketing specialists, pollsters, lawyers, professors or teachers, or human rights observers. Prior to the panel discussion, Panelists will each complete a VIBE questionnaire made up of **20 indicators (5 per principle)** that capture the most important elements of the four VIBE principles (for more details see **Scoring System** below).

Each panel of up to 15 panelists per country will be conducted by a moderator who will themselves be experts in the media and information

landscape of the country. VIBE moderators will be responsible for ensuring panels include representatives from various types of media, the capital city, and other geographic regions, and that they reflect gender, ethnic, and religious diversity as appropriate. In addition, IREX encourages moderators to select panelists with varying ideological backgrounds, to minimize the chance that only certain political or social views are captured. For consistency from year to year, at least half of the previous year's participants will be included on the following year's panel.

In some cases where conditions on the ground are such that panelists might suffer legal retribution or physical threats as a result of their participation, IREX will allow some or all of the panelists and the moderator to remain anonymous. In severe situations, IREX does not engage panelists as such; rather the study is conducted through research and interviews with those knowledgeable of the media situation in that country. Such cases are appropriately noted in relevant chapters.

VIBE questionnaires are written in a way that explicitly asks for evidence for each indicator. Panelists are encouraged to consider specific laws or policies, examples from media sources, recent events or developments, research data, personal experiences, or observations of the work of colleagues for each indicator. Based on this evidence and the level of consensus achieved in panel discussions, moderators will assign a **Strength of Evidence (SoE)** score to each indicator (see more details below).

To ensure consistency across country scores, IREX's managing editor reviews, analyzes, and finalizes scores for each country. If the managing editor has concerns about the validity or comparability of indicator scores, she or he may review the narrative chapters to see if evidence is provided to support the scores, modify the scores, or remove extreme outlier scores that vary significantly from the average score.

Scoring System

Each indicator is broken into clear sub-indicators, which panelists will score individually on the VIBE scale. Sub-indicators will be averaged to make the indicator score.

Sub-indicators will be scored using the following scale (0-40):

0 – Disagree

10 – Agree in a few cases but mostly disagree. For example, it may be true for only a minority of content, content-producers, or parts of the country.

20 – Agree in some cases but not others. For example, it may be the case this is true for most professional content but not true for most non-professional content. Or it may be true in some parts of the country but not others.

30 – Agree in most cases. This is the norm, although it may not be true for certain content, content-producers, or parts of the country.

40 – Agree.

N/A - Not Applicable. This will be used for any sub-indicator where a panelist feels the specific concept being assessed is not applicable or relevant to the country.

DK – Don't Know. I do not have sufficient information to answer this at this point. This should be used in cases where panelists do not feel they have adequate information or evidence to assign a score.

Panelists will be allowed to use increments of 5 if they feel the most accurate response is between two of the above options (i.e., scores of 5, 15, 25, or 35). Principle scores are calculated using a straight average of the five expert-opinion indicator scores. Country scores will be calculated as a straight average of the four principle-level Indicators. When a panelist replies N/A or DK on a sub-indicator, that sub-indicator is dropped from both the numerator and denominator for averaging.

The scores will be interpreted per the following categories:

	Principle 1: Information Quality	Principle 2: Multiple Channels	Principle 3: Consumption & Engagement	Principle 4: Transformative Action	Country
Highly Vibrant (31-40)	There is quality information on a variety of topics and geographies available. The norm for information is that it is based on facts and not intended to harm.	People have rights to information and adequate access to channels of information. There are diverse channels for information flow, and most information channels are independent.	People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools. They have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.	Information producers and distribution channels enable and encourage information sharing across ideological lines. Individuals use quality information to inform their actions. Information supports good governance and democratic rights.	Quality information is widely available in this country. People have the rights, means, and capacity to access a wide range of information; they recognize and reject misinformation.
Somewhat Vibrant (21-30)	There is quality information on some topics and geographies available. Most information is based on facts and not intended to harm, although misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech do have some influence on public discourse.	Most people have rights to information and adequate access to channels of information, although some may be excluded due to economic means or social norms. There are diverse channels for information flow, and most information channels are independent.	Although there are privacy protections and security tools available, only some people actually use them. Some people have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate, whereas others do not.	Information producers and distribution channels enable information sharing across ideological lines but not actively encourage it. Individuals sometimes use quality information to inform their actions. Information sometimes supports good governance and democratic rights.	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.

	Principle 1: Information Quality	Principle 2: Multiple Channels	Principle 3: Consumption & Engagement	Principle 4: Transformative Action	Country
Slightly Vibrant (11-20)	There is quality information on a few topics and geographies available, but many topics or geographies are not covered. Some information is based on facts and not intended to harm, but misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech have significant influence on public discourse.	Many people have either limited rights to information or inadequate access to channels of information. Channels for government information are limited. There are only a few channels for information flow, and many of these channels are not editorially independent from their owners or funders.	Relatively few people are able to use privacy protections and security tools. Relatively few people have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate. Relatively few people engage productively with the information that is available to them.	Information producers and distribution channels do not enable information sharing across ideological lines but also do not actively prevent it. Government occasionally uses quality information to make public policy decisions. However, this is not the norm.	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, mal-information, and hate speech in circulation, and it does influence public discourse. Most people do not recognize or reject misinformation.
Not At All Vibrant (0-10)	There is limited information available and/or it only covers a few topics or geographies. Misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech are widespread and have a significant influence on public discourse. There are limited resources for content production, and only the views and experiences of the dominant few are shared through media.	People do not have rights to information and/or do not have adequate access to channels of information. There are few channels for any information, including government information. The channels of information that do exist are generally not independent.	People cannot safely use the internet due to surveillance. They do not have the necessary skills or tools needed to be media literate. Media and information producers rarely or never engage with their audience or work to build trust.	Information producers and distribution channels discourage information sharing across ideological lines. Individuals cannot or do not use quality information to inform their actions. Information does not support good governance and democratic rights.	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.

Strength of Evidence (SoE) Score

The **Strength of Evidence** rating is meant to identify areas where further research is needed and to increase transparency about the potential subjectivity of some indicators. For each indicator, moderators will assign a Strength of Evidence rating - Weak, Somewhat weak, Somewhat strong, or Strong - based on the quality of evidence informing each indicator, the confidence of panelists in their scores, the number of N/As or DKs among panelists' scores, and the level of consensus across the panel. A panelist's score that varies by more than 15 points above or below the average indicator score may be removed.

Strong: There is a great deal of evidence providing a strong case for scoring this indicator. Panelists are able to provide a great deal of timely, reliable, and comprehensive evidence to justify their scores (through their questionnaires or panel discussions), and there is a high degree of consensus on the score across panelists. There are no (or almost no) N/A or DK sub-indicators among panelists.

Somewhat strong: There is some evidence providing a somewhat strong case for scoring this indicator. Panelists are able to provide some timely and reliable evidence to justify their scores (through their questionnaires or panel discussions.) There is mostly consensus on the score across panelists for this indicator. There are a few N/A or DK sub-indicators among panelists.

Somewhat weak: Although there is some evidence providing a case for scoring this indicator, it is somewhat weak. Panelists are able to provide only limited timely and reliable evidence to justify their scores (through their questionnaires or panel discussions). There is limited consensus on the score across panelists. There are some N/A or DK sub-indicators among panelists.

Weak: Although there is some evidence providing a case for scoring this indicator, it is weak. Panelists are generally not able to provide timely and reliable evidence to justify their scores (through their questionnaires or panel discussions). There is little consensus on the score across panelists. There are many N/A or DK sub-indicators among panelists.

VIBE Indicators

Principle 1: Information Quality

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

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

Indicator 3: The norm for information is that it is **not intended to harm**. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.

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

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

Principle 2: Multiple Channels: How Information Flows

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

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

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

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

Indicator 10: Information channels are **independent**.

Principle 3: Information Consumption and Engagement

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

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

literate.

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

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

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

Principle 4: Transformative Action

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

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

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

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

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

The background of the image is a teal-colored topographic map. It features intricate white contour lines that represent elevation changes. Scattered across the map are small white symbols: squares, triangles, and circles, many of which are accompanied by numerical values such as 3891, 6723, 21486, 34866, and 36617. These symbols likely represent specific geographical points of interest or data markers.

SOUTHEAST EUROPE

ALBANIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 1



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

22

Albania's main challenge in 2020 was addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, naturally leaving aside other political topics and debates. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government passed a state-of-emergency act that, among other restrictions, banned public gatherings.

In March 2020, the Council of the European Union opened accession negotiations with Albania. Nevertheless, it introduced further conditionality by requiring additional institutional reforms, specifically judicial reform and ensuring the Constitutional Court is functioning, before Albania would be granted its first Inter-Governmental Conference, a key step in continuing the accession process. After numerous attempts and debates, the Constitutional Court became functional again at the end of 2020.

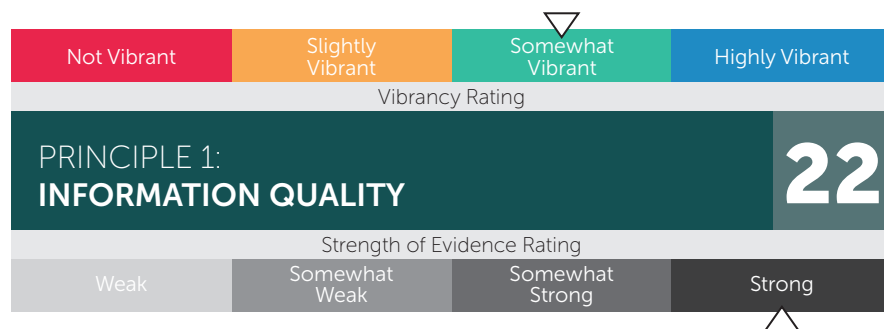
Following the establishment of the "Political Council," a cross-party platform for negotiations, the political parties ended the political stalemate on June 5, 2020, striking a deal for electoral reform. This agreement paved the road for the opposition to return to the electoral process. However, after achieving this agreement, the ruling majority approved some constitutional changes that affected the electoral system--including but not limited to gradual electronic identification of voters, and appointment of a deputy commissioner for elections--drawing strong criticism from the opposition.

In May 2020, the government demolished the National Theatre building in Tirana, an act that amassed a strong resistance from part of the community of artists, civil society, the opposition, and Tirana citizens. The demolition in the midst of a pandemic led to strong protests and was widely criticized abroad. In December, several hundred protesters clashed with police for several days after a police officer killed an unarmed civilian who had violated a COVID-19--related curfew.

On September 6, 2020, President Ilir Meta called parliamentary elections for April 25, 2021. Despite the pandemic, the imminent elections polarized the political situation even more, which was reflected in an extreme polarization and militant partisanship in most media outlets.

While Albania's media landscape enjoys a satisfactory infrastructure, fact-checking and verifying information, along with the quality of information, are not at the same level, leading to the spread of misinformation--especially in online media. The economic effects of the pandemic shrank the advertising market even more, leaving media outlets even more vulnerable to economic pressure and undermining the quality and independence of their reporting. While Albania's legislation generally guarantees the right to freedom of expression and freedom of media, in practice journalists are vulnerable and often resort to self-censorship.

There are multiple sources of information available, but problems with the quality and independence of information persists, while concentration of the media market has also further intensified. The level of media literacy skills among the population was assessed to be rather low, and direct engagement and responsiveness with their audiences was not ranked among the main priorities for Albanian media outlets. Although multiple channels of information exist in terms of access and technology, the information provided is rarely qualitative or independent. Professional and independent reporting lays mainly with media established by civil society organizations, which are not under political or economic influence, while the government's failure to use quality information in decision-making was another criticism voiced by the panel.



Although the infrastructure in place for producing quality information is satisfactory, the quality of information conveyed to the public is not necessarily high. Fact-checking and verification of sources is inadequate, and articles are often densely laced with politicians' statements presented without any further probing. Online media are especially problematic, given their tendency to run stories immediately without verifying their accuracy. In this context, and without any repercussions for the people driving the problem, misinformation flows freely. In general, journalists do not voluntarily engage in spreading disinformation or hate speech but sometimes fall prey due to professional neglect or external pressure. The panelists gave their highest scores to the indicator on inclusiveness and diversity of content, pointing to attempts to cover different groups and describing how new technology has also enabled vulnerable groups to establish their own media. On the other hand, the panelists gave their lowest scores to the indicator on the sufficiency of resources for content production. The pandemic shrank the advertising market even more, leaving media outlets more vulnerable to economic pressure and undermining the quality and independence of their reporting.

The panelists shared a generally unified opinion Indicator 1 (quality information on a variety of topics is available). They agreed that the infrastructure in place for producing news and information is very sound. In addition, there are a variety of institutions and organizations offering training for journalists and other content producers, although opportunities tend to be rather concentrated in the capital, Tirana, and might not extend to all parts of the country. At the same time, the

panelists heavily criticized the quality of information produced, and especially the decline of editorial independence in the news conveyed to the public. In general, the panelists agreed that editorial independence has weakened steadily in the past years. "The problem is in the treatment of news, as most of the media do not produce real content, do not verify sources, do not check the facts, and appear content to merely report statements of institutions and government officials," said Ornela Liperi, director of *Monitor*. One of the panelists also noted a growing phenomenon: rather than journalists reporting from the field, officials report on the events themselves, turning media into a mere conveyor belt. Furthermore, with the advent of the pandemic, another panelist noted that conspiracy theorists—previously just a peripheral presence in the media—now get airtime on prime-time television to spread disinformation.

The problem seems to be more acute with online media. As Anila Basha, founder of an online media outlet, said, "Online journalists are more prone to quick publication of news, and often rely on social networks or reports from citizens, while the importance of field reporters and verification of information has lost priority—weakening the quality of information." Furthermore, another panelist added, those journalists who behave unethically and unprofessionally are never punished.

The panelists were highly critical of the media's performance on the indicator that examines misinformation, noting that most media fail to offer independent and fact-based reporting. Apart from one fact-checking organization, there are no other websites or organizations that focus on accuracy of information.

Information Quality Indicators

- There is quality information on a variety of topics available.
- The norm for information is that it is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.
- The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.
- The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.
- Content production is sufficiently resourced.

One panelist mentioned the existence of donor-funded media that deliver qualitative investigative reporting, but it is unclear whether they will be sustainable if the support is cut.

Journalists noted that recent events, such as the deadly 2019 earthquake and the pandemic, fueled the spread of inaccurate information in the media. “Here we have a very dramatic and serious situation, dealing with an ecosystem flooded by disinformation, whether it is intentional or not. I believe we have reached a situation where the axiom of journalism—that the facts are sacred, whereas opinions are free—has flipped in Albania,” said Remzi Lani, director of the Albanian Media Institute. Other panelists also confirmed that misinformation and disinformation has become a norm in the country, and there are no professional consequences even when there are cases of inaccurate reporting from journalists.

Journalists do not deliberately aim to disinform or engage in hate speech, some panelists maintained, although the panel recognized cases of professional neglect or journalists bowing to pressure. However, one panelist noted that a few media outlets attempt to use information to blackmail certain businesses and face no professional consequences.

The panelists hesitated to assess the extent of the spreading of information and propaganda by foreign governments in Albanian media. Journalists on the panel admitted that their e-mail addresses are constantly filled with propaganda from several countries, though only a few of the messages eventually appear in the media. Compared with other countries, the influence of other states in Albanian media is much lower, they said. Although proxy news portals engage in the propaganda of countries such as Turkey, Iran, and China, a flagrant, coordinated effort in this regard is not highly visible.

The panelists differed on whether the content produced is sufficiently

inclusive and diverse. Some panelists noted that online media provide more opportunities for marginalized groups and specific minorities to launch their own media. “Now we also have some media for disabled people, and media in different languages for linguistic minorities,” said Aleksander Cipa, chair of the Union of Albanian journalists.

However, some panelists also noted a need for improvements related to representation. One noted that most media focus heavily on politics and rarely try to be more inclusive of different groups, while another emphasized the tendency to focus on celebrities rather than different vulnerable groups of the society. The panelists also disagreed somewhat on the representation of gender issues and on the presence of women in the newsroom. Although they emphasized that gender is not an issue in newsrooms and most journalists are, in fact, female, some panelists noted pointedly that few women hold leadership positions.

The advertising market in Albania remains relatively small to sustain the large number of media outlets present. According to data collected

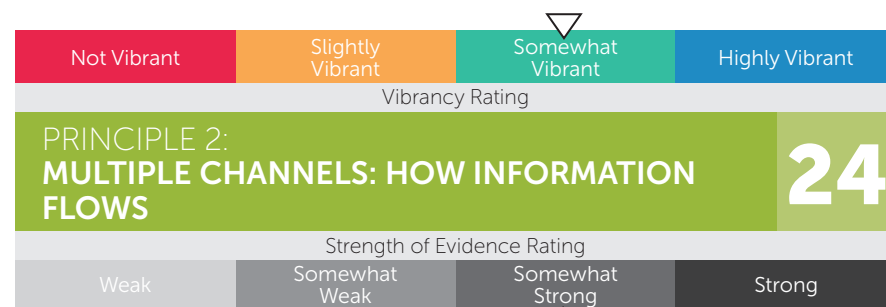
by *Monitor*, the market is estimated to be at about €35 million (\$42.8 million), with more than half going to the three national television stations. Liperi described a paradox in the market developments: “The pandemic drastically reduced marketing budgets of companies; at the same time, new online media pop up frequently, and also news television channels have started broadcasting, which would not make much sense.” The panelists agreed that advertising revenue for print media has

been reduced almost to zero, shifting mostly to online media and social networks. However, one panelist noted the need to also consider the investments that the main television stations have made in their online and social media teams. These investments constitute another source of income for these stations, though they are still quite low, considering the substantial budgets necessary for the operation of television stations. At the same time, the panelists noted the tendency for increased spending on social media over traditional media, especially from politicians on the

“The problem is in the treatment of news, as most of the media do not produce real content, do not verify sources, do not check the facts, and appear content to merely report statements of institutions and government officials,” said Liperi.

eve of electoral campaigns, given the attraction of the lower costs and the direct and targeted marketing opportunities.

The panelists expressed doubts on whether state advertising is still distributed to media outlets. While most recognize a significant reduction in public spending on advertising, they pointed out the phenomenon of state institutions and media partnering on specific projects. “Even though there is no longer state advertising, there are new methods in this respect, such as partnerships between state institutions and media; these are selective and spend public money, both in the central and local governments,” said Cipa. While the panelists had contrasting perspectives on whether these initiatives could be enough to distort the market, they agreed that the procedures of allocating the money are selective and not transparent.



The situation regarding the right to create, share, and consume information is complex. On one hand, the legislation generally guarantees these rights, but in practice, journalists in the field are vulnerable and often resort to self-censorship due to the dynamics within the Albanian media scene. The panelist gave the highest scores to the indicator gauging the accessibility of multiple sources of information, judging that there are numerous resources and that people are able and free to access and use these sources of information. Although the infrastructure for channels of government information is satisfactory, the implementation of the law on public information has worsened, and information provided by the government tends to be one-sided. Albania’s media landscape features an abundance of outlets, but they

tend to be heavily concentrated in certain sectors, especially television. The panelists gave their lowest scores and sharpest criticism to the independence of information channels. Faced with persistent pressure from politicians, companies, and media owners, editorial independence is extremely rare in traditional media, most often limited to donor-funded media better equipped to resist such influences.

Multiple Channels Indicators

- People have rights to create, share, and consume information.
- People have adequate access to channels of information.
- There are appropriate channels for government information.
- There are diverse channels for information flow.
- Information channels are independent.

Overall, the existing legislation guarantees freedom of expression and media freedom. The panelists called the parliament’s decision to pass regulation considered restrictive for online media at the end of 2019—against the opinion of the media community—a step backward, although, for now, the law is still under review. Even though journalists were not arrested or physically assaulted, they reported heightened levels of intimidation. Cipa noted that lawsuits against journalists at

the Court of Tirana multiplied steadily in 2020—a point that Aleksandra Bogdani, an investigative reporter for BIRN Albania, confirmed. “There is a series of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), against me and other journalists, from powerful individuals and companies engaged in public contracts with the state, who do not tolerate any probing or reporting from the media in this regard,” she said. Overall, the panelists agreed that political pressure exists, but they feel it is exerted through the owners, rather than applied directly to journalists. One panelist also mentioned cases of government officials being displeased by unfavorable reporting, depriving journalists of official information.

The panelists concluded that the situation is rather complex, ranging from a generally positive legal framework to the *de facto* vulnerability of journalists in the field. “There is no open censorship, but rather self-

censorship. There is also considerable pressure from media owners, politicians, and businesses, amounting to a serious trend that has worsened recently. At the same time, though the laws are considered good, the court's interpretations are not always favorable to the journalists, leaving us in a gray area, but the tendency seems to grow darker," said Lani.

With literally hundreds of television and radio stations and newspapers, and a boom in online media, Albanians have access to plentiful news sources. Albanians face no legal or technical hurdles in accessing the Internet, foreign media, or any other sources of information. The government does not block access to any online or traditional media. Internet penetration is constantly rising, along with people's use of social media—especially Facebook. The number of subscribers to Internet broadband connections has increased steadily in recent years. Overall, the panelists agreed that information sources are numerous and highly accessible.

People with hearing impairment also have more options now. "Public television and three other television stations have started broadcasting news for this group of people, which marks an improvement in the access offered in this respect," said Cipa.

The panelists considered the situation regarding government information channels rather complex. Albania has a strong public information law; however, the panelists agreed that the law's implementation has steadily worsened in the past few years. "We notice that in the period 2014–2021, the implementation of the law weakened, whereas there is a stronger tendency to control the information," said Lutfi Dervishi, a journalist with Albania's public broadcaster. The panelists agreed that rather than failing to reply altogether, official institutions tend to provide general information—which is typically not very valuable for specific reporting initiatives. "It is a very rare event to

receive the information you demand. Since the institutions have not faced any particular punishment from the respective commissioner, they do not feel the pressure to provide the information, often giving ridiculous excuses," said Bogdani.

The panelists had no positive feedback related to the role of spokespeople on the channels of information, either. They agreed that the main role of spokespeople is not providing information for the media and the public, but rather promoting public relations for the institutions they represent. "Spokespeople just convey propaganda and make sure the media receive and distribute it. During the pandemic, especially,

in some cases there has been a total blackout of information from particular spokespeople," Bogdani added.

In general, media can be established freely in Albania. Most of the licenses for audiovisual media had already been allocated, according to the panelists; hence, the transparency or fairness of the process is no longer a heavily contended issue. Efforts to prevent ownership concentration regressed notably after a 2016 amendment removed ownership

limitations for national licenses of audiovisual media. As a result, the panelists underscored the increasingly strong monopolistic tendency of some media players in the market. "The regulation on media ownership concentration has been lethally wounded by the decision of the Constitutional Court, leading to a *de facto* concentration of the television market in the hands of a small group of families," Dervishi explained. Regarding the transparency of ownership, the public can consult an open database of business companies to determine media ownership, but the transparency of online media remains problematic. At the same time, the transparency of funding for media outlets is even more problematic.

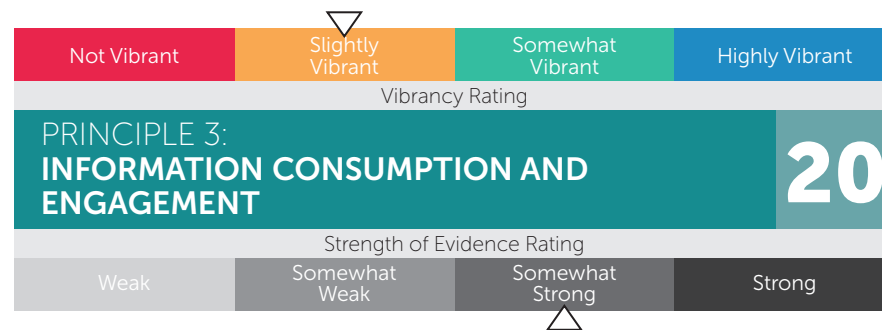
The panelists shared a more positive opinion on the current situation of the public service broadcaster, highlighting improvement in the offerings of educational and entertaining programs, and more important, a

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stronger commitment to neutrality in its news programs. In addition, there were no signs of any discrimination in the services of Internet providers.

Media are largely and significantly affected by the interests of owners and by their financial sources, mainly advertising. Economic interests heavily impact editorial independence, and the panelists emphasized that a real division between the newsroom and marketing department is missing. Editorial independence slipped even further out of reach during the pandemic. “Given the marked absence of advertising, media sought alliances with big business, such as pharmaceutical companies. Even though in Albania there are numerous complaints on the quality of medications in the market or the level of reimbursement, you never read about these in the media, because they are our advertisers, and you cannot publish bad press about them,” said Basha. Overall, the panelists agreed that the lack of advertising revenue and the small media market leaves media wide open to the influence of their owners, compromising their editorial independence.

On the other hand, the public media’s financing is guaranteed by law. “However, financing of the public media should not be confused with the license fee, which is paid by Albanian households. While the funds have gone mainly toward investing in technology and broadcasting, the funds for the production of programs are far from adequate,” said Dervishi. The public broadcaster does not seem to show preferential access to certain information or government sources. Regulatory authorities are elected through the parliament. Thus, their election, to some degree, is politically influenced. However, since most licenses have been awarded, there is no current debate or controversy on this process at the moment.



The population is generally not highly prepared to assess the quality and truthfulness of information and media consumption. The panelists heavily criticized the population’s media literacy skills, giving their lowest scores to the related indicator and flagging it as both an urgent need and a challenge for the moment. Additionally, while there are laws and regulations in place regarding privacy protection and security tools, only a small subset of the population seems to be well versed in their protections. Although media consumption is relatively high, and interactive formats in traditional media, online media, and especially social networks are available and used, they also tend to reinforce the existing communication bubbles. On the other hand, Albanian media’s main priorities do not include responsiveness to audience needs and efforts to build relationships rooted in trust with the public. Although community media remain underdeveloped, the panelists gave this indicator their highest scores for this section, mainly due to the opportunities these media represent for marginalized and vulnerable groups and minority groups in general.

Albanian legislation does protect digital security and data privacy, through several laws and safeguarding institutions. Media companies also take steps to protect themselves from digital attacks and other similar interventions, through the services offered by specialized companies. However, citizens’ awareness on these risks and the measures they can take for protection seems rather low. Basha cited a recent case involving many reports of citizens claiming their phone data had been hacked through WhatsApp, indicating the population’s lack of savvy in this respect. “We have laws that seem to reflect high standards,

but no one seems to have educated the public, which remains largely unaware in this regard—and I must say that even we, as organizations, have not started to take these matters seriously yet,” said Lani.

Media and information literacy fall outside the scope of government policies. The educational curricula also fail to cover these concepts specifically, although certain subjects, such as civics, Albanian language and literature, and ICT, address some related elements. Most of the trainings and other initiatives in this field originated from civil society, including the Albanian Media Institute, which is currently working with educational institutions to draft pre-university curricula, expected to be piloted in some schools next year. “This has not been part of the ministry’s priorities, but they welcomed the idea and have shown goodwill to test this initiative,” Lani commented. However, the panelists agreed that the outlook for improving the population’s media literacy skills looks poor, and there are no data on current use of fact-checking or investigative websites, or on overall knowledge and appreciation of professional reporting traits. “Media literacy remains one of the most formidable challenges for the country’s future. People do not seem capable of differentiating between what they read on Facebook and what they read from a professional team of journalists,” said Dervishi. Open Society Institute Sofia’s 2021 Media and Information Literacy Index ranked Albania’s preparedness in this field 33 among 35 states in Europe, indicating the citizens’ poor awareness of the concepts and skills of media literacy.

There are no data on the actual use of the right to information by journalists or by the population in general. The right to free expression is generally exercised by the population in media or other public forums. Many television and radio programs provide opportunities for the public to interact with their platforms by phone or through their social media profiles. The regulation on public consultation requires public sessions with stakeholders before certain laws can be approved, but some panelists said these are only a formality and do not always lead to

meaningful reflection on the draft regulation.

The panelists were especially critical of the quality and level of exchange and debate on online media and social networks. “People view digital space, unfortunately, as a platform for venting, be it in online media, social networks, or even more professional media,” Dervishi said. Another panelist noted that complaints by citizens to institutions such as the People’s Advocate and the Commissioner for Data Protection have multiplied. However, in most cases these complaints deal with personal offenses or data protection and are not particularly focused on addressing hate speech.

Major television media companies do measure television ratings, but the data’s reliability are disputed. Furthermore, the industry players do not share the information with one another or discuss ways to improve audience measurement. The panelists also questioned the commitment of media companies to ethics. “We have ranked these indicators, having in mind a certain moral and ethical standard that media should respect. However, media do not necessarily focus on reliability of their content, but on audience numbers. Unfortunately, trust is not a priority for our media, apart from NGO media,” said Cipa. Other panelists also agreed that there is a tendency to produce programs that are far from educational and focused on being the most viewed, often resorting

“Interaction of the media with the audiences is only in the function of monetization, not focused on gaining their trust, and this harms the quality of the programs offered,” said Dervishi.

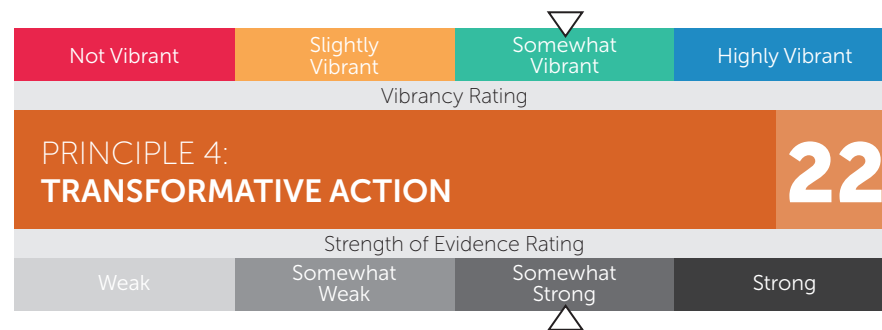
Information Consumption and Engagement Indicators

- People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.
- People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.
- People engage productively with the information that is available to them.
- Media and information producers engage with their audience’s needs.
- Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

to unethical or scandalous behavior. “Interaction of the media with the audiences is only in the function of monetization, not focused on gaining their trust, and this harms the quality of the programs offered,” said Dervishi.

Another trend the panelists noticed is the absence of special departments or sections within the media that deal with audience engagement. “Unlike trustworthy media, like BBC or CNN, which have audience engagement departments, such standards do not exist in our media. Programs for youth and children are neglected, which tells us that the main aim is to grab as many views as possible,” said Valbona Sulce, a civil society activist.

The development of community media appears to be slow in the country. However, a few panelists said that community media do exist and have demonstrated diversification and development in recent years. The audiovisual media law allows communities to apply for audio licenses. “So far, four audio licenses for community radio stations have been awarded to the four main religious communities in the country,” said Arben Muka, director of programming at the audiovisual media regulator. Other panelists also pointed out that other communities or minorities have their own online media, with LGBTQ activists especially active in this regard. “There are also community media for people with hearing impairment, online and audio, as well as specific media for the health community, for specific regions, or for Albanian emigrants,” said Cipa. However, there is little information on the way these media operate and on how successfully they cater to the needs of their communities.



Although multiple channels of information exist in terms of access and technology, the information provided is rarely qualitative or independent. Qualitative reports are not easily found, and media reports are often influenced by political propaganda. Civil society organizations generally engage in providing qualitative and trustworthy information, but their influence may be limited. There are media that engage in professional and investigative reporting; however, the response of the authorities to reports is selective, and the information published does not necessarily affect the voting process or prevent corruption. The panelists gave their lowest scores to the indicator measuring the government’s use of quality information in decision-making; their highest scores went to the indicator assessing the news producers and channels of dissemination that enable the distribution of information through ideological lines.

The environment of information production and the situation with dissemination channels is quite vibrant. Technological developments have enabled a broad variety of channels that make information available. Social networks, especially Facebook, are very popular in Albania, with more than 1.6 million accounts, or almost 60 percent of the population. This, along with the public’s opportunities to provide feedback on some radio and television programs, and in most online media, provide several streams of interaction between the public and the media.

When it comes to the quality and independence of sources of information available, the panelists agreed that there is a broad range of

sources, although only a few can be considered independent. “We have a polarized and politicized media environment, very vibrant and also cacophonous,” said Lani. Iris Luarasi, lecturer at the University of Tirana, said that media are generally divided according to political lines, which means that often the public must access different sources of information to determine the truth. At the same time, the panelists noted that the social networks, while allowing for a greater exchange of opinions, also tend to reinforce existing bubbles or echo chambers, where people tend to follow media that reinforce their existing beliefs and preferences, rather than being open-minded to exchanges of opinions.

The panel had very little confidence that individuals use quality information to inform their actions. Quality information is scarce in most media outlets, making it difficult for citizens to make use of such information to inform their actions.

The panelists said that most of the information is, in fact, derived or shaped from propaganda, with only a small amount reflecting fact-based reporting by journalists, or by citizen journalists. “The fact that 46 percent of Albanians do not believe in vaccines and 60 percent prefer to believe in conspiracies means that they do not base their beliefs on accurate information, and that the public often tends to believe disinformation without any major doubts,” said Lani. The panelists agreed that this is a situation that is also largely influenced by the low level of media literacy education in the country.

The panelists were divided on the role of civil society organizations in Albanian society. The large number of NGOs registered in the country does not always match the work done in the field, as many groups are inactive or get involved only in specific cases. However, most panelists highlighted the existence of a group of organizations that are now almost 30 years old, indicating that they tend to do serious, valuable work and are influential in the country. In addition, the panelists agreed that when it comes to serious civil society organizations, they do contribute significantly in terms of research, expertise, and advocacy, and they steer away from disinformation. “Many influential organizations are not in any way a source of disinformation, although some of them might

have a particular bias. The fact that they are funded by donors makes them very careful not to engage in any disinformation,” said Lani. One of the panelists also highlighted the fact that there are several NGOs that have their own media and have been influential in informing the public in a qualitative and independent manner, like BIRN Albania, Faktoje.al, Citizens Channel, and the Albanian Center for Quality Journalism. “It may seem a paradox that civil society has established its own media; although it does not constitute a business model, it has produced very positive results, bringing the public quality journalism,” said Dervishi.

The contributions of civil society organizations in terms of information, activities, monitoring, and advocacy initiatives are constantly shared with the public, thanks also to the high use of social networks in this respect. However, the panelists agreed that more needs

to be done to increase their cooperation with the media. “I know of organizations that do a very good job and offer social services but find it difficult to gain media attention, as there is a prejudice that NGOs are only there to receive funds and do not do anything else,” said Luarasi.

Even though there are mechanisms for the government to interact with civil society and the media--such as press conferences, press meetings, communication on the media space or on social networks--the panelists were highly critical of the idea that any of these efforts are done in the public's interest. “Government institutions tend to provide information and issue press statements very often, but the problem is the fact that the information they publish is often one-sided and is not aimed at informing, but rather manipulating the public for electoral purposes,” said Liperi. Government officials have their own media channels through which they communicate with the media and the public further, which further supports this point. “Government has become a medium on its own, and in this respect it dictates the agenda of the rest of the media,” said Dervishi.

In general, the panelists considered political parties and government officials to be the biggest source of disinformation in the country.

“We have a polarized and politicized media environment, very vibrant and also cacophonous,” said Lani.

Transformative Action Indicators

- Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.
- Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.
- Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.
- Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.
- Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Furthermore, they agreed that with few exceptions, serious media investigations often face a wall of silence and indifference from the government. Even though, in some cases, reports from investigative programs spurred a reaction from the government, the norm is usually to ignore these concerns. According to the panel, government actors rarely base their decision-making on credible media reports, and there have been only a few limited cases when the government has had to react, such as the case when a tender on building the capital's new highway was won by a fictitious company. Furthermore, rather than proactively using media reports and other credible

data and information to inform policies, the government usually reacts to potential reports and incidents that emerge.

In general, the level of reaction and responsiveness of the government to reporting that exposes corruption is low. The panelists mentioned recent examples of corruption among hospital staff for COVID patients to which the authorities reacted, leading to prosecution. However, it did not escape notice that this reinforced the impression that the authorities were more comfortable reacting given the low positions of the staff, which is not the case for more important officials. "The reaction of relevant institutions is stronger in cases of individual threats, but not in high-stakes corruption cases," said Liperi. In these cases, the panelists agreed that official institutions tend to ignore the media reports, or even try to attack their credibility or ridicule them.

The panelists indicated that there is no evidence that quality information can affect election results or reduce or prevent corruption. "Experience so far has shown that the result of elections is not affected by quality information, but by the vote of the electorate that is polarized by political rhetoric," pointed out Emirjon Senja, editor-in-chief of online section of ABC News Albania. The long stagnation of Albanian society, where rhetoric is fierce, with mutual exchanges of charges on wrongdoing from multiple actors, has lowered the public's sensitivity to media reports on corruption. "In Albania, there is the banalization of corruption, where everyone has accused everyone for 30 years now; everyone is corrupted, and no one is corrupted. In this context, the public is less sensible, and sometimes disinformation has proved to be more attractive for the public," said Lani.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

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Lutfi Dervishi, journalist, Radio Televizioni Shqiptar, Tirana

Valbona Sulce, civil society activist, Tirana

Arben Muka, director of Programming Department, Audiovisual Media Authority, Tirana

Iris Luarasi, lecturer, University of Tirana

Emirjon Senja, editor-in-chief of online section, ABC News Albania, Tirana

Klementina Cenkollari, editor-in-chief, MCN TV, Tirana

Genc Demiraj, media owner, Amantia TV, Vlora

MODERATOR

Ilda Londo, research coordinator, Albanian Media Institute, Tirana

BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 1



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

18

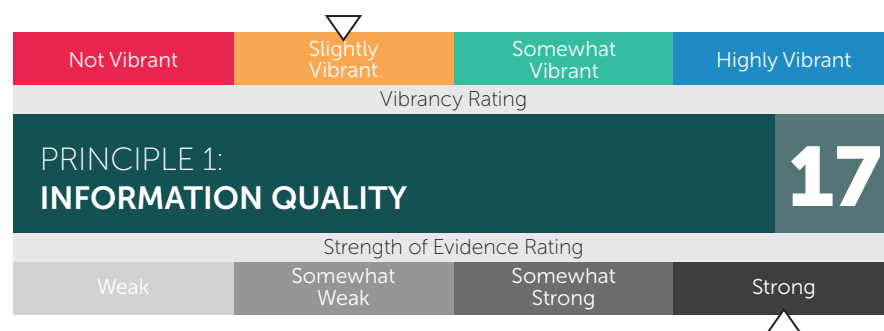
The COVID-19 pandemic heavily impacted the political, economic, and media sectors in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) and emphasized issues, including complex administrative divisions and corruption, that have been stalling the country's progress to a fully functioning democratic society. At the beginning of the pandemic, in March 2020, governments introduced measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including curfews, lockdowns for the elderly and minors, the prohibition of public gatherings, the closures of educational and cultural institutions, and the suspension of public transport. Even though measures eased in the second half of 2020, they left an impact, particularly on industries related to accommodation, food service, and transportation. The measures introduced did not consider the needs of vulnerable groups, and in April 2020, the Constitutional Court ruled that restrictions requiring the elderly and minors to stay under lockdown were discriminatory. There were attempts made to restrict freedom of expression, as the governments of the Republika Srpska (RS), the Brčko District, and some municipalities in the Federation of B&H (FB&H) all adopted orders aimed at prohibiting the spread of panic and disinformation.

During the first months of the crisis in 2020, the media suffered sharp declines in advertising revenues, and some had to lay off journalists and other media professionals. Disinformation and conspiracy theories about COVID-19 permeated online media and social media networks, affecting the public's reaction to health measures. Professional journalists played an important role in informing citizens about COVID-19 and uncovered a series of

fraud in public procurement contracts for pandemic-related medical supplies. Additionally, the media and civil society organizations (CSOs) revealed numerous abuses aimed at influencing voters ahead of the 2020 Bosnian local elections. The local elections showed signs of change as opposition parties won most of the mayoral positions in Sarajevo municipalities and the mayoral position in Banja Luka. In the ethnically divided city of Mostar, elections were held in December 2020 for the first time in 12 years, an important step in the country's democratic process.

However, ethno-national divisions still persist, and the country lags behind its neighbors in terms of European Union and NATO membership. B&H needs to adopt reforms in terms of rule of law, the respect of human rights, and protection of minorities. Regulations on the transparency of media ownership and concentration are still missing.

The panelists agreed that in some cases there is quality information on a variety of topics but overall the quality of information has decreased, mainly driven by an alarming number of false and misleading content about COVID-19. There is no strategic approach toward media literacy education and there is lack of awareness and knowledge about digital security and the legislative framework for the protection of personal data is insufficient. The level of exchange of information among people who do not share similar viewpoints is low, online forums and comments sections are packed with insults and hate speech and information mostly does not support good governance and democratic norms.



Professional media in B&H revealed a number of corruption scandals during the coronavirus pandemic, but the overall quality of information, from both professional and nonprofessional producers, decreased, mainly driven by an alarming number of false and misleading content about COVID-19. Panelists agreed that in some cases there is quality information on a variety of topics but that content production is not sufficiently resourced.

Infrastructure and the means to produce varied and quality media content are solid, but panelists noted that they are not adequately used to produce ethical and evidence-based journalism. Senad Zaimović, the director of the marketing agency Fabrika, said that the media in B&H lack both the equipment for the production of content that follows global trends and staff who is skilled enough to use it. “Today, podcast video is a standard format that is very developed, even in the region, but we, regarding the production of content for digital media ... are lagging behind,” Zaimović said. There are around 10 universities, both public and private, that teach media-related studies. But Boro Kontić, director of Mediacentar Sarajevo, explained that there are fewer good non-academic schools of journalism, compared with 15 years ago, largely due to the lack of funds and interest from the professional community. In addition, according to Azra Maslo, program standards coordinator at the Communications Regulatory Agency (CRA), there is a particular need to train nonprofessional content producers.

Professional media producers publish content on a variety of topics with a focus on current and political events and critical stances toward

government representatives. However, as Maslo noted, within the mainstream media the editorial policies of some outlets are under external political and financial influences. “The highest number of breaches [of CRA codes] in the last three years was related to violations of rules on fairness and impartiality,” Maslo said, adding, “There are media that do not adhere to ethical and professional standards.” Self-censorship, in the form of avoiding certain topics, is present at both the state-level and entity-level public broadcasters, and, according to Kontić, in 2020 even an independent private television station that is considered impartial aired a one-sided public relations statement from its owner’s company. “Even good-quality television cannot be separated from what is pure propaganda,” Kontić said.

Panelists agreed that, overall, professional reporting during the pandemic was good despite the obstacles and restrictions journalists faced. The media played an important role in revealing a number of high-profile corruption scandals, including, for example, the case of the Srebrena malina (Silver raspberry) company, in which authorities from the Federation of B&H granted a permit to a fruit grower and processor to procure 100 ventilators from China for a much higher price than that of similar products on the market. However, Edin Ibrahimfendić, an expert adviser at the Institution of Human Rights Ombudsman, said even this case was surrounded by misleading information. Some media reported that the ventilators cannot be used in the intensive care units as they do not meet the necessary standards, while other media reported that they can.

False and misleading information about the coronavirus, its origin, and vaccines flooded the Internet, online news outlets and social media, anonymous websites, and even the Facebook statuses of renowned journalists. According to Tijana Cvjetičanin, editor at the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje, it was also present in the content of traditional media, although to a lesser extent. This misinformation can help ensure a high readership and thus more profit, but Cvjetičanin explained that some journalists and media simply fall for false claims and think they are doing a good thing by disseminating the information. Sandra Gojković-Arbutina, editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper *Nezavisne novine*, said that disinformation finds its way to the newspaper through news

agencies, including the Serbian news agency Tanjug or Anadolu, the Turkish-owned news agency based in Sarajevo. “We republished news from Tanjug, and now we are in a situation where we should be fact-checking Tanjug,” Gojković-Arbutina explained, “You can imagine how much time it takes.”

Foreign news agencies and affiliates of international media are a means through which foreign governments and financiers can reach and influence public opinion in B&H. Leila Bičakčić, director of the Center for Investigative Reporting (CIN), spoke about Al Jazeera Balkans, which is part of the Al Jazeera Media Network from Qatar, and its reporting on the relations between Israel and Palestine, which, according to her, “can and will definitely impart a very unequal perspective towards this topic in B&H in particular.” Additionally, Ibrahimfendić gave an example of two completely opposing interpretations and narratives on the renewed outbreak of hostilities in late 2020 between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabakh by the news agencies Tanjug (from Serbia) and Anadolu (from Turkey) that were published in B&H media. He also explained how foreign news agencies prefer news that presents the politics of their countries as successful. “Take for example, Anadolu,” Ibrahimfendić explained. “There’s a whole range of stories on how the Turkish government is successfully preventing the spread of the virus.”

Governments and public institutions withheld information from journalists and the public, especially during the pandemic, over such issues as patient testing procedures and the procurement and distribution of medical equipment. There were also instances in which high-ranking politicians were the sources of false and misleading information. Bičakčić recalled how the Serb member of the presidency and the head of the ruling Republika Srpska Alliance of Independent Social Democrats SNSD party, Milorad Dodik, opposed requests to establish reception centers for migrants and refugees, which so far have been mainly concentrated in the Federation of B&H, in the territory of Republika Srpska, under the pretext that in three years migrants and refugees with asylum status will be able to obtain B&H citizenship and thus vote. Dodik’s statements were disseminated by the media, even though, as Bičakčić said, information was “false, but no one checked further whether it is even possible. It created an avalanche of false

information for political points.”

Norms for fact-based and impartial information exist, both within regulatory and self-regulatory frameworks, but professional ramifications for non-adherence to such standards are minimal. The dissemination of false information can be sanctioned under libel laws if the intent is defamation, but as Cvjetićanin noted there are no regulations for sanctioning disinformation in general in the broadcasting sector. “At the very beginning of the health crisis [in 2020], we had a number of cases of broadcasting allegedly false information related to COVID. However, breaches of the rules and codes of the agency were not found,” Maslo said.

Fact-checking resources exist, but Slađan Tomić, a freelance journalist, explained that it is difficult to fact-check information coming from government sources, especially for journalists who report on daily events. Media newsrooms lack the professional and financial capacities to fact-check and regulate content to avoid circulating false and misleading information and to moderate user-generated comments on their articles and on their social media accounts, which are often

full of insults, hate speech, and derogatory language. Đorđe Vujatović, editor at Elta TV and a journalist at Gerila.info, said that web pages even aim to have a higher reach, by attracting a larger number of comments.

In the past year, hate speech and derogatory language in user-generated content – particularly targeting migrants and refugees, along with the overall media coverage of them – have been problematic. Aldijana Purić, editor at the local public media station RTV Velika Kladuša, said that a certain percentage of

Information Quality Indicators

- There is quality information on a variety of topics available.
- The norm for information is that it is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.
- The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.
- The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.
- Content production is sufficiently resourced.

information given by government representatives does not adequately represent the current situation, including the causes and consequences of the migrant crisis on migrants and refugees and the local population.

Research from the CRA in 2019 showed that content intended for or dedicated to minorities and vulnerable groups—and adapted for persons with disabilities—is extremely underrepresented in television and radio programs in B&H.¹ However, Maslo said certain improvements have been made; in 2020, the CRA introduced binding quotas for broadcasting content that is accessible to people with disabilities, and it intends to change the rules for other service providers as well. Public broadcasters, as of 2020, are also obligated to broadcast a program intended for members of national minorities for at least one hour a week. Despite these changes, the coronavirus pandemic further marginalized minority groups in the media as the resources and news reporting mainly focused on COVID 19 cases and anti-pandemic measures. Issues such as online learning during the pandemic within low-income families or for children with disabilities were rarely reported in the media, and there are still no news outlets in minority languages. In terms of gender stratification, data collected by the CRA show that gender inequality is still present in managerial positions: overall 30.1 percent of directors for radio and television stations and 42.5 percent of editors-in-chief are women.

The financial consequences of the pandemic have impacted the media sector, and advertising revenues sharply decreased during the first three months of the pandemic. Zaimović said that the overall decline in media outlets' revenues in 2020 was 30–40 percent, further exacerbated by a

“Media newsrooms lack the professional and financial capacities to fact-check and regulate content to avoid circulating false and misleading information and to moderate user-generated comments on their articles and on their social media accounts, which are often full of insults, hate speech, and derogatory language, explained Tomić.

years-long practice in which a significant part of the advertising space in B&H is bought in Serbia through regional television channels. Vujatović noted that the overall value of the advertising market, which, based on estimates from marketing agencies, is around €22.9 million (\$27 million), is insufficient for quality reporting, while Purić observed that advertisers are choosing to advertise products on social networks rather than in the local media because it is more affordable.² She also pointed out that the

allocation of the government's commercial contracts with the media implies certain favors.

Gojković-Arbutina argued that the decline of revenues was higher, around 50–60 percent, based on the estimates within her newsroom. Despite an improvement by the end of 2020, the media are still facing financial consequences; many had to lay off part of their staff and lower the salaries of their employees, which further impacted the quality of reporting. In addition, journalists faced additional working hours and stress due to restriction measures and fear of COVID-19. Reporters remain inadequately paid, with an average

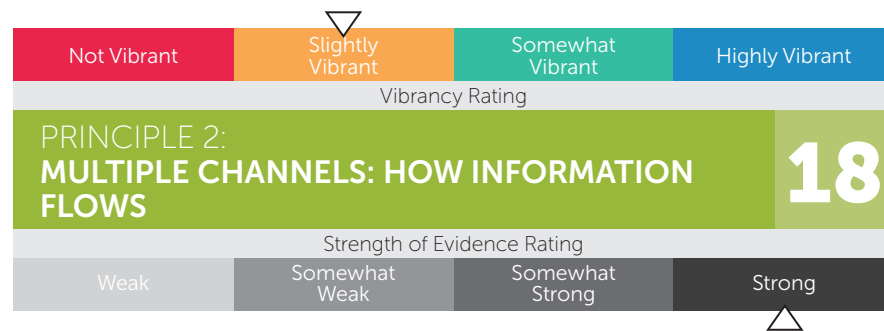
salary of around €300 (\$354), according to the experience of Tomić. Other sources state that the average monthly wage of journalists ranges from \$410 to \$500.³ Even though media organizations have called on state institutions to provide financial help, there have not been any special models of state aid for the media.⁴

1 CRA, 2019. *Analiza Analiza dječijih i obrazovnih programa, programa koji su namijenjeni ili se bave manjinama i ranjivim grupama stanovništva, te programa prilagođenih osobama sa invaliditetom u audiovizuelnim medijskim uslugama i medijskim uslugama radija u Bosni i Hercegovini.*

2 IPSOS data suggest that the advertising market was worth around 38 euro in 2017 and 2018. Tasco, 2020. *National Data Overview, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sustainability of Professional Journalism in the Media Business Environment of the Western Balkans.* <http://tacso.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Sustainability-of-Professional-Journalism-in-WB-Study-National-Data-Overview-BiH-final.pdf>

3 Estimates of the Association B&H Journalists and the platform plata.ba.

4 Association BH Journalists, 2020. “Covid 19 i ekonomske posljedice: Formirati nezavisni fond za pomoć medijima u BiH”, <https://bhnovinari.ba/bs/2020/06/29/covid-19-i-ekonomske-posljedice-formirati-nezavisni-fond-za-pomoc-medijima-u-bih/>.



Legal protections for freedom of speech and information are in place in B&H, but implementation remains inadequate and many journalists self-censor due to fear of retribution. The government does not openly censor the media, but during the pandemic there were attempts to restrict freedom of expression. People mostly have adequate access to channels of information, but awareness about privacy protections and security tools is low.

About 80 percent of defamation lawsuits against journalists in the past four years have been filed by politicians and other public officials, such as judges and prosecutors, an Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) analysis of B&H found.⁵ These lawsuits mostly do not consider European Court of Human Rights law, under which politicians must have greater tolerance for public criticism. In addition, the OSCE found that about 30 percent of proceedings lasted more than five years, creating long-term pressure on the media. Ibrahimefendić noted that there are targeted lawsuits against journalists by individuals who know they will lose but still persist, knowing this is a way to pressure the media.

In 2020, the Association B&H Journalists registered 69 cases of freedom-of-expression violations of journalists and attacks on journalists, including physical attacks, online and in-person threats, smear

campaigns, mobbing, and hate speech.⁶ In most cases, the prosecutors' offices and police did not find the perpetrators, and the courts did not process them. Research from the Association B&H Journalists pointed to the precarious situation of journalists working in local newsrooms—in the past three years, 40 percent of interviewed journalists in the study (157 overall) said they had been exposed to attacks and threats, and 75 percent of them received pressure from government officials, the opposition, and advertisers.⁷ Gojković-Arbutina recalled how insults and pressure on journalists were constant during the pandemic and how her outlet received threats over the phone, which were not taken seriously by the police. Damir Đapo, editor of RTV Slon, mentioned how a police officer in Tuzla confiscated an RTV Slon journalist's phone, erasing photos of a student dormitory that was used as a quarantine location for those who came from abroad. Pressure on the media was particularly visible during the pre-election period. CRA received complaints from the media that local power holders were pressuring journalists to come to press conferences despite health risks.

During the 2020 pandemic, there were attempts by authorities to limit freedom of expression and the flow of information. Panelists said there were difficulties in accessing official information on a daily basis, as the crisis management headquarters set up in entities, cantons, and cities (under the pretext of health security) limited journalists' access to press conferences and even organized press conferences online.⁸ In certain instances, journalists were only allowed to submit their questions online, and in the Herzegovina-Neretva Canton, journalists boycotted the local crisis center's press conferences after their questions were ignored. According to Đapo, in the Tuzla Canton, journalists communicated with the crisis center through a group on the app Viber. Every day, a different media outlet attended the press conference and shared the material

5 Emina Dizdarević and Lamija Grebo, 2020. "Cenzura tužbama – rast postupaka protiv novinara ograničava medijske slobode", Detektor, <https://detektor.ba/2020/12/17/cenzura-tuzbama-rast-postupaka-protiv-novinar-a-granicava-medijske-slobode/>.

6 "BH novinari: Pritisci, niske plate i samocenzura u lokalnim medijima," 2020. Media.ba, <https://media.ba/bs/vijesti-i-dogadaji-vijesti/bh-novinari-pritisci-niske-plate-i-samocenzura-u-lokalnim-medijima-u-bih>.

7 Safejournalists, 2020. "Istraživanje BH novinara: Mediji u BiH na udaru politike, a novinari podložni autocenzuri." <https://safejournalists.net/ba/istrazivanje-bh-novinar-a-lokalni-mediji-u-bih-na-udaru-politike-novinari-izlozeni-pritiscima-i-autocenzuri/>.

8 Slađan Tomić. 2020. "Komuniciranje kriznih štabova: Sužen prostor za novinarska pitanja," Media.ba, <https://media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/komuniciranje-kriznih-stabova-suzen-prostor-za-novinarska-pitanja>.

with the other outlets. However, communication between journalists and the crisis center deteriorated, and journalists could no longer obtain information—including, for example, reasons why restriction measures were eased or curfews no longer enforced in the Federation of B&H. Similarly, press conferences in Banja Luka initially seemed open, but Gojković-Arbutina said that as time went on, “it was subtly mentioned to journalists not to come to press conferences and to send questions, so we had several situations where only two to three media were invited.”

The government of the Republika Srpska adopted and then, after criticism from local and international organizations, revoked an order that prohibits the spread of panic, with violations punishable by fines. “The government tried to determine what is fake information. One doctor from Prijedor was even fined for her stances on the coronavirus in the media,” Vujatović said. Similar orders were introduced in the Brčko District and in some municipalities in the Federation of B&H, where police reported cases of those who allegedly spread panic through disinformation and fake news on social media platforms.

The implementation of B&H’s Freedom of Access to Information Act (FOIA) remains problematic, and provisions of the FOIA laws are not aligned with current international standards (e.g., proactive transparency). Even though groups are not systematically excluded from using their right to information, access to information is consistently denied to journalists, and, as Bičakčić noted, there is a lack of awareness among the public about their rights to public information. Research conducted by Transparency International B&H in 2020 determined that only 44.5 percent of public institutions send answers to FOIA requests within legally prescribed deadlines and that during the pandemic, researchers waited as long as five months to obtain certain information, such as the conditions under which the donated medical equipment was

stored in Banja Luka.⁹

One of the reasons behind the poor application of FOIA, according to a special report of the Institution of Human Rights Ombudsman, is the lack of knowledge of the staff working in press offices in government and public institutions.¹⁰ Panelists noted that the availability of information also depends on the professionalism of spokespersons. Tomić said that there are examples of great public officers, such as those with the Border Police and the Indirect Taxation Authority, who are widely available to the press. By contrast, according to him, it is difficult to obtain information from the Federal Finance Ministry, the Prosecutor’s Office of B&H or the Sarajevo University Clinical Center, even during the pandemic.

“Even though groups are not systematically excluded from using their right to information, access to information is consistently denied to journalists, and there is a lack of awareness among the public about their rights to public information, noted Bičakčić.”

There are no laws that regulate domestic and foreign ownership concentration in media and advertising, nor that require transparency in media ownership. Additionally, there are no laws regulating the transparency and criteria in the allocation of public funds to the media. According to Vujatović, there is some information on ownership about the mainstream media outlets, but there is no information about anonymous portals.

Panelists agreed that information channels are not independent and that media organizations are influenced by their ownership. In the past three years, Maslo said the Communications Regulatory Agency monitored the information programming of all three public service broadcasters on three occasions. In the case of the public-service broadcaster of Republika Srpska, namely RTRS, there has

9 TI BiH, 2020. “International Day for Universal Access to Information: The work of institutions slowed down due to the pandemic, progress related to transparency insufficient,” <https://ti-bih.org/medjunarodni-dan-slobode-pristupa-informacijama-epidemija-usporila-rad-institucija-pomaci-u-transparentnosti-nedovoljni/?lang=en>.

10 Institucija Ombudsmena, 2019. *Specijalni izvještaj o iskustvima primjene zakona o slobodi pristupa informacijama*. <https://www.ombudsmen.gov.ba/documents/obudsmen-doc2020020515415139bos.pdf>.

been a tendency to promote one political view in news programming. Political pressure on the media was particularly present during the local elections; the Coalition Pod Lupom and the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje registered cases of biased media reporting, with portals openly favoring certain political candidates.

Multiple Channels Indicators

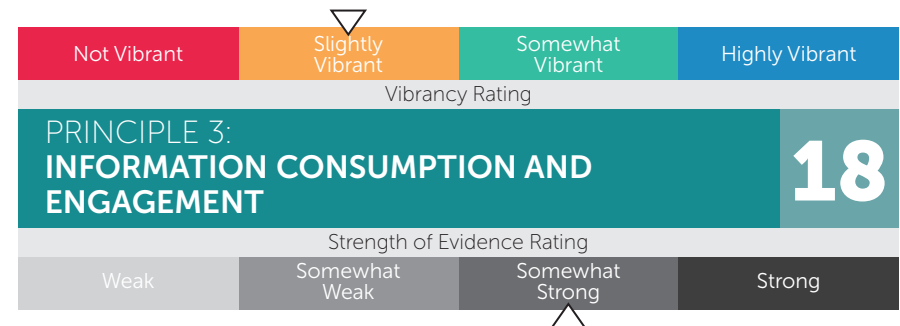
- People have rights to create, share, and consume information.
- People have adequate access to channels of information.
- There are appropriate channels for government information.
- There are diverse channels for information flow.
- Information channels are independent.

Information and communications technology infrastructure meets the information needs of most people, but it is not adapted to the needs of people with disabilities, according to the CRA. Although the Internet use rate, according to the Communications Regulatory Agency, is 94.32 percent, rural areas are neglected due to the lack of a national broadband strategy. In addition, online content access platforms (websites) are largely not adapted for people with disabilities. According to the CRA, there are 10 large cable

distribution operators. Small cable operators have built their networks in limited geographical areas, and they are still privately owned by one or more individuals, and provide their services to customers in those areas. In recent years, however, larger cable operators have been buying smaller ones, raising concerns over a growing monopoly.

The licensing process for radio and television broadcasters is based on the principles of transparency and nondiscrimination, and local and foreign channels are available. Concerns over the politicization of the CRA, however, further intensified in 2020 when Draško Milinović, the former director of Radio Television Republika Srpska (RTRS) public broadcaster, was appointed as CRA director. Milinović was the director of RTRS during the period when the CRA fined the RTRS for 13 breaches, including fines for reports on subjects linked to war crimes. Even though panelists criticized public service broadcasters for their partiality, Lejla

Turčilo, a journalism professor at the University of Sarajevo, said that the public service broadcasters' educational programming during the pandemic was an instance in which they fulfilled their public-service role.



The activities of the governmental and civic sector aimed at raising media literacy skills are at their inception phase, and there is no strategic approach toward media literacy education at the state level. Even though the number of people who report disinformation to fact-checking platforms has risen, the public has become even more radicalized and polarized with the coronavirus pandemic. Panelists mostly agree that people lack the necessary tools and skills for media literacy. And though it may be considered important, the community media sector still has not been developed in B&H.

Panelists noted that in B&H there is a lack of awareness and knowledge about digital security and that the legislative framework for the protection of personal data is insufficient as it does not include the digital sphere. Regulations are not aligned with the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and do not protect personal information from companies such as Zoom, which has been used prolifically during the pandemic.¹¹ In addition, in March 2020 some local governments started publishing on their web pages the personal information of people who were in isolation or who tested positive for COVID-19. Because of this, the Agency for the Protection of Personal Data had to

11 Jelena Gugić, 2020. "Lični podaci na izvolite," Media.ba, <https://www.media.ba/bs/magazin-mreze-i-web/licni-podaci-na-izvolite>.

reach and publish a decision prohibiting this practice.¹²

Gojković-Arbutina said that *Nezavisne novine* has been investing in digital security and has five employees who focus primarily on digital security. Other media representatives also said that the administrators of their web pages report and deal with distributed denial of service (DDOS) and other attacks. However, among local media there is a lack of knowledge about the mechanisms and reasons behind these attacks, few opportunities for training on digital security, and insufficient protection mechanisms for online data transfer. Within the Republika Srpska Ministry of the Interior, there is a High-Tech Criminal Unit that deals with digital attacks, but, according to Vujatović, its technical capacity is limited. A similar unit for cybercrime operates at the Federal Police Administration of the Federation of B&H, but cybercrimes rarely get prosecuted.

Some institutions and organizations have been actively promoting media literacy during the coronavirus pandemic, but there is no strategic approach and there is a dearth of inclusive data on the level of media and information literacy skills of B&H citizens. Despite the activities of the Ministry of Transport and Communication of the Republika Srpska and the government of the Sarajevo Canton, media and information literacy is still not part of the school curricula nor part of the education of teachers. “There is not much enthusiasm in primary and secondary schools for a separate subject,” said Turčilo. “Teachers generally think that it is an additional subject that would further burden them and that there is no one to teach it.”

Even though there has been a rise in the number of activities, publications, and workshops on media and information literacy, panelists noted that there are still few media literacy professionals, and training courses on media and information literacy are urban-centered

12 “Agencija za zaštitu ličnih podataka: Odmah ukloniti lične podatke lica,” 2020. Media.ba, <https://media.ba/bs/vijesti-i-dogadaji-vijesti/agencija-za-zastitu-licnih-podataka-bih-odmah-ukloniti-licne-podatke-lica>.

and mostly targeted toward young people. A survey conducted by the CRA and UNICEF about how informed young people are about COVID-19 showed that one-quarter of respondents do not know how to verify information online.¹³ Bičakčić, however, noted that verification tools are usually used by professionals, and there is no evidence that the general public uses them. “They consume news as it is presented to them on social media networks, and that is why we have such a huge increase in extremist content ... extremist discussions on social networks in general, which then classify people into certain groups,” Bičakčić said.

“They [the general public] consume news as it is presented to them on social media networks, and that is why we have such a huge increase in extremist content...extremist discussions on social networks in general, which then classify people into certain groups,” said Bičakčić.

Thousands of people have reported disinformation to the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje, but there are, as Cvjetićanin said, a large number of people who follow the platform and consider it part of a conspiracy involving “Bill Gates, Soros, Satanists, deep state, lizard people, and all that ... It is a terrible process of radicalization that happened especially since the start of the pandemic, and that has entered into the mainstream.” In addition, Ibrahimfendić noted that people

do not understand online algorithms.

There are no legal consequences for exercising freedom of speech and the right to information, but as Turčilo said, there are other subtle mechanisms to frighten and silence those “who think differently.” In 2020, a journalist from the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), Nejra Džaferović, and a journalist from N1, Nikola Vučić, were demonized on the Internet due to their critical stances. Džaferović was discredited on web pages and social networks for criticizing the naming of one mosque after a Bosniak army general who was accused for war crimes at the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia in the Hague. Similarly, Nikola Vučić was a target of a hate campaign on B&H Croat portals due to a tweet. After the West-Herzegovina Canton had declared itself a “corona-free zone,” he sarcastically asked

13 CRA. Rezultati istraživanja o adekvatnoj informisanosti mladih u Bosni i Hercegovini o situaciji vezanoj za Covid-19 <https://www.rak.ba/bs-Latn-BA/brdcst-media-literacy>.

whether a “fascism-free zone” would be declared soon. What followed were numerous threats, calls for violence, and hate speech and insults against Vučić and his family. In addition, there are examples in which media ended cooperation with journalists due to their comments on Facebook, which happened to Tomić, during his work for the Radio of the Federation of B&H in May 2020.

Different platforms for public debates exist, but the question is how and for what purposes they are used. “For example, for the regulatory plan of Banja Luka, there was a public debate, but no one attended. Only later do you find out that something has been amended... The question is whether the invitation to the public debate is promoted clearly and loudly enough,” Gojković-Arbutina said. She also noted that the outcomes of public debates on draft laws and decisions do not affect decision-makers. Discussions on government and policies are organized by nongovernmental organizations, but, Vujatović noted, are attended by the same people despite being open for the general public. “People are not interested when it comes to things like public debates on the budget or even when it comes to public debates on regulatory plans. They are not really involved in this aspect,” Purić said. One of the reasons for this, Kontić said, is the lack of quality reporting on local issues that are of interest to the public. “You do not have media that will present topics like regulatory plans to people in a way that they understand it as very important,” Kontić explained.

COVID-19 restrictions further diminished the quality of television debates, and candidates used social media platforms for promotion and avoided direct confrontation on television shows. Digital platforms were widely used during the pandemic and the local elections, but panelists agreed that comments sections were full of insults and hate speech. According to Bičakčić, comments sections are a space where people can vent their anger or frustration with the system, life, and a lack of opportunities, and a lack of education further hinders constructive discussion.

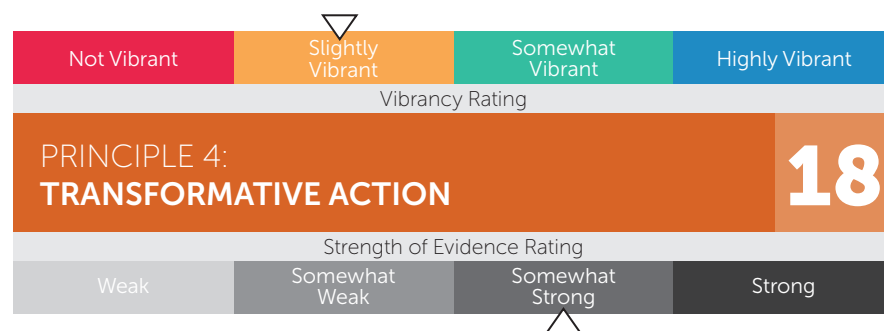
Panelists said that media outlets follow their audiences’ needs, but audience measurement data are not available to all. Zaimović said that larger television stations prepare their programs based on telemetric

Information Consumption and Engagement Indicators

- People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.
- People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.
- People engage productively with the information that is available to them.
- Media and information producers engage with their audience’s needs.
- Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

data, while news portals are trying to adapt to new trends by producing audiovisual content. Media representatives said that they follow daily visits to their web pages and receive comments and suggestions from their audiences on social networks. Still, local broadcasters do not commission audience measurements due to a lack of funds and instead try to obtain data in different ways, including by producing their own surveys (Velika Kladuša) or through cable operators (RTV Slon).

In B&H, there are legal provisions to establish nonprofit radio stations as a form of community media, and the CRA regulations define the conditions for issuing license permits. However, there are only three registered community radio stations: Radio Open Network and Radio Marija in Sarajevo and Radio Active in Zenica. These stations, according to Maslo, give space to marginalized groups to participate in public communication and debates, and the CRA has not received complaints about their content. Still, there is a lack of awareness and knowledge, even among the participants, on the definition and role of community media, and the sector has been rather underdeveloped in B&H.



There are a variety of professional and nonprofessional content producers, but panelists said people usually follow the outlets and producers that support their viewpoints. The B&H audience is polarized along ethno-national and political party lines – and recently along opposing attitudes toward the coronavirus. Panelists believe that, in general, information mostly does not support good governance and democratic norms, but there are examples where civil society uses quality information to improve their communities.

“In our country, people mostly follow the media that confirm what they think ... We have a huge offering; people can in principle see completely different viewpoints, but how much they follow these viewpoints is the question. I personally think they follow, if nothing else, to check what the situation is with the ‘enemy,’” Kontić said. In the Republika Srpska, for example, the public-service broadcaster RTRS, under the influence of the governing SNSD party, and the private television station BN TV, whose reporting favors the opposition, give politically different viewpoints on the same events. However, Gojković-Arbutina said people follow both television stations to see what is happening on the side of the ‘enemy’, but for some, it is also to have a wider understanding of events.

Besides political divisions, the public space is also burdened with a heavy war history and mutually exclusive memory politics with one-sided interpretations of Balkan war events; these opposing perspectives are visible in both traditional and new media and in user-generated comments.¹⁴ “The narratives of ethno-national communities have an established formula that the media do not try to change at all—for

14 Anida Sokol, 2019. *Media usage in the Birač region*. Sarajevo: MediaCentar, https://www.media.ba/sites/default/files/media_usage_habits_birac_region_0.pdf.

example, reporting on war crimes, especially in the Podrinje region (Srebrenica and Bratunac),” Vujatović said.

Panelists agreed that the media in B&H are selective in their reporting and in the selection of their interviewees. Independent content, however, can be found among media associated with CSOs that are funded mainly by international donors, media that receive support from global networks, and private media financed mainly through advertising.¹⁵ The CRA representative stated that broadcasters air news using the nongovernmental sector, political analysts, and experts from various fields as a source of information, thus encouraging citizens’ critical thinking and active participation in democratic processes.

The level of exchange of information among people who do not share similar viewpoints is low. There are numerous online forums where people comment or discuss different topics, but when confronted with different ideological stances and opinions, the exchange of information usually becomes filled with hate speech and insults. “I am afraid that the pluralism we see does not, in fact, contribute in the least to the pluralism of opinion and that we are not capable of being able to participate in a discussion without conflict, nor are we willing to listen to the other side,” Bičakčić said. Even though people engage in discussions, these discussions are based on opinions and not on facts. “This is actually an essential difference—we are discussing what we think to be true, not what we have as a fact established to be true, and in this we find all the causes of all our misunderstandings,” Turčilo explained.

Even though the audience became even more polarized during the pandemic, Tomić said that the pandemic opened additional forums for the exchange of opinions, and people with opposing views engaged in discussion over issues such as the origin of the virus and vaccines. Safety and health recommendations during the coronavirus pandemic were followed only to an extent—mostly in Sarajevo and Banja Luka—while in other towns people did not wear masks and behaved in a way that was detrimental to their safety. Gojković-Arbutina feels this is because

15 Tasco, 2020. *National Data Overview, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sustainability of Professional Journalism in the Media Business Environment of the Western Balkans*. <http://tacso.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Sustainability-of-Professional-Journalism-in-WB-Study-National-Data-Overview-BiH-final.pdf>

of the public's lack of trust in institutions; Bičakčić also cited superficial media reporting on some measures and decisions. As an example, Bičakčić mentioned the media coverage on the December 2020 decision from the Constitutional Court of B&H that declared mandatory mask-wearing in the Canton of Sarajevo and the restriction of movement in the Federation of B&H a human-rights violation. The media failed to emphasize that the Court concluded that the appellant's request for revocation of the orders was unfounded, given the undoubted public interest in introducing the necessary measures, which influenced people's attitudes and behavior in regard to protective measures. The court only ordered the Parliament and the Government of the Federation of B&H to "take activities and bring their conduct in compliance" with human rights standards.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Turčilo explained, a number of traditional media treated interview subjects who approached coronavirus with science and those who approached it with conspiracy theories the same way. For example, in April 2020, a popular private television channel called Face TV brought Semir Osmanagić, a historian engaged in pseudoarcheology, as a guest on its news show; he talked about conspiracy theories and recommended the use of alternative medicine against the virus. After complaints, the CRA concluded that the Code on Audiovisual Media Services and Radio Media Services was not breached. However, the CRA pointed to the need for a more responsible and professional approach to topics related to the coronavirus pandemic in order to prevent the spread of misinformation that may adversely affect human behavior and safety.¹⁶

The pre-election period was marked by abuses of public resources

16 "Gostovanje Osmanagića na Face TV-u: RAK utvrdio da nije došlo do kršenja kodeksa," 2020. Media.ba, <https://media.ba/bs/vijesti-i-dogadaji-vijesti/gostovanje-osmanagica-na-face-tv-u-rak-utvrdio-da-nije-doslo-do-kršenja>.

“In our country, people mostly follow the media that confirm what they think...We have a huge offering; people can in principle see completely different viewpoints, but how much they follow these viewpoints is the question. I personally think they follow, if nothing else, to check what the situation is with the 'enemy',” said Kontić.

and different types of fraud to influence public opinion. Transparency International B&H, for example, identified 2,481 instances where public resources were used to promote parties and candidates during the pre-election period, with the largest number of abuses related to the rise in the number of public works, such as reconstruction of roads.¹⁷ An analysis of the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje also showed that numerous anonymous portals mushroomed during the pre-election period, promoting political parties and political candidates, and showed that traditional media published false and misleading information with the aim of influencing voters' opinions.¹⁸ Despite these instances, Bičakčić argued that in this election cycle, unlike previous ones, there

were many reports and discussions about these abuses, which, according to her, influenced the public and resulted in some change of opinion, at least in larger towns. Purić said that quality information during the election period was also present in local communities. “Surely quality information reaches those who seek it. They can influence the outcome of the elections, and I believe we have witnessed this during the last local elections,” Purić said.

In B&H, there are around 30,000 CSOs, including those whose activities focus on producing quality information and conducting quality research. Some good examples of these kinds of CSOs, according to the panelists, include the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections Pod Lupom, whose primary activity is election observation and reporting on election frauds; BIRN B&H (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network), which specializes in reporting on war crime trials; and Transparency International B&H, which focuses on the fight against corruption. There are also environmental civil

17 “Izbori u BiH: Političke promjene i izborne nepravilnosti,” 2020. Media.ba, <https://media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/izbori-u-bih-2020-politicke-promjene-i-izborne-nepravilnosti>.

18 Istraživanje: Dezinformacije u izbornom procesu, 2020. Media.ba, <https://zastone.ba/istraživanje-dezinformacije-u-izbornom-procesu-u-bih/?fbclid=IwAR0yLGzsjBi19E8hvlzv5qtUTf522DV6EX-RRNypu2xgB7DWewLCg09UCk>.

society organizations that work to raise awareness about protecting the environment.

Panelists, however, highlighted many problems within the civil society sector, including a large number of CSOs that are not active or visible; the existence of GONGOs, government-organized nongovernmental organizations that mimic civic groups; and a lack of engagement between media outlets and civil society in covering socially important issues. “There is a huge gap between the NGO sector and journalists and the media in general, because neither of them understands the other and they have very poor communication,” Bičakčić said. The activities of CSOs often do not reach the media because the media are not interested, do not understand the activities, or do not find the reports and the activities of CSOs attractive. Gojković Arbutina claimed that many CSOs lack expertise in public communication and fail to present their work and research in a way that is attractive to the media. Đapo, however, said that throughout the past 25 years, staff at RTV Slon have had a very positive experience with civil society.

Overall, CSOs produce quality reports and have advocacy initiatives, but their effect on the decision-making processes is still limited. In general, governments are unwilling to cooperate with CSOs—with a few exceptions, such as the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees B&H, the CRA, and the Institution of Ombudsman B&H. Governments and institutions do not base their decisions on high-quality policy research and use information from civil society selectively. Turčilo said that the Ministry of Education of the Sarajevo Canton used her research on young people selectively, ignoring indicators of some deviations in the educational system.

Media outlets have revealed numerous cases of corruption, human-rights violations, and civil liberties abuses; during the pandemic, journalists uncovered a series of frauds in public contracts for pandemic-related medical supplies. After journalists’ investigations into the case of Srebrena malina (Silver raspberry), in which the authorities of the Federation of B&H granted a permit to a fruit grower and processor to procure 100 ventilators from China, the Prosecutor’s Office of B&H charged Fadil Novalić, FB&H Prime Minister, Fahrudin Solak, the

Transformative Action Indicators

- Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.
- Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.
- Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.
- Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.
- Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

suspended director of the Federal Civil Protection Administration, and Fikret Hodžić, the owner of Srebrena malina, with the abuse of position or authority. The FB&H Deputy Prime Minister Jelka Miličević was also charged with negligent work in the service. However, only in rare cases do prosecutors launch inquiries after investigative journalists in B&H publish stories on corruption, bribery, influence peddling, etc.¹⁹ For example, the Center for Investigative Reporting published stories on fraud in the court appointments of attorneys. Despite the revelations, the criminal trial that followed and the recommendations of the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council, according to which

the selection of attorneys should be randomly selected by computer rather than manually, Bičakčić said that the practice continued with the involvement of the same people and in the same manner.

¹⁹ Elvira Jukić-Mujkić, 2019. Mediji i pravosuđe: Saveznici ili suparnici? Media.ba, <https://www.media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/mediji-i-pravosude-saveznici-ili-suparnici>.

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MODERATORS AND AUTHORS

Anida Sokol and Elvira Jukić-Mujkić, Mediacentar Sarajevo

KOSOVO

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 1



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

24

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the most significant news stories in Kosovo, political drama attracted most of the media's attention. In the course of 2020, Kosovo had three prime ministers. When former Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj resigned from his post and snap elections were called, it was Albin Kurti who formed the new government on February 3, 2020. However, by March 25, Kurti's government was ousted from the parliament in a no-confidence vote. Kurti called the move against him a coup, citing pressure from U.S. Special Envoy Richard Grenell to sign an agreement between Kosovo and Serbia.

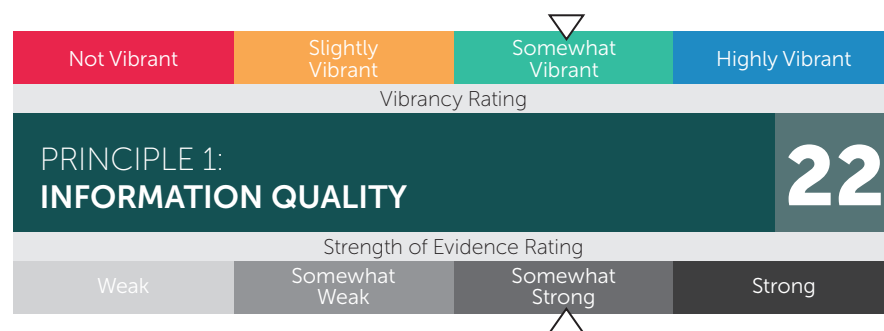
In September 2020, the economic normalization agreement was signed by Kurti's successor, Avdullah Hoti, and Serbian President Aleksandr Vučić at the White House in Washington, D.C. This agreement established, among other things, the basis for more unrestricted travel between the two countries, work with the U.S. Export-Import Bank and the International Development Finance Corporation, and joining the Mini Schengen Zone. Kosovo's president, Hashim Thaçi, however, did not participate in the ceremony, as he had resigned due to war-crime accusations by the UN International Court of Justice. Kadri Veseli, leader of the Democratic Party of Kosovo, and other prominent figures of the former Kosovo Liberation Army, have been accused of similar charges.

Kosovo's media significantly fueled both the pandemic and political crises. Panel participants said that the media sector has seen an increase in harmful content, including misinformation and fake news related to the spread of

coronavirus in particular, spread through all sorts of media channels.

Kosovo's overall country score of 24 shows that it falls close to the mid-range of VIBE scores when measuring information openness, factuality, professionalism, and economic sustainability. A further analysis of Kosovo's scores indicates that Principles 1 (information quality) and 3 (information consumption and engagement) received the lowest scores, underlining that the media and information sectors have not managed to adhere fully to international standards for information quality.

Despite their criticism on how information is produced, panelists gave higher scores to Principle 2 (how information flows) and Principle 4 (transformative action). These results suggest that consumers have experienced no restrictions, political or otherwise, with creating, sharing, or consuming information. Moreover, online media have increased rapidly, spurring a diversity of information channels. These information flows, however, do not mean that most citizens of Kosovo have the skills and tools necessary for media literacy. Panelists pointed out that such shortcomings leave consumers susceptible to fake news.



Panelists agreed that Kosovan media offer quality information on a variety of topics and that the mainstream outlets produce information based on facts. However, the panelists also expressed the belief that mal-information and hate speech are quite present among media organizations. The lowest score of all 20 indicators was given to the VIBE indicator on resources for content production, suggesting that media produce a large amount of news without sufficient resourcing. This trend is especially present in emerging online media that produce single-source news.

Kosovo has built an adequate infrastructure to deliver varied content (including print, broadcast, and digital media), and the country has journalism schools and training programs available. Still, producers are inadequately versed on creating ethical, evidence-based, and coherent content, and major violations of ethical standards abound at media organizations. Media members face no professional ramifications for producing content that does not meet these standards, apart from warnings and occasional fines issued by the Independent Media Commission (IMC).

Reporters do not adhere to basic professional standards. Their coverage is based on preliminary facts surrounding an issue, so the construction of articles remains problematic. One panelist noted that online media tend to favor the short and fast approach. Reports are not driven by facts but rather by politicians or institutions making single statements or declarations. This practice results in articles lacking adequate sources, contextualization, or explanation of the issues at hand.

Although most media faced financial crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, new online and broadcast media continue to emerge in Kosovo. The number of private televisions increased when K10 and ATV entered the market. These outlets have diversified broadcast and digital media in particular. However, the quality of information remains just as low.

Kosovo has an increasing number of fact-checking organizations; however, only Krypometri is certified by the International Fact-Checking Network.

Education institutions provide a number of training opportunities that target young journalists and focus more on an overview of journalistic production. Programs tailored to contemporary digital needs are lacking or insufficient. Panelists said that the dearth of good journalistic education prevents journalists from investigating harder topics or having larger impacts in their respective fields. Universities offer journalism programs, but only in Albanian.

Kosovan media cover a variety of topics, including political and social issues and local, national, regional, and international news. Panelists agreed that the reporting quality in the media has decreased. Traditional media, such as daily newspapers and terrestrial broadcast channels, have higher levels of editorial safeguards than newly established online media with little financial means. Online media mainly employ young and inexperienced journalists. One panelist pointed out a new-media habit: publish first and fact-check later.

The media landscape is inclusive of all communities and represents the ethnic composition of the Kosovan population. In addition to Albanian media, Kosovo has Serbian, Turkish, Bosnian, and Roma outlets. Specific groups, such as religious communities, have their own radio and television channels. However, minority media lack proper infrastructure and signal coverage. Hardly any Serbian-language TV stations fully cover Kosovo's territory. For example, the Serbian cable channel RTK2 is not offered in northern Kosovo, which is mostly populated by Serbs, because no cable provider wants to carry it. Another local TV station in Serbian, RTV Mir from Leposavić, has been completely taken off program lists of

private cable companies and cannot be viewed.

Most Serbian-language media are registered as nonprofit organizations, with international and local donors providing their operational funds. Some also have a business registration, but due to the limited advertising market, these media organizations cannot function fully on profits. Their operations are impaired by constantly having to fundraise and by implementing activities not necessarily related to daily reporting. Some Albanian publications, such as the daily *Koha Ditore*, are employing alternative means of profit making, such as subscriptions for online editions. However, media currently do not practice this widely.

Many online content producers will produce misleading titles with little information reported the article. Panelists observed the tendency of media to produce more and more provocative content, rather than content in the public interest. Nearly every day, online media report stories with improper source citations or completely without citations. Only some online media hyperlink original sources for information or photos.

Ethical standards protecting the privacy of ordinary citizens are often violated. *Gazeta Sinjali* committed one of the most serious ethical violations at the beginning of 2020, when it published the names and birth dates of approximately 200 COVID-19 patients who were ordered to be quarantined in North Mitrovica and Zvecan. The paper's decision prompted reactions from local and international media associations.

The Kosovo Press Council, a self-regulatory body for print and online media, and IMC, a public body that licenses and oversees broadcast media, have addressed numerous violations of reporting standards. IMC has also issued warnings to its licensed broadcasters for violating different aspects of its code. IMC is monitored by its own board of directors, with the parliament appointing board members. However, some panelists expressed the belief that appointments are highly politicized, serving only the interest of parties in power.

Panelists agreed that elderly people are more susceptible to fake news because they are less able to distinguish it from factual media. In 2020, most of the false published information was related to COVID-19's causes

and treatment. The public broadcaster RTK reported from an anonymous source that patient zero in Kosovo was a Russian UN employee working in northern Kosovo. The UN mission in Kosovo denied the claim. Another issue is that the government failed to offer information in each local language on its anti-COVID-19 measures. At the beginning of the pandemic, the Ministry of Health and the Institute for Public Health did not provide timely information in non-Albanian languages, even though the former Minister of Health Arben Vitia sometimes addressed the Serb audience in the Serbian language directly.

There is a worrying trend involving foreign governments creating and disseminating information in Kosovo that is intended to upset the ethnic and religious balances in the country. Additionally, both professional and non-professional content producers put out (intentionally or unintentionally) dis-information and hate speech. There are no serious consequences for doing it. However, there is no evidence that media outlets work together with non-governmental groups to create or disseminate information intended to harm.

In terms of social diversity, the mainstream media are not inclusive

Information Quality Indicators

- There is quality information on a variety of topics available.
- The norm for information is that it is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.
- The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.
- The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.
- Content production is sufficiently resourced.

in their coverage, particularly pertaining to ethnic or LGBTQI groups; however, marginalized groups have some alternative platforms to express their views. Although women own some of the largest media organizations, the mainstream media are male-dominated and male-led institutions, and this is reflected in perspectives and approaches to coverage. Nonprofessional producers—particularly social media users and bloggers—have more women present. Regarding the issue of diversity in news topics, most professional and semiprofessional media

organizations report on political issues, devoting little attention to stories related to health, culture, education, local news, or community development.

Some media outlets publish or broadcast information that is inadequately sourced or that does not fairly cover the position on all sides. Media have grown accustomed to quoting widespread social media posts, often from public officials or political figures, in a push to publish time-sensitive or exclusive information. These posts are often unreliable or are used in a different context. For example, if a politician attacks an opponent in a Facebook post, media with close ties to this politician will publish the comments without asking the person under attack for a response.

Panelists also pointed to problems with the rule of law. Defamation lawsuits languish in the courts for many years, and according to the panelists, most judges feel that they might become targets of media attacks and are afraid to rule against the media. Panelists have spoken of the immunity against defamation that political elites enjoy, even though the same people are often the sources of mal-information.

The Kosovan government does not intentionally publish harmful information, but the media commonly lodge complaints over the government's restricting access to public documents. Some media even exercise the right to report to the Ombudsperson Institution of Kosovo (OIK) or directly sue the institutions. Resolving cases of defamation via the justice system is problematic. According to OIK, a court case in Kosovo requires an average of eight years to be resolved.

As a multiethnic society, Kosovo has challenges with providing information in several languages. The print media are divided linguistically between those that publish in Albanian and those that publish in Serbian. This rift is reflected in the topics they cover and the space they provide for members of the other community to express opinions. The news stories produced in Albanian rarely feature Serb

citizens as interviewees; likewise, stories produced in the Serbian language rarely include Albanian voices.

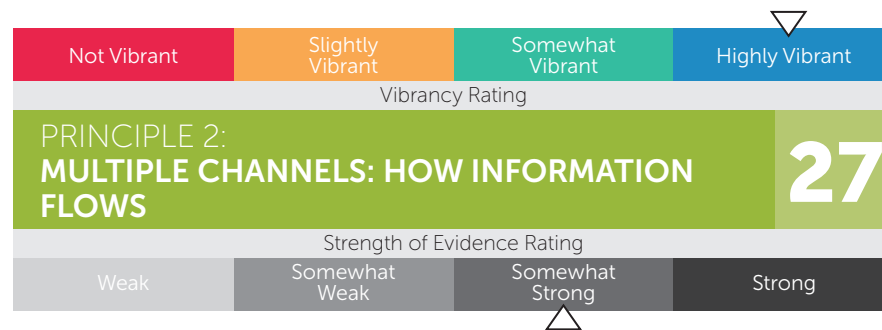
The media sector has a shortage of female analysts and commentators on everyday issues, including those of the LGBTQI community. Panelists pointed out that IMC is doing more to advance licensing media outlets launched by women. The government does not disseminate media grants; however, it uses profitable public companies such as the postal service and telecommunication facilities to finance pro-government media. Most companies that advertise in the media benefit from public contracts, in effect penalizing critical media outlets due to the financiers' favoring.

Panelists expressed the view that professional content producers do not have sufficient financial sources to output high-quality information. This situation has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which advertisers cancelled contracts. Due to COVID, newspapers have ceased their print editions, although they are still publishing online; additionally, some broadcast media restructured to introduce major operational shifts, such as integrating print, online, and television newsrooms into one, leading to staff layoffs. Budgetary diversification would allow professional content producers to be more resilient amid economic strains. Local advertising revenue does not necessarily stay in the local market. Instead, advertisers funnel their spending into national media and international social media companies, such as Facebook. Local content producers are not heavily engaged in identifying alternative sources of income, other than international donors supporting media development through international NGOs which has increased.

While salaries in the majority of media companies tend to remain average, journalists have no financial security, as they are employed through short-term contracts. A 2016 study showed that more than 85 percent of journalists in Kosovo were temporary contractors, preventing them from getting loans and credit cards. According to the panelists, journalists feel that they are easily replaceable, particularly

Panelists observed the tendency of media to produce more and more provocative content, rather than content in the public interest.

with new entrants to the market. Journalists do not necessarily have the opportunity to earn extra income, as many media managers disallow their journalists from producing for other publications. Journalists' welfare also deteriorated during the pandemic crisis, when many companies canceled their advertising contracts. However, the government offered a little financial help to the media community through the Emergency Fiscal Package, which funded direct subsidies to private-media employees.



Generally, the legal infrastructure provides good protection for sources and whistleblowers—one of the reasons why this principle was rated the highest. The constitution firmly guarantees freedom of information, and the parliament has adopted laws to protect freedom of press, such as the Law on Access to Public Documents, the Law on Protection of Journalism Sources, and the Law on Protection of Whistleblowers. However, one panelist stated that journalists have a very poor understanding of legal frameworks.

The government does not censor media, but some media self-censor, fearing that they will lose advertising from public companies and private businesses aligned with the government. Journalists are aware of the editorial stance they need to pursue—that is, the media company's political position. Self-censorship is more or less agreed upon and applied from the moment a journalist joins a media outlet that has certain political leanings.

Channels of communication are diverse. While traditional media such as television remain the most trusted, online media are catching up as

primary news and information sources. The government uses its own communication channels, including mainstream public outlets and the prime minister's Facebook and Twitter accounts. However, panelists said that the state needs to increase availability of government information in all local languages, especially with news related to COVID-19.

Panelists agreed that citizens have the right to create, share, and consume information. In addition to its constitution, Kosovo has a number of laws that aim to protect freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Officials enforce most provisions equally across a diverse citizenry.

Panelists acknowledged that law content is sufficiently updated, but they pointed out that some laws are not implemented properly. The Law on Access to Official Documents is one example. The government and municipal institutions in general are reluctant to provide information on issues related to budget spending, even though that information is public under the law. Access to public documents and information was particularly fragile in 2020, in the context of the pandemic and the political turmoil that saw a government fall amid heightened political tensions. All of these upheavals have created an environment where government and other institutional representatives have found it easier to not respond to requests for information, nor straightforward requests for interviews or comments.

Although some panelists said that the environment for journalists is safe, incidents continue to be reported. The Association of Journalists of Kosovo (AGK) is quick to issue public statements condemning incidents in which journalists, reporters, or camera operators face verbal or physical attacks. Some of the journalists that were physically assaulted

Multiple Channels Indicators

- People have rights to create, share, and consume information.
- People have adequate access to channels of information.
- There are appropriate channels for government information.
- There are diverse channels for information flow.
- Information channels are independent.

during 2020 included Valon Sylja, Diamant Bajra, Nebi Maxhuni, Arsim Rexhepi, and Nenad Milenkovic. Other incidents include journalist Shkumbin Kajtazi's car almost being set on fire, and police detaining journalist Tatjana Llazareviq for violating curfew even though she showed them her press identification. AGK has reported that a number of prominent journalists have received threats.

Kosovo's laws protecting whistleblowers and the confidentiality of sources are very good on paper, but the problem is their implementation—lawsuits on defamation and incitement of hate take many years to be resolved. Kosovo has no criminal libel laws that could be used to indict citizens or journalists for openly expressing opinions or for their news coverage. Yet a new form of intimidation is taking place: Private companies are using strategic lawsuits to quell public participation by suing human rights activists and demanding large sums of money.

Information and communication technology have improved greatly over the years, evolving to meet the needs of people with disabilities, people who are illiterate, and people who speak ethnic languages. Most of Kosovo's territory is now covered by an internet and cable infrastructure, extending to all urban and rural geographic areas. Internet penetration is above 92 percent, and cable providers have reached almost all corners of the country. The majority of people throughout Kosovo have the economic means to access most information channels, including digital and social media.

Kosovo has no social, ethnic, or religious norms that preclude any community from accessing information. Internet governance provides open and equal access to users and content producers. However, not all information is available in the languages of Kosovo's multiple ethnic communities. Consumers have a variety of channels for accessing government information. Public media provide live coverage of parliamentary sessions and of key government information presentations.

“Self-censorship is more or less agreed upon and applied from the moment a journalist joins a media outlet that has certain political leanings.”

Kosovo's laws conform to international standards and norms and guarantee the right to information. However, panelists expressed the belief that these laws are not implemented in timely or comprehensive ways. The state offers tools for public access to governmental policy and decision-making information, including online mechanisms. However, ordinary citizens rarely use these tools—not out of fear of seeking out information, but because many are reluctant to ask for it due to lack of knowledge about what public information is as well as lack of trust in the transparency of public institutions. Often, media organizations and civil society organizations (CSOs) are the entities seeking to access public information.

Government officials have spokespersons or information offices, but these liaisons rarely give information or take questions from the press. Immediate and crucial matters that demand a public response are usually addressed by public officials, such as the president or prime minister. Panelists have also expressed concerns about government spokespersons reliably telling the truth to the press and the public. Parliament members refuse to appear on TV to repeat what they declared in the parliament. The political discourse in parliament among opposing political parties is quite contentious and produces many media headlines.

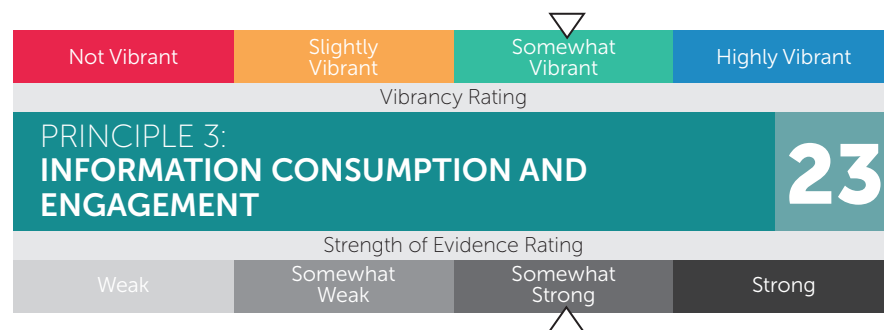
Transparency in media ownership transparency is low, despite laws that require it. Information for media ownership is available but is hard to find for the average citizen. Media distribution channels are not strictly monopolized, but a small number of conglomerates do dominate the market.

By law, the freedom to establish media is guaranteed, and the process for spectrum allocation is fair and transparent. License holders usually renew every few years, with IMC managing licensing procedures. In practice, however, governmental regulatory bodies overseeing frequency allocations, licenses, and telecommunications services are political. Even the members of regulatory bodies with oversight of media or

information and communication technology structures are politically appointed.

Public service media produce informative and educational news to some degree, but they do not provide fair coverage to all political parties, as the Law on Public Broadcasting requires. The public broadcaster is financed directly from the state budget, therefore jeopardizing its editorial and institutional independence. In one positive, public television provided online learning materials prepared by the Ministry of Education during the pandemic crisis when schools were closed.

Internet service providers are nonpartisan and do not discriminate based on users or content. The same cannot be said for cable providers; they decide which channels to include and leave out. Funding sources—including advertising revenue and owners' investments in media outlets—dictate editorial stance to a high degree. Government subsidies or advertising contracts also influence editorial independence. Further, panelists said that they see no clear distinction between newsroom operations and business operations for professional content producers. It is common to see the general director of a television company appear as an analyst on live news editions or talk shows.



In a broader societal scope, Kosovans have little information on digital security and poor understanding of its importance. Media members have not had formal training or informal experience in digital security. While younger populations are aware of how algorithms drive social media content, older groups are more prone to fall prey to fake news and misinformation. Overall, panelists agreed that Kosovans do not

have sufficient media literacy skills, and panelists gave this indicator the lowest of all scores in this survey.

One panelist argued that educational organizations offer some good initiatives on media information education and media literacy, but the focus is on the wrong participants. Most training targets journalists that actually produce the news, but it should target educators and teachers instead, the panelist said.

Schools across different levels have not embraced media literacy courses as part of mandatory curricula. While there are media literacy courses in Kosovo, they mainly target young people and students, with very few media literacy efforts directed toward adults. Few Kosovans show initiative in working with educational groups and learning to be more discerning with media. Still, organizations continue to assist citizens in increasing critical knowledge in the ways that texts and media messaging establish or promote certain value systems.

Kosovo's legal protections for data privacy and digital security are enforced in a way that does not impinge on personal freedoms. However, media outlets and other professional content producers have failed to engage enough with digital security training and tools. Media companies' digital hygiene practices are insufficient as a result, leaving their websites vulnerable to cyberattacks. Individual consumers can freely access technology-based tools that help protect their privacy and security. But panelists said that they have not seen much evidence that the population has basic digital and data literacy skills, such as the workings of digital technology

Information Consumption and Engagement Indicators

- People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.
- People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.
- People engage productively with the information that is available to them.
- Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs.
- Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

and digital security. Further, panelists said that they are not convinced that the population is aware of the algorithms driving social media, the mechanics of advertisement targeting, and other ways in which personal information is enlisted to target digital users.

Although awareness is growing on internet danger—particularly spreading disinformation and endangering individuals’ privacy—Kosovans have little knowledge of how to protect themselves. Attacks on media websites are common, and some website owners contract out cybersecurity services. Another problem is that Kosovo does not possess a country-level domain, so all government addresses are .com or .org and therefore more easily targeted by hackers. According to the panelists, people are highly concerned with their personal banking information when they apply to withdraw their private pension savings. Due to the pandemic-related financial crisis, the government passed a law that allowed citizens to withdraw 10 percent of their own savings from the Kosovo Pension Saving Fund. When the system was open for application, cybersecurity experts warned that the personal data may be under attack.

Kosovo has freedom of speech, but public discussion of more sensitive issues remains problematic. In 2020, Shkelzen Gashi—a human rights activist who briefly served as an adviser to former Prime Minister Kurti—was sacked from his advisory position. The removal stemmed from the enormous negative public reaction following Gashi’s statement that individual Kosovo Liberation Army fighters committed crimes during and after the war. In addition, Gashi remains a target of online assaults, including personal threats. His case has led to CSOs widely reacting in support for his free speech, although as the panelists pointed out, Kosovo’s fragile public sphere still can organize attacks when certain opinions are considered to be against “established truths.”

Kosovans enjoy a variety of quality public debates and discussions due to an active civil society. Multiple online public debates persisted during the COVID-19 lockdown and government responses. However, these debates were not organized by the government. Citizens also have

platforms such as town halls for public debate. These meetings tend to be more popular in bigger cities, where more citizens participate. In smaller towns, fewer people take part.

The media sector does not conduct credible market research, nor do individual media outlets. As such, they have little to no information regarding the audience’s needs or interests, or what topics the audience considers to be of public interest.

Media staff have little communication or feedback with their audiences. Any communication is generally limited to comments on social media, and these platforms do not always serve to engage discussion between the public and editorial teams. Therefore, open digital communications are generally characterized by unhealthy debates, misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech. Panelists noted an increasing tendency for people to report such content to the police, and they say that OIK

addresses the complaints it receives in a fair and balanced way. Only certain media—especially those that are funded from international donors—take steps to build audience trust, such as transparency in authorship and reporting methods and in publishing corrections.

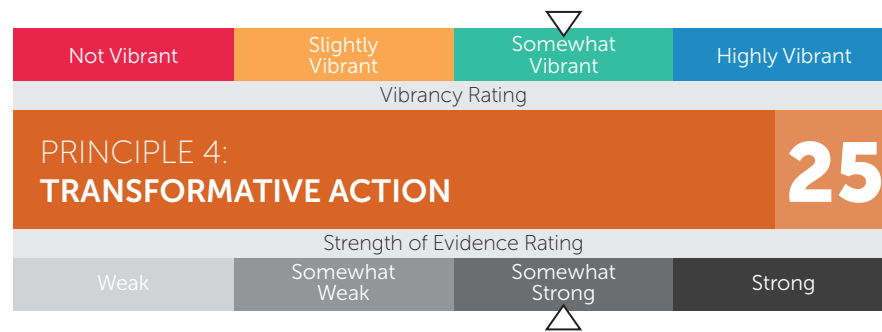
Journalistic media and CSOs regularly collaborate for productive information sharing, while accepting and considering feedback from one another. The cooperation between CSOs and media is adequate, and CSOs invest in communication strategies as well as personal relations with media representatives. Media-CSO partnerships in research projects are also common.

Online media provide space for readers’ reactions, and comment sections are widely available, either directly on the website or via social media platforms.

Community media are not recognized as such in Kosovo, although some outlets—mostly youth initiatives—could be described as community resources. These include sites created by CSO activists for debates or blogs and portals led by journalism students. Recently, Kosovo

Kosovo has freedom of speech, but public discussion of more sensitive issues remains problematic.

has seen a positive increase of a variety of smaller media outlets that serve as community media, including Perspektiva of Foundation 17, dylberzimi, QIKA, and Grazeta. They are a combination of journalistic and new-media platforms and they target and respond to the needs of specific societal groups. These outlets include feminist, youth-oriented, or LGBTQI platforms. Their initiatives are filling in a gap in mainstream media, which rarely delve into marginalized communities or their issues.



The Kosovan media sphere has nonpartisan and quality news sources; however, they remain more the exception than the norm. While people engage in debate on social media platforms through exchange of comments, much of it is antagonistic debate. Meanwhile, TV debates seem to have particular influence over setting the public dialogue agenda. By and large, these debates are heavily opinionated or partisan discussions rather than fact-based analysis or commentary. Yet panelists scored this principle as the second highest; they gave high scores to Indicator 16 (information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines) and to Indicator 18 (civil society uses quality information to improve communities). Moreover, panelists agreed that distribution channels enable and encourage information sharing, and this in turn supports good governance and democratic rights. However, the panelists also noted that the government does not rely enough on quality of information to make public policy decisions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed just how susceptible citizens of Kosovo are to conspiracy theories. According to a survey by the

Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group and Ipsos, around 80 percent of citizens believe a variety of falsehoods with regard to COVID-19: that it was created by the Chinese government, that it came from a lab in Wuhan, that it is a biological weapon of the United States, and so on. Among many factors for believing in such theories is the lack of public trust in government and public institutions. This absence of trust has driven broad disregard for following fact-based health and safety recommendations throughout Kosovo. Through their own actions, public institutions--especially the national government and the parliament--have undermined their appeals to people to respect social distancing and other public health measures. At various points, the president convened meetings with political party leaders to discuss changes in the government cabinet, and political parties organized street assemblies that disregarded public health recommendations. Taken together, this has further decreased citizens' trust in government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country.

Still, the diversity of media and information outlets allows consumers to read or view multiple types of media with varied ideological leanings. People engage with others with whom they disagree through in-person forums, such as town hall meetings; or through digital forums, such as social media platforms or comment sections. The Albanian community has a more developed culture of debate, but those discussions are mostly built around assumptions, rather than data and evidence. Panelists said that any fact-based or well-evidenced discussions are usually led by CSO representatives.

Some people's views on political and social issues are shaped primarily by quality information, and citizens rely on these sources more when electing political parties. Although it is hard to prove, panelists said that the misinformation circulated during election campaigns has an influence on people's views.

CSOs produce high-quality, reliable, and credible work, and CSOs and the media have a cooperative relationship. The media report on the work of CSOs; in turn, the media use the work and findings of CSOs to initiate more substantial journalistic investigations. Panelists said that CSOs do a good job in monitoring government and institutions,

Transformative Action Indicators

- Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.
- Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.
- Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.
- Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.
- Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

in providing feedback and analysis to legislative changes, and in advocating for such changes. CSOs reference high-quality investigative reports conducted within Kosovo when they call for policy changes or corporate reforms, and they integrate quality news and facts in explaining their mission and objectives. These organizations also share quality information with the public as part of their missions and do not disseminate misinformation or mal-information. However, CSOs have limited capacities to fight the spread of these ailments.

Media outlets actively engage with civil society to cover socially important issues. However,

citizen participation in key decisions (such as policy formation and legislative change) is not very evident, the panelists reported.

According to public polls, citizens consider most CSOs valuable and reliable sources of information. Panelists also held the view that CSOs in Prishtina are more credible and have stronger research capacities. Outside the capital city, CSOs are dependent on municipal funds; as a result, they often become instruments of the daily politics in their respective municipalities.

Many legislative initiatives are spearheaded by CSOs, but government officials and members of parliament rarely acknowledge this. Rather, elected officials tend to participate in conferences organized by CSOs. One panelist pointed out a new practice: At times, government officials leak information to media outlets allied with them and then leverage this same information to attack a political opponent through the media.

In cases when information sources reveal corruption, the government does not always respond swiftly. The panelists expressed a shared belief that quality information can have a cooling effect on government corruption. A prevalence of factual information can prevent or lower the incidence and severity of corruption among state and local officials, but the justice system is still slow to act. When information sources report on human rights violations, the government does respond appropriately, usually by issuing a press release or a Facebook post. When information sources identify civil liberty violations, the government faces pressure to remedy the violations.

Media outlets actively engage with civil society to cover socially important issues. However, citizen participation in key decisions (such as policy formation and legislative change) is not very evident.

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MONTENEGRO

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 1



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

21

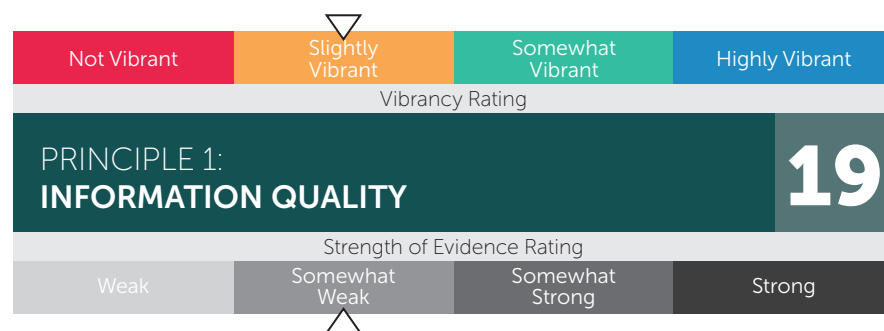
Fierce political instability and conflict between Montenegro's pro-Western government and opposition forces tied to the Serbian Orthodox Church—supported both financially and through the media by neighboring Serbia and Russia—hobbled hopes of improvement in Montenegro's media sector. Throughout the year, Serbia and Russia lobbed propaganda targeting Montenegro's Euro-Atlantic leanings and efforts to legally protect Montenegrin cultural and religious heritage. As a result, the then-ruling Montenegrin coalition suffered a narrow defeat in the August 2020 parliamentary elections: 41 parliamentary seats went to the opposition and 40 to the ruling coalition at the time—the first defeat in 30 years for the Democratic Party of Socialists. The new government, backed by forces under the influence of Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić and the minority populist-civic party, formed in December 2020.

Alongside political conflicts and the change in government, the COVID-19 pandemic hit Montenegro hard, causing serious health and economic impacts. According to the Public Health Institute (www.ijzcg.me), by the end of 2020, 805 Montenegrins had died and 61,659 had been infected (10 percent of the population). The pandemic also set off a huge economic downturn, driving the unemployment rate to rise to 20 percent.

A slew of negative influences and poor practices keep Montenegro's media sector stuck in a vicious circle, plagued by the same problems year after year. Online journalism has completely sidelined print media, which continues to see its circulation decline, in contrast to the ever-soaring influence of social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.). Furthermore, the chronic problem of political bias very

much persists in a media sector dominated by political and commercial interests. That, in turn, threatens professional standards and information quality, inhibits media literacy, and erodes media freedom.

Taking into account the opinions and positions of panelists around the four VIBE principles, several striking conclusions emerge. First, information quality falls short of the professional standards and customary norms that support the free press in a democratic country, primarily due to: the political bias of media outlets' editorial teams, the prevalence of fake news on social networks, the malign influence of foreign governments (Serbia, Russia), biased interpretation of facts, and limited human resources that hinder quality reporting and the development of investigative journalism. Second, despite a fairly well-developed legislative framework, lagging enforcement and respect for professional standards drive self-censorship, undermining the media's credibility and freedom. Third, Internet usage is quite developed, without censorship, but faulty regulations enable its abuse. Media literacy, although an element of advanced education reform efforts, is marginalized, priming the population for political manipulation and information misuse. Fourth, there are key strengths, including media outlets in Montenegro that can be considered independent of political influences and a well-developed and influential civil society sector—although nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) often enjoy cozy relationships with political parties or government services and agencies.



The quality of information in Montenegro overall is mediocre, with a noticeable divide between the abundance and reliability of news—attributable to political interference and a shortage of resources. Media outlets generally possess adequate technological infrastructure for news production, as well as skilled journalists and other technical staff capable of providing professional information. The best-developed national media outlets show signs of potential for investigative journalism and specialized reporting as well. The biggest obstacle to improving the quality of information, the panelists felt, is the heavy political pressure on journalists and editors and the widespread misuse of media for political purposes. Media have a tendency, because of their editorial policies or business interests, to align their reporting with the interests of certain political parties and groups. The panelists saw significant increases, either through social networks or traditional media, of politically motivated fake or misleading news in the last year, which was marked by intense internal political conflicts surrounding parliamentary elections, as well as external attacks on Montenegro's media that stirred malicious public discourse. Although information flows from different ideological channels, and the media community bears the hallmark of distinctly pluralistic features, it is not enough to overcome challenges, including financial limitations, political and business influences on media, limitations related to the quality of journalists, and the lack of professional and trade union solidarity among journalists—leaving a lot of space to improve the quality of reporting in Montenegro.

Although Montenegro is a small country, it has 130 registered electronic

and print media (1 media per 5,000 citizens), and Internet usage is free and without any limitations. Yet the sheer abundance of channels does not necessarily equate to quality, independent, coherent, ethical, fact-based reporting. Many Montenegrin media outlets and the country's one private news agency (MINA) produce a steady stream of information of national or local importance, as well as international news. However, the panelists overwhelmingly agreed that despite the prolific flow of information, the quality is questionable. As Aneta Spaić, dean of the law faculty at the University of Montenegro, explained, "Based on statistics, we have quite a lot of registered—but far fewer active—media outlets. Established media companies in Montenegro are capable of producing quality journalism. However, the results are frequently mediocre and often flawed. ... In most cases, this is a result not of a lack of knowledge but rather editorial pressure on journalists—or they simply cave to self-censorship." It seems that political influence is the media community's major problem, thus compromising the key principles of professionalism and impartiality, Spaić noted, concluding, "Media pluralism and institutional media freedom are not sufficient guarantees of media professionalism, nor are they enough to forestall the chaotic, unregulated media scene we are witnessing on a daily basis."

Still, for determined citizens, it is possible to obtain balanced news—it just takes effort. Duško Vuković, program manager with Media Centar, commented, "Montenegrin citizens can access information, based on which they can form a relatively objective picture on the state of play in their country and beyond, but they can access this information only by using several information sources—from traditional to online media and social networks. The only limits are budget and curiosity."

Tanja Pavicevic, a journalist with the daily *Pobjeda*, noted that print dailies have less bandwidth to provide in-depth, quality reporting than they used to. "Ten years ago, there were three dailies (*Pobjeda*, *Vijesti*, and *DAN*) and a fourth one occasionally started and then shut down (*Publika*, *Republika*, *Dnevne Novine*). These dailies had enough staff, and their journalists were able to develop specializations and cover specific areas. At the time, despite all the limitations, journalists were producing professional articles." Yet in recent years, editorial teams have changed their structure for the worse, she noted—at least for print media.

Marijana Bojanic, director of TV Vijesti, pointed out that it's partly a question of resources; the poor financial situation impacts the quality of reporting. "Producing quality material is a complex journalistic work, and, therefore, it is unrealistic to expect quality to rise in an increasingly poor financial environment."

Based on the panelists' opinions—along with the existing media infrastructure, the state of journalism education, compliance with the journalistic ethics, the range of available information, and the impact of editorial policies on quality of reporting—Montenegro's media has not succeeded in elevating the level of quality reporting on different social issues.

Information Quality Indicators

- There is quality information on a variety of topics available.
- The norm for information is that it is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.
- The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.
- The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.
- Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Misinformation in Montenegro is significant; in fact, most of the panelists agree that misleading information in the media has increased, thanks mainly to uncontrolled misuse of social networks and the expansion of false or furtive media companies' web portals—particularly during election season. Traditional media rarely publish fake news, but they are prone to politicized or distorted interpretation of obvious facts. Furthermore, statements of government officials often escape serious journalistic scrutiny, making it hard to ascertain whether the government is disseminating

accurate or fake information. In this respect, Bojanic noted, "Fact-checking of officials' statements rarely happens, and when it does, it is done by a single journalist—i.e., a single media company. A huge number of short-staffed web portals fill in that empty space with numerous press releases, which do not serve to inform the citizens or to open public debate on important social issues. In effect, many of these

online media are just bulletin boards for government institutions. The situation is similar with other types of media. It is just that, by the nature of the business, it is not possible to set up a television station or print publication on a small budget, as you can with online outlets."

Montenegro has a lot of fake news and hate speech; according to Spaić, "Still, these issues are mainly detected on social networks and similar informal forums under the pretext of free speech; they are less frequent in traditional print and electronic media." Even when these things happen, they are perceived as somewhat of an exceptional incident. She also noted that statistics last year indicated that hate speech directed at the LGBT population mainly surfaced on social networks (circa 100 criminal charges per year), and these cases were most often prosecuted before misdemeanor courts, sanctioned with fines ranging from €200 to €600 (\$240 to \$725). She also notes that under Montenegro's criminal code, the only criminal offense related to disseminating fake news is under Article 398: "Causing panic and disorder by means of disseminating fake news."

Disinformation is a global issue, and it is obvious that Montenegro's institutional response is inadequate to cope with the volume of tough-to-trace fake news, placed mainly through social networks under fake profiles, using fake portals, or using portals that exploit legislative gaps and function more as political-propaganda hubs with hidden funding sources. (For example, Montenegro's Media Law does not require web portals to publish the name of the editor-in-chief and names of editorial team members as is the case for printed media.) Despite cases of police investigations and arrests of citizens due to hate speech and threats posted on social networks, journalists are rarely prosecuted. In this respect, Nikola Dragash, a journalist with the web portal Analitika, pointed out, "The arrest of the former editor-in-chief of FOS Media, after she published fake news at the beginning of last year, saying that Kosovo special police forces would assist Montenegrin police on Christmas Day, attracted a lot of public attention."

Samir Rastoder, editor-in-chief of Radio Petnjica gave another example, noting, "During the last year, we had more sources of news than ever—but also more fake news than ever. For the needs of electoral campaigns,

some unknown authors created temporary political-propaganda platforms that churned out fake news constantly.”

The panelists viewed fake news and hate speech differently but agreed both are very much present in Montenegro, disrupting professional journalistic standards and tipping the public discourse toward the interests of certain political groups. This trend has been on the increase since 2016, aimed primarily at undermining the country’s Euro-Atlantic orientation. The fact that platforms specialized for exposing disinformation and hate speech have detected and publicly exposed hundreds of fake news missives is just more evidence of the vast quantity of fake news flooding Montenegro. Leading platforms exposing fake news, fake Facebook and Twitter profiles, and hate speech include Raskrinkavanje.me, created by Center for Democratic Transition, a well-known NGO working alongside the International Fact-Checking Network, and the Digital-Forensic Center, working within the framework of the Atlantic Council of Montenegro.

Assessing the news market, Pavicevic said, “In Montenegro, we have the polarization of media, with pro-Montenegrin on one side, pro-Serbian media on the other. Editorial policies are defined by national affiliations and their support for, or critique of, the government. Media outlets won’t publish information that doesn’t suit them, forcing the reader or viewer to read all four dailies or watch at least two news shows to figure out what is happening. Professional media rarely publish fake news, but other media sometimes do, as we saw in the 2020 case of a prosecuted FOS Media journalist.”

Citing examples of propaganda, Vuković noted, “During 2020, we saw a drastic case of online media established for the sole purpose of harming individuals and certain political groups. I am talking about the web portal Udar, established on the eve of parliamentary elections in Montenegro, that was operational until Election Day. The portal denounced people from opposition parties or those close to them. No

government institutions initiated any kind of investigation in relation to this web portal, so it was never determined who created it and who was placing fake news.”

Many of the panelists agreed that news is comprehensive and diverse, irrespective of its flows or shortages. In this respect, it is important to

mention legislative changes (Articles 17–23 of the Media Law) that introduced the Fund for Stimulation of Media Pluralism and Media Diversity. This fund will receive 0.09 percent of the annual Montenegrin budget, and 60 percent of funds will be earmarked for commercial and nonprofit media, with 40 percent for dailies, weeklies, and online publications. There is no doubt

that this fund will be of particular help to marginalized groups that are insufficiently represented in leading media.

The panelists noted that media content includes the views of all genders; they also had a consensus that there is enough diversity within the media sector to allow space and audience for various ethnic and religious groups. However, the main minority groups (Serbs, Bosniaks, and Albanians) are more visible in the media than others. The Montenegrin media sector does not exclude any ethnic or national community, although there are always complaints about insufficient public representation (e.g., Roma population, LGBT community). At the same time, the panelists did not note significant gender discrimination in media management structures, editorial offices, or among journalists; this also holds true for non-professional media content producers.

However, speaking of the wide spectrum of ideologies and positions, Dragash said, “In an ideologically deeply polarized country such as Montenegro, news media are not exposing citizens to a wide spectrum of ideologies or positions. Media mainly present those ideas advocated by the political option close to them.”

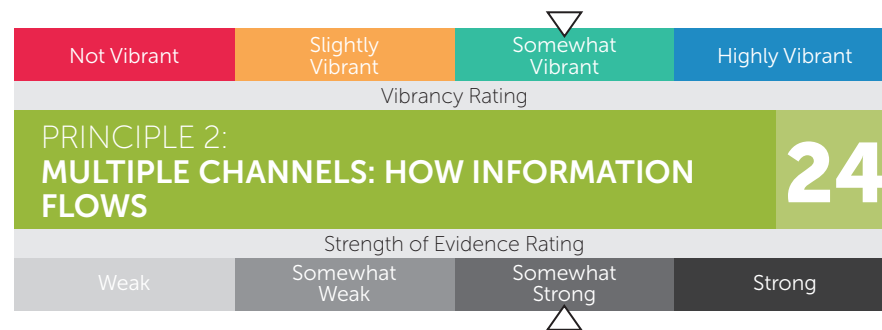
Media funding sources are limited, and most media rely on advertising revenue, investment by media owners, or assistance and budget

“Producing quality material is a complex journalistic work, and, therefore, it is unrealistic to expect quality to rise in an increasingly poor financial environment,” said Bojanic.

funding from the government. In the current operating environment, the media sector has not identified significant alternative sources of funding, such as subscription-, crowdfunding-, or membership-based models. Revenues from local advertising remain with municipality media. At the same time, government funding to the media sector is provided according to published criteria, but there are strong objections to advertising contracts from state-owned and public institutions. Participants in the panel believed that advertising contracts with public institutions often favor pro-government media at the local and national level.

The panelists agreed there are serious issues with media resources. The media business is expensive, and while the adoption of the 2002 Media Law introduced certain incentives, at least when it comes to stimulating media pluralism, media companies, in principle, do not enjoy any special privileges compared to other businesses. The same applies to those employed by the media industry. Spaić noted that Chapter III, Articles 13–16 of the August 2020 Media Law, for the first time, prescribes the obligation to publish financial contributions allocated to media from public funds. “This obligation refers to three actors,” she said, “all public agencies from which the funds are discharged, the media receiving those funds, and the line ministry. The Montenegrin market is relatively small; according to rough estimates, it amounts to €9 million [\$10.1 million].” And, she added, “Clientelism is very much present in media advertising operations.”

Regarding the economic and social position of journalists, journalist Pavicevic said that the total monthly income of a media professional or even a journalist is hard to pinpoint because MONSTAT (Montenegrin Statistical Office) does not record that data. “The average monthly salary at the national level is €520 (\$630), and an OSCE survey has shown that journalists make, on average, €470 (\$570), which is less than the national average. Journalists simply cannot live on that. There is no system in place to reward the best journalists, and media owners do not invest in journalists’ training or in investigative journalism,” she explained.



The legislation regulating the status and operations of media in Montenegro is mainly aligned with international standards and the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. In 2020, the new Media Law and Law on National Public Service (pertaining to the state-owned, radio-television station) were adopted. These laws should provide financial support to the local media sector.

However, even after these new laws were adopted, unregulated areas of online journalism and operations of media through social networks remain. There is also ongoing public debate over the best model to ensure political neutrality in the work of the public service broadcaster (Montenegrin Radio-TV). As in previous years, the panelists reiterated that existing regulations are mostly acceptable, but the issue, as always, is their inconsistent enforcement. Courts in Montenegro are obliged to uphold the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, relying in the process on the European Court of Human Rights case law. However, the panelists felt that court practice often fails to produce appropriate results in terms of a balanced approach between free speech and media accountability. With respect to some solutions stemming from the new law, a few of the panelists pointed out that Article 30, paragraph 2 of the law is actually a step back because now journalists can be obliged, at the request of the state prosecutor, to reveal their source of information in three particular circumstances: for the sake of protecting national security, protection of territorial integrity, and protection of health.

When it comes to information technology, Montenegro has recorded strong technological development in recent years. Media digitalization

is complete, including the National Public Service Radio and Television of Montenegro; mobile telephone service is omnipresent, with four licensed operators; and the Internet is accessible in all urban and many rural areas in Montenegro. Regarding access to government-owned information, the panelists overwhelmingly felt that this area has room for improvement. As for media licenses, complaints persist regarding competition in the electronic media market (i.e., the panelists pointed to the especially problematic presence of foreign media through cable television in a way that, in their view, damages local television stations). Finally, the panelists believed that news channels are not perceived as independent; rather, editorial policies are politicized or dependent on media owners' commercial interests—doubtlessly jeopardizing professional standards and preventing media from acting in the public interest.

Montenegrin media are officially free, but fundamental practical issues persist, including political misuse of media and politicized editorial policies related to the National Public Service (Montenegrin Radio and TV) as underlined by the European Commission in its latest progress report on Montenegro.

Dusko Kovacevic, a freelance blogger, observed, “People definitely have the right to create, promote, and publicly disseminate information, especially in light of new and applied media. We don’t have a problem with the government or with political elites but rather self-censorship and journalists’ adulation of political and other power centers, as well as unprofessional work for the said power centers.”

When assessing legal protections for journalists, Vuković said, “Despite the opposition from the media community, in the

new Media Law the status of confidential sources of information has deteriorated. We have seen cases where data on confidential journalists’ sources haven’t been protected, and in two cases, mobile phones have been taken away from journalists. In the case of investigative journalist Vladimir Otashevich, the police took his phone in order to extract a recording of the journalist with the prime minister’s brother, and during the incident, police officers threatened the journalist. In the case of the editor in chief of web portal FOS Media, Angela Dzikanovich, police officers took her phone under the pretext that she has published information that had upset the public.”

Marko Vešovic, a journalist with the daily *DAN*, agreed, and said, “In practice, in recent months, we don’t see retaliation because of reporting and publishing information. Earlier, journalists were attacked because of their reporting, and in the case of *DAN* in 2004, the editor-in-chief was assassinated, and we also witnessed more than 70 attacks on media and journalists. The new Media Law is very restrictive regarding a journalist’s right to protect his/her source of information. However, in practice, things are going well recently; there are no attacks so far, and there are no restrictions in terms of using, creating, and disseminating information.”

Ivana Jabučanin, the editor of Radio Cetinje, a local public service, added, “We do have legal protection for journalists and free speech; however, in practice, this is not applied. Local media are exposed to enormous pressure because ruling political parties have the need to impact their editorial policies, and, based on my experience, I can say that existing protection mechanisms haven’t been implemented in practice. After the last parliamentary elections, our media faced blackmail and threats by the local authorities, which culminated in cutting us out of the local budget and depriving us of funds necessary for our operations.”

In connection to this, Miško Strugar, director, Radio Antena M, pointed out, “We do have a good legislative framework, and there are protection mechanisms, but there is also self-censorship, and, therefore, we have to empower journalists to resist pressures coming from the media owners, authorities, and from other power centers. However, the greatest

Multiple Channels Indicators

- People have rights to create, share, and consume information.
- People have adequate access to channels of information.
- There are appropriate channels for government information.
- There are diverse channels for information flow.
- Information channels are independent.

amount of self-censorship is related to information regarding the Serbian Orthodox Church because information producers, both professional and nonprofessional, are fearful that they might have problems if they write anything remotely critical about that religious community.”

Citizens generally enjoy adequate access to news channels and, thanks to different modes of communication, encounter no problems accessing relevant news channels. As Pavicevic noted, “In Montenegro, there are a number of media with both national and local coverage, and the means to distribute that news (television sets, radios, newspapers, mobile phones with applications) are accessible to everyone. Newspapers are sold at specific locations but also in common supermarkets, gas stations, etc. Every café and restaurant has newspapers on offer to their customers. In every café or restaurant, there are television sets. Furthermore, Montenegro has twice as many mobile phones compared to its population.”

An estimated 70% of the population has Internet access, Spaić said, adding that there are an estimated 47,835 cable Internet users and 30,638 ADSL connections as of January 2021, per the Agency for Electronic Communication and Postal Services.

For 16 years now, Montenegrin legislation has supported the right of free access to information. Currently, the 2012 Act on Free Access to Information regulates this area. This law enables access to government information, and it is based on principles of free access to information, transparency of government agencies, the public’s right to know, and equality; it is implemented in line with standards embedded in international human rights agreements and generally accepted rules of international law. Article 3 of the law allows everyone, local or foreign, to access information without the need to present reasons. However, Vuković noted, “The Freedom of Information Act gives greater power to those in possession of information of public interest than to the citizens and media seeking that information. Every government entity has the power to classify as confidential any document they wish, so it

turns out that many decisions that are of public interest were classified as confidential so that citizens and media wouldn’t have an insight in corruptive government practices.”

Regarding the Act on Free Access to Information, Spaić observed, “Changes in the law from 2017 relate to technical issues, such as reused information, machine-readable format, and open format for information disclosure. Information seekers are dissatisfied with the 2017 Freedom

of Information Act, as it limits the space for ‘free access to information’ based on misinterpretation and abuse of the term ‘business secret.’ Unlike Croatia and Slovenia, which have passed laws on ‘business secrets,’ exhaustively listing all government bodies and institutions that

have the right to limit access to information and regulating strictly up to which point business secrets are to be protected, that step was never taken in Montenegro. This legislative gap was abused, making enforcement of the law in this area very problematic.”

State authorities generally have spokespersons, although the panelists noted that sometimes media cannot obtain information they request from the government. Spokespeople try to publish true information, but they are also selective, providing partial information to the public about controversial events or potential scandals. However, the panelists believed that the spokespersons of public institutions generally facilitate providing reliable information

Most of the panelists agree that there are no serious limitations regarding different channels for information flow, and they do not see this issue as problematic. The only sensitive point relates to transparency regarding ownership because there are no data on some media owners, especially for online journalism and web portals, which often do not even display a press imprint.

The 2010 Law on Electronic Media has been amended four times (twice in 2011 and two more subsequent changes in 2013 and 2016), regulates ownership concentration in broadcast media (radio

“We do have legal protection for journalists and free speech; however, in practice, this is not applied,” said Jabučanin.

and television), and provides appropriate control mechanisms. The National Agency for Electronic Media is charged with enforcing this law, and so far, no cases have been challenged in court.

In Montenegro, there are plenty of media at the national and local level that are owned by various legal entities and individuals, so there is a lack of clear evidence of media monopolies. At the same time, in recent years there have been no cases of broadcasting frequencies being challenged in court, although there has been political and public controversy about the presence of electronic media operating in Montenegro that are owned by entities in other countries.

In general, everyone can establish a media under the same legal conditions, if they follow the proscribed procedures. Regarding public service media at the national and local municipality levels, the panelists' main concerns centered on political influence exerted on these media, which is directly related to their operations being funded from the state budget. There is a general public opinion that the ruling parties use budgetary power to interfere in the editorial policy of public service media.

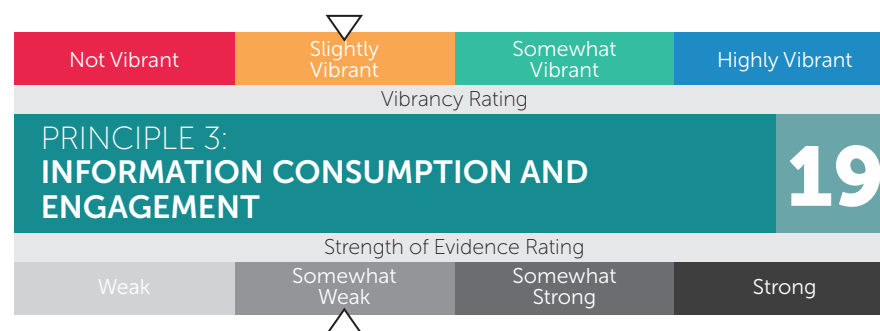
The panelists agreed that news channels can hardly be considered independent, as the political influence of their owners and advertisers is obvious. This is quite visible in private media and is also the subject of a long-term dispute regarding the National Public Service, with the government accused of exerting improper influence on its editorial policy. All these influences are reflected in the quality of reporting.

Media owners significantly influence the editorial policy of their media, and they are regularly engaged in the daily operations of their media outlets. The panelists also discussed that media outlets shy away from criticizing large advertisers, lest they lose critically needed revenue, which leads such media to turn a blind eye toward their funding sources. Concurrently, there is a general public opinion that media which have concluded advertising contracts with public authorities avoid criticizing—or are less critical of—state bodies and their officials.

Public service media are financed from state or municipal budgets. As a

result, the panelists generally believed that they are under the influence of the ruling parties. While it is generally believed that regulatory agencies that focus on issues such as issuing licenses and frequency allocations do not cause controversy, there are always objections regarding the influence of the governing policy on the work of regulators. Montenegro does not have state-owned media, and public service media are not privy to more government information than private media.

Emphasizing that Montenegro's media market is small—650,000 to support many media companies—Pavicevic concluded, “All media survive on advertising, and the number of advertisers is proportional to the size of the country. Bearing in mind that since the last global financial crisis [2008-2009], they are all cutting down on advertising expenses, and usually one advertiser opts for a single media, and not for many of them. It is rare that media publish critical information about their key advertisers.”



The panelists generally agreed that despite the existence of privacy protection regulations for years now, Montenegro's online community cannot be considered sufficiently secure, limited by citizens' readiness to privately protect their communication channels. Additionally, media literacy remains weak, leaving many Montenegrins unable to read the news critically or distinguish fake news. Although Montenegro has free media, the citizens are not well-informed consumers and fail to exercise their freedom productively.

However, there are positive signs of growth. Citizens are distancing

themselves from hate speech and reporting it to the authorities more frequently. In addition, local media can be considered a strong point for Montenegro's media sector.

Montenegro's law protecting personal data, passed in 2008, has been altered three times and will undergo one more change to align with European law. In line with Article 4 of that law, protection of personal data is granted to every person regardless of citizenship, residence, race, skin color, gender, language, religion, political or other affiliations, nationality, social background, financial status, education, social status, or any other personal feature. The intention is clear: to grant Montenegrin citizens adequate privacy protection. Additionally, in special circumstances (related to business, tax dues, etc.), provisions of the Law on Electronic Identification and Electronic Signature are to be applied.

The Law on Personal Data Protection also regulates the Agency for Personal Data Protection, which is required to supervise private data protection. Most media strive to bolster their digital security, with major media outlets employing their own IT teams dedicated to protecting their digital products. When it comes to the general population, the younger generations increasingly appear to possess the knowledge and skills that provide them with adequate digital protection. Evidence for this is largely grounded in periodic public surveys conducted mainly by specialized non-governmental organizations.

Spaić described another concern related to the changes announced for the Personal Data Protection Law, which,

she explained, “will mean transposition of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which are already mandatory for us. Although GDPR provisions already apply to Montenegro (in terms of online providers of goods and services and EU citizens), so some institutions are already training their staff—administrators and data handlers—and in this respect, suspending work for changes in the law is simply bad news.”

Milan Jovanovic, director of the Digital Forensic Center, highlighted the need for a more comprehensive approach, adding, “Mitigating threats from DDoS attacks can be achieved only if we have protection strategies at several levels. This involves advanced attack prevention and threat management systems that combine firewall, VPN, content filtration, and balancing servers' load.”

Media literacy in Montenegro, as a product of organized government and education strategy and productive practices, is still in its infancy, reflecting negatively on the overall strength of critical analysis and media culture in Montenegro. Furthermore, poor media literacy, especially in an era of digital media, online journalism, and the expansion of social networks, opens the space for the manipulation of information and misleading reporting.

In Montenegrin schools, courses covering media literacy are optional and insufficiently used—depriving younger generations of media literacy fundamentals and critical thinking skills regarding press articles, news, and information. Spaić commented, “Some within the international community are organizing, on an ad-hoc basis with specifically targeted groups, trainings on different topics related to media literacy, but unfortunately, the importance of media literacy hasn't been recognized in Montenegro yet. It is extremely important to come up with a systemic response and identify media literacy as a necessity and the single most important tool in combating fake news.”

Vuković commented, “Media and IT literacy are more in the focus of the NGO sector rather than public education institutions. The government, so far, has shown little understanding of the issue, and media literacy has been marginalized. Although a designated working group developed a Strategy of IT and Media Literacy a few years ago, the government

Information Consumption and Engagement Indicators

- People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.
- People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.
- People engage productively with the information that is available to them.
- Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs.
- Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

failed to adopt it.” Vešovic also emphasized the importance of improving the education system to boost the development of curricula promoting media literacy.

When it comes to citizens’ relationship to free speech and their use of available information, the panelists were divided. Montenegro has a lot of media and no restrictions in terms of accessing foreign news channels. Furthermore, the online community boosts opportunities for public debates, comments, and sharing of individual opinions. However, the panelists gave mediocre scores to the media culture and possibilities for productive public debate. Media platforms enable citizens to conduct constructive and democratic debates, but the dominance of politically charged, ideological voices hinder the development of a healthier media culture.

In rare cases, people are held accountable for their statements, and in recent periods, this relates exclusively to hate speech on social networks. Evaluating this indicator, Kovacevic noticed, “People productively and proactively participate in information processing, especially by posting comments on portals and even more intensively on social networks.”

Pavicevic added, “In Montenegro, citizens enjoy all the prerequisites for being well informed. Exchanging views and opinions is possible within family settings and with friends; citizens are able to write to newspapers, public institutions. Most Montenegrin citizens are on social networks, where they express their views and engage in debates on a daily basis. However, we almost have no organized social events, whether traditional or by means of digital platforms, offering opportunities to exchange opinions on the government or different policies.” Before the COVID-19 pandemic, she noted, ministries, NGOs, and international organizations used to offer such opportunities in the form of public debates and roundtables.

Media are aware of the need to survey their customers’ needs, and the panelists felt confident that editorial teams and media producers—

especially larger, more serious media—use survey results extensively to shape their editorial policies. The major obstacle for media is the lack of funds, which prevents most of them from running their own surveys—although there are exceptions (for example, the National Public Service Media periodically implements public opinion surveys, which are publicly available). Most, however, must rely heavily on surveys or data periodically published by NGOs (for example the Center for Democracy and Human Rights (CEDEM), one of the leading NGOs in Montenegro, specializes in such work).

According to the data from the Ministry of Culture and Electronic Media Agency in Montenegro, there are many media outlets in the country: 70 print media, out of which 50 are active; 83 active electronic media, out of which 38 are commercial radios; 2 radio and 3 television stations within the National Public Service; 14 local publicly owned radios; 2 nonprofit radios; 3 local public television stations; and 17 commercial television stations, out of which 4 have national coverage. It is obvious that all these media outlets are in fierce competition against each other, with poorly paid journalists and pressure to please commercial advertisers—and as a result, the general public’s needs often come second.

Most of the panelists agreed that community media represent a bright side of Montenegro’s media world. These media are less susceptible to fake news; although local public service media receive some political pressure, generally, the panelists agreed that communities have a high degree of confidence in their local media. They believed that community media meet the news, entertainment, and identity needs of the local population to a much greater extent than regional or national media. Jabučanin explained, “Local media, unlike those with national coverage, almost never contribute to the creation or dissemination of fake news but focus rather on the needs and interests of respective local communities.”

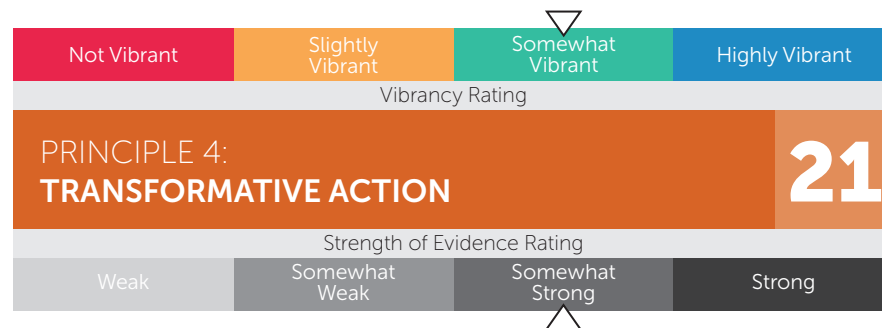
Bojanic agreed, noting, “Montenegrin citizens believe their local media.

“People productively and proactively participate in information processing, especially by posting comments on portals and even more intensively on social networks,” said Kovacevic.

The best proof of that is the fact that local radio stations rank higher than all the other media in their communities.”

Vešovic added, “I think that Montenegro has vibrant and strong local media that are very much visible. I think those media enjoy strong support from their communities. Also, local media do not disseminate fake news, at least not that I have seen recently.”

Community media appear to be much closer to citizens’ needs and interests and that is why they are viewed sympathetically and enjoy greater confidence. They are also “much more thorough in terms of reporting on local issues compared to their national counterparts,” Jovanovic said, citing examples such as the controversy surrounding the cutting down of cypress trees in Bar and citizens’ objections because of environmental reasons and the protest of parents against mandatory mask-wearing in schools along Montenegro’s coastline.



Media channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines. Information exchange across ideological lines, within the media sector, is ongoing, but the panelists generally feel that ideological orientation determines the audience for that specific media and thus the choice of television and radio stations citizens want to listen to, although the most ideologically biased groups tend to prefer print or online media.

Almost all major media companies present themselves as independent news sources, but the fact remains that media are recognized by the

public based on their editorial policies that favor certain political groups or ideological positions. On the other hand, there is not much media debate among different ideological views, although media do occasionally provide a platform for conflicting positions to exchange their views. However, this practice has not become customary, and, therefore, there is a dearth of constructive debate between conflicting political and ideological camps. The panelists felt that citizen use of quality information is not very high and that a large portion of the general public is susceptible to fake news, as the elections and the pandemic abundantly exposed. Montenegro has seen unusually strong activity of civil society organizations in the country for years now, with a number of active NGOs making valuable contributions to strengthen the public discourse and hold the government accountable.

Information producers and numerous distribution channels do not foster adequate information sharing across ideological lines. Media are dominantly politically and ideologically affiliated, and this fact limits quality public debates and the development of societally productive democratic diversities. On that point, Kovacevic said, “Ideological affiliation, not the truth, is a highway people are using to navigate through media landscape in order to see the ‘other side’ or other people’s views.”

Vuković reiterated, “Most of the media are not officially affiliated with political parties, although the majority of leading, as well as and other media, are recognized as in favor of certain parties, whether they are in power at the national or municipal level.”

Milica Babić, editor of the public service TV CG, commented, “There are independent sources of news and information, and they usually have political connotation. People are following the reporting of various media with different ideological views. However, if certain media are not ideologically close to them, people tend to reject everything they publish/post as a lie, despite presented evidence and proof.”

In this regard, Strugar said, “There are independent sources of news and information, but still very few that are not politically ‘colored.’ People do read/follow different media, of different ideological affiliations. As one of

the panelists said, once you had to read between the lines to find out the truth and now you have to read between newspapers.”

Citizens do not quality information in the best possible way, the panelists agreed, and large portions of the general public form their views based on fake news, which they absorb without question or critique.

This became obvious during the pandemic, when large swaths of the population, especially younger people, ignored health risks—and because of that, Montenegro is one of the worst-hit countries in Europe. That is why Spaić emphasized, “In emergency situations, people are prone to believe fake news, to act harmfully to themselves and others, neglecting health recommendations, and believing fake news.”

Babić added, “During March, April, and May, the then-government did the best it could for citizens to obtain the right information on the pandemic. It organized regular press conferences, and institutions’ representatives were at media disposal, and this meant that citizens had a feeling of safety and accountability of the government. However, since July, when the electoral campaign was in full swing, everything went from bad to worse. Politicians were giving irresponsible statements, media were peddling fake news, several information sources started disseminating fake news, and citizens started behaving irresponsibly.”

NGOs play an active role in society, and the strongest among them (for example, Center for Civic Education (CGO), Network for Affirmation of NGO Sector (MANS), CEDEM, Center for Democratic Transition (CDT), Institut Alternativa, Civic

Transformative Action Indicators

- Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.
- Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.
- Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.
- Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.
- Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Alliance, Human Rights Action, Media Center) are very much present in the public discourse. They have been recognized for their criticism of the government and poor political practices—and for their professional treatment of public policies, respectable public opinion surveys, media-sector analysis, and protection of human rights.

The panelists generally believe that NGOs, as the most active segment of civil society, share quality information aimed at improving the society. In addition, panelists are also of the opinion that the NGO sector has significantly contributed to strengthening progressive public policies, formed a proactive relationship toward Euro-Atlantic integrations, and improved the media environment overall; according to Babić, “NGOs are an important source of information and many of them are opening their own research centers in order to reach faster and more effectively their target audiences.”

Cooperation between the media and the NGO sector is traditionally strong as well. As Vešović commented, “Maybe more than in other countries in the region, in Montenegro, the media are actively engaged with civil society in order to cover each and every important issue. What is important, and what we see on the ground, is the strong coordination between journalists and civil society activities being established.” Some NGOs, including CDT and the platform Raskrinkavanje.me, actively expose fake news and support campaigns for the change of public policies with accurate data and reports.

There is a contrast between the positive contributions of these NGOs and what can be seen as the excessive, socially, and politically unacceptable position of the dominant religious community, the Serbian Orthodox Church, which actively disseminated propaganda and sought to advance its clerical-nationalistic perspective in the latest parliamentary elections. The church directly interfered in the formation of the new Montenegrin government, including the selection of the new prime minister.

The panelists believe that, for the development of public policies, the government does not use quality information enough. The former government was pretty much in conflict with leading NGOs and part of

influential media. The current government, just two months after coming to power in December 2020, tried to incorporate a certain number of NGO leaders into the government anticorruption body (MANS, Institut Alternativa). Nevertheless, the government has been exposed to strong criticism from a number of influential media (for example, *Pobjeda*, Portal CDM, Portal Analitika, Radio Antena M, Portal Lucha) and in the meantime became a bad example of quality public relations. Ultimately, the panelists generally felt that the information produced by the media is neither supportive of quality public management nor do they contribute solid foundations for good democratic practices and democratic norms.

The panelists mainly disputed government practices in terms of using quality information, which is necessary to make good public policy decisions. The long-term practice of the former government was assessed negatively, and the initial practice of the new government has already been evaluated by the panelists as unacceptable as well. Both the former and the current governments have been recognized for the lack of productive communication with the media sector and the NGO sector as well. In addition, the current government has strong inclinations toward one religious community (Serbian Orthodox Church, whose seat is in another country—Serbia—and who is under the strong influence of the Serbian regime and Serbian President Vučić), thus discrediting the constitutional concept of secularism and inciting discriminatory behavior with respect to the orthodox population (the government is ignoring the social and legislative status of the Montenegrin Orthodox Church). When assessing the radically reduced relationship of the new government with the general public, Spaić said, “Tweets as the basic communication tool of the government is not a good message either to the local or international community. Absence of press conferences and answers to journalists’ questions is a very problematic practice of the new government.”

While information is plentiful in Montenegro, it is not leveraged to hold the government accountable or develop democratic norms. Panelists discussed that corruption scandals often are not fully prosecuted,

because everything depends on the actors involved in the corruption. Senior officials find it easier to avoid responsibility, while lower-ranking officials are more likely to be prosecuted. When media report on human rights violations, there is generally reaction from government bodies to take action. As a result, in spite of many examples of responsible government bodies reacting to media reports of corruption or human rights violations, the general position of the panelists was that overall institutional practice is below the threshold expected of a European Union candidate country.

Panelists agreed that quality information affects the prevention or reduction of human rights violations by national or local authorities. Quality information also contributes to the public exerting positive pressure on state bodies in the event of a violation of civil liberties. However, the panelists were divided on the issue that reliable and truthful information contributes to fair and free elections at the local and national levels. In this sense, objective media and media that publish

quality information often have significant influence on the choice of voters during election campaigns.

Taken as a whole, Kovacevic observed, “We don’t have a good governance or stable democratic norms, so even quality information has only limited impact.”

Vešovic added, “The former government was very much corrupted and criminalized, slow, ineffective, and on top of that the judiciary was quite servile to it. They were particularly resistant to serious electoral reforms. However, now we have a new government, so that may change...but it is still hard to predict. We shall see in six months what the new government brings.”

The panelists were critical of the way the government uses quality information in articulating good public policies, particularly with respect to the democratic practices of the executive power and with political elites sharing information that is in the general public’s interest.

“Ideological affiliation, not the truth, is a highway people are using to navigate through media landscape in order to see the ‘other side’ or other people’s views,” said Kovacevic.

LIST OF PANELISTS

Tanja Pavicevic, journalist, *Pobjeda*, Podgorica

Marko Vešovic, journalist, *DAN*, Podgorica

Marijana Bojanic, director, TV VIJESTI, Podgorica

Milica Babić, editor, TV CG, Podgorica

Duško Vuković, program manager, Media Centar, Podgorica

Nikola Dragash, journalist, Portal Analitika, Podgorica

Samir Rastoder, editor in chief, Radio Petnjica, Petnjica

Ivana Jabučanin, editor, Radio Cetinje, Cetinje

Miško Strugar, director, Radio Antena M, Podgorica

Dushan Kovacevic, freelance blogger, Podgorica

Milan Jovanovic, director, Digital Forensic Center, Podgorica

Aneta Spaić, dean, law faculty, University of Montenegro, Podgorica

MODERATOR

Rade Bojovic, CEO, Media DOO

NORTH MACEDONIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 1



USAID
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE**21**

North Macedonia's government has only been in office since 2017. However, that has been enough time for the ruling coalition to launch long-promised reforms to the country's ailing media ecosystem. However, that reform process has been delayed, most recently in 2020 because of elections, the government's focus on its protracted and difficult European Union (EU) candidacy, and the COVID-19 pandemic, which touched all areas of social and political life and further eroded the shaky fiscal foundation of the country's media and information industries.

The parliamentary elections held on July 15 resulted in a new four-year term for the incumbent cabinet led by the Social-Democratic Union of Macedonia and the Democratic Union for Integration (the leading party of Albanians). Traditional media covered the campaign in a more or less balanced way, while online media and social networks were more partisan and sources of misinformation. Of importance to the media system was the election law decision to finance campaign political advertising solely from the state budget. The allocation was based on the total number of registered voters in the country, predefined prices for advertising time and space, and it amounted to almost 15 percent of the country's advertising market.

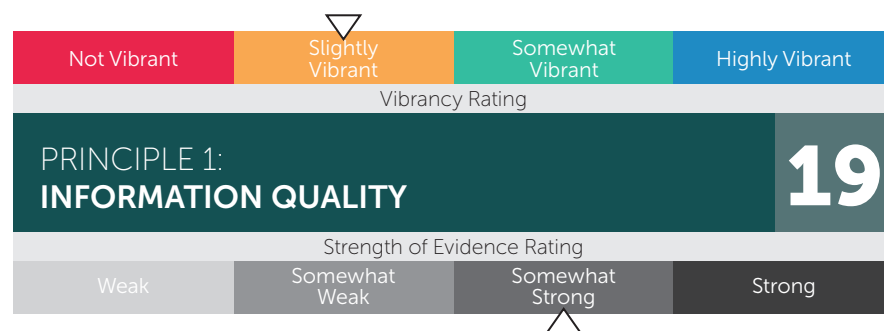
In 2020, North Macedonia was again blocked on its path to EU membership, this time by neighboring Bulgaria disputing several important aspects of Macedonian identity, insisting that Macedonian language and Macedonian identity have Bulgarian roots, and that Macedonian history is appropriating large chunks of Bulgarian history. On a positive note, the country became NATO's 30th member in March.

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic had a huge effect on North Macedonia's social, economic, and political life. The so-called infodemic did not spare the country either, with the government and the opposition exchanging blows and accusations over infection and mortality rates, preparedness of the health-care system, and failed efforts to procure vaccines. The pandemic hit North Macedonia's economy hard: gross domestic product shrank by 14.9 percent in the second quarter alone, although the contraction slowed to 3.3 percent in the third quarter of 2020. The government implemented several programs of economic assistance – amounting to a total of €1.2 billion (\$1.4 billion) -- mostly in the form of salary subsidies but also including capital investment projects.

The media were covered by those emergency economic assistance programs, and broadcast media were also relieved of the obligation to pay annual fees for the use of frequencies and broadcasting permits.

The overall country score reflected the panelists' position that the quality of information is falling due to extreme polarization along political, ethnic, and religious lines and a growing tendency to avoid doing original or enterprise reporting. The panel concluded that while there are multiple channels for information and many information providers, the numbers alone do not ensure true media and information pluralism; habits of information consumption and engagement remain at the mercy of political actors; and the chances for transformative action based on accurate information remain remote given the divisions in the country.

The country ranked 92nd in the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index for 2020, up slightly from 95th in 2019.



The quality of information in North Macedonia is in steady decline. Panelists were particularly concerned about information from online sources and the abundance of fact-based information produced for the sole purpose of weaponizing it against political or business opponents. Panelists said news organizations' financial instability in an overcrowded market has resulted in seriously understaffed editorial offices. Only a handful of media outlets have enough journalists to provide somewhat complete coverage. Panelists also agreed that the main financing model, advertising sales revenue supplemented by donor funds and some subsidies (for the print media), will remain, perpetuating the current economic crisis in the media and information industry.

The 24-hour news cycle and the insistence on being first with a story and getting the most clicks mean that few media rely on well-researched and sourced stories. Indeed, panelists gave Indicator 5—whether content is sufficiently resourced—their lowest mark of this principle. The most highly scored indicator in this principle was overall inclusivity and diversity of content.

North Macedonia has the infrastructure to allow content producers to cover all topics of interest to the public, in all geographic areas, and in multiple languages. Forty-five television stations and 68 radio stations broadcast at the national, regional, or local levels, in addition to the five TV channels and four radio stations of the public service broadcaster Macedonian Radio and Television (MRT). While radio is dominated by music stations (only one of the four national radio stations produces its own news), all TV stations air a mix of entertainment and information programming and place a huge emphasis on news and political talk

shows (largely because they cannot afford to produce or broadcast quality entertainment, such as popular sports or high-end drama). Panelists said broadcast media, especially local and regional TV stations, rely on outdated equipment.

The four dailies and 17 weekly and other print periodicals, hundreds of online news websites, and amateur producers of content all have easy access to the necessary technical equipment, broadband Internet, transmission capacities, printing presses, and distribution networks.

Panelists said a key problem is the media's tendency to regurgitate the same quick-hit stories rather than doing enterprise reporting. Sead Dzgal, a lecturer at the International Balkan University in Skopje, said he and his colleagues worked with Foundation NGO Infocenter Skopje (NGO Infocenter) to monitor media coverage of the 2020 parliamentary elections. "We found that the media, instead of producing one proper, well-researched article, would publish 10 short, instant news articles. Of course, those 10 articles will be of low quality," he said. Equally important, panelists said, is the growing trend of uniformity of information, with all newscasts of the leading national broadcasters, for example, offering the same reports, sometimes in the same order.

Panelists agreed that traditional print and broadcast media are more likely to disseminate reliable information and quality content than online media, which are far more likely to spread misinformation and disinformation, especially on social media. "Traditional mainstream media do have some form of regulation and standards that they mostly adhere to. Online media remain a gray area," said Vesna Nikodinovska, a program director for the Macedonian Institute for the Media (MIM). On the other hand, in a poll by the institute, 25 percent of respondents said political parties and political elites are the main sources of disinformation, while 22 percent said all journalists and media spread disinformation.

Panelists noted that few media can invest in proper fact-checking departments and that speed trumps accuracy. Slobodanka Jovanovska, from the Nezavisen.mk news website, noted that her newsroom does not have the staff or money to spare for fact-checking. "We're guided by

our experience and our instincts to recognize information that may be a problem,” she said.

As for disinformation, no systematized data is available, but the CriThink and Vistinomer.mk (truthometer) fact-checking operations, run by the Metamorphosis Foundation, report that about two-thirds of the articles they debunked in 2020 were related to COVID-19. Some of the most prominent sustained disinformation efforts tied to the COVID-19 pandemic, panelists noted, were localized versions of global conspiracy theories, such as Bill Gates’s alleged plan to implant microchips in people through COVID-19 vaccines and the role of 5G technology as a source and vector for the spread of the virus.

Rather than a sustained disinformation campaign focused on a single topic, however, the country’s two main political camps used their armies of trolls and bots to challenge as disinformation and “fake news” every utterance or move by the other side, almost exclusively via social media. “Back in the day, party activists were expected to put up campaign posters. Now, they sit at their computers and churn out party-generated disinformation,” Dzidal said.

Panelists also agreed that there was a significant increase in hate speech and other harmful content online. The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights said the amount of hate speech in the country’s public discourse had doubled in the past year, but some panelists thought that went too far. “People are too quick to call every insulting, libelous, or disagreeable piece of content hate speech, when upon scrutiny and by the legal definition of hate speech, it wouldn’t really warrant that,” said Sefer Tahiri, a professor at the South East European (SEE) University in Tetovo.

The European Parliament has noted the problem of hate speech and harmful speech in foreign-owned media in the country, especially a group of media owned by Hungarian investors close to Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s government. On the other hand, little evidence of much-discussed Russian interference, including the clandestine funding of media, has turned up.

Panelists said foreign relations are also a source of hate speech. Bulgaria’s recent insistence that North Macedonia acknowledge its

majority language and ethnicity as truly Bulgarian “resulted in a flood of hate speech in the media in both countries,” said Goran Gavrilov, general manager of Kanal 77 Radio, a national broadcaster in the eastern city of Stip.

Panelists said that except for nonprofit media supported by content-production grants from foreign donors, media coverage dedicated to minority, vulnerable, or marginalized groups is largely absent from the mainstream media.

Panelists also bemoaned media segregation on linguistic or ethnic grounds. “We now have Macedonian television, in the Macedonian language, for ethnic Macedonians and Albanian-language television for Albanians. Similarly, Turks watch Turkish TV, Bosniaks watch Bosnian TV channels available on cable. That’s a very negative development,” Dzidal said. Panelists noted with worry that the same trend is happening in public broadcasting, which has established separate language services for all major ethnic and linguistic communities in North Macedonia, losing its role as an agent of social cohesion.

Information Quality Indicators

- There is quality information on a variety of topics available.
- The norm for information is that it is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.
- The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.
- The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.
- Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Another effect of this segregation, panelists said, is that media ignore the problems and issues faced by other ethnic communities. “Journalists and editors share the blame here,” said Urim Hasipi, a journalist from Tetovo, noting that reporters from Alsat, the Albanian-language TV channel, and Sitel, the leading Macedonian-language TV channel, rarely venture to report from outside their primary ethnically and linguistically defined audiences.

Panelists noted that regular surveys of the structure of

workforce in broadcast media conducted by the audiovisual media regulator indicated that there is gender balance in the newsrooms and in the ranks of journalists and reporters, but that there are few women who hold senior editorial or managerial positions. “It is an unwritten rule that the owners, managers, editors-in-chief are men. The same principle pervades all types of media”, said Nikodinovska from MIM. She also noted that female journalists and reporters are more likely to be targeted by hate-speech and threats against their personal integrity.

Panelists were unanimous that the country’s information industry cannot sustain itself on the total available advertising spending of €25 million to €30 million (\$30 million to \$36 million). Notably, after a law passed before last year’s parliamentary elections allowed campaign political advertising to be funded only with subsidies from the state budget, a total of €3.5 million (\$4.2 million) was spent, amounting to about 13 percent of the total advertising spending in the country. The media also received emergency relief funds from the government, and broadcasters did not have to pay their annual transmission and broadcasting licensing fees, the second of which amounted to about €1.18 million (approximately \$1.28 million).

In the economic crisis that accompanied the pandemic, advertisers cut their ad spending by about 20 percent, less than advertising industry insiders had projected. They also shifted some funds from traditional media ads to digital outlets, particularly to social media.

Sales of advertising space remain the main source of financing for the information industry, but some have found a nice niche as nonprofits. Relying solely on foreign funding, they tend to produce the most accurate and unbiased news and information. As for local media, those panelists said they do not have advertisers but rather “sponsors and supporters,” reflecting the practice of bigger companies in their local economy to buy ad space against any financial logic.

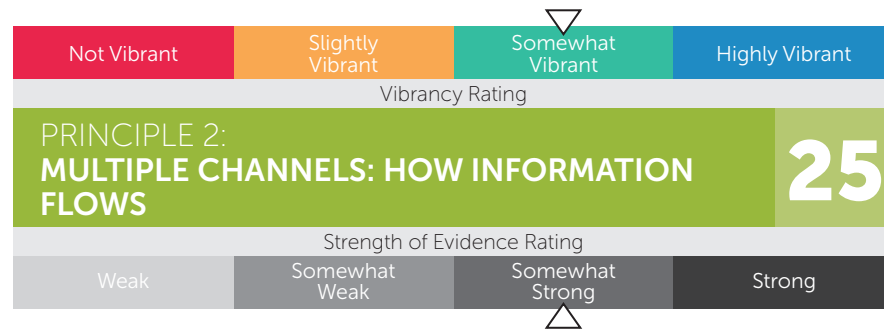
There is little interest in and few resources for testing alternative sources of income. Panelists said some new models of funding for quality journalism are simply not available in the country, typically for legal or technical reasons. “If a journalist wants to go to Substack, Facebook, Google, Patreon, and supplement his earnings, he or she can’t do that, and that option is not available here since they can’t legally collect such earnings,” said Darko Buldiovski, a blogger and podcaster who manages the NewMedia.mk digital advertising agency.

Under those circumstances, public funds and subsidy programs take on added importance. Faced with declining circulation and ad revenue, along with the failure of the few paywall trials, print media survive almost completely on indirect subsidies, by carrying the government’s mandatory public notices, and direct aid, in which half of their printing and distribution costs are picked up by the government. Those are worth approximately \$750,000 combined.

In 2020, some broadcasters demanded that the government create subsidy programs for them. While not opposed to the idea altogether, panelists said oversight should ensure that public money is distributed impartially and not primarily to media friendly to the government and that it is spent to promote the public interest and help the most vulnerable types of media, especially local reporting and information.

There were voices of dissent among the panelists though. “I believe, regarding the subsidies, that we have to make a clean break once and for all. We need to reach an agreement that we should eliminate state interventionism altogether,” said Tahiri from the SEE University in Tetovo. Even the public broadcaster should be independent, he said, alluding to a fiscal crunch and questions of credibility that have resulted from funding the service from the government budget.

“We found that the media, instead of producing one proper, well-researched article, would publish 10 short, instant news articles. Of course, those 10 articles will be of low quality,” said Dzical.



Existing laws and regulations offer strong protections for citizens and journalists to freely express their opinions or engage in the production of information. The Constitution of North Macedonia guarantees freedom of expression and the right to access information. The country is also party to international agreements that guarantee these rights, such as the United Nations' International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights.

Except for North Macedonia's Law on audiovisual media services (regulating broadcast media), which needs a serious overhaul, its media and information rules are sound. There are excellent freedom of information (FOI) legislation and strong regulations against media concentration. The problem, rather, is in the implementation of these laws and regulations.

The state does not openly try to censor the media, although panelists noted that all political parties have their "armies of bots" poised to dispute and discredit on social media any information and news unfavorable to them.

Panelists gave their highest marks to Indicator 7 for people's adequate access to channels of information; they gave their lowest marks to Indicator 10 on the independence of information channels.

Journalists are generally free from overt and direct pressure by political or corporate interests, and panelists agreed that the environment is much better than during the previous government's tenure. But panelists said journalists are not completely free from pressure—especially

financial pressure—to self-censor. In the industry's ongoing financial crisis, control over advertising spending, which is often politically motivated, even for private companies, gives corporations and the government huge sway.

"We have no money, which means we're no longer the so-called fourth estate. We all keep silent because we all need to get money from somewhere. Threats to our physical integrity, judicial pressure, we don't see that type of pressure really," Jovanovska, from *Nezavisen.mk*, said.

Attacks or threats against journalists—including physical assaults or verbal attacks, insults, and humiliation—are in decline. The Association of Journalists of Macedonia counted 14 attacks on journalists and the media in the course of their duties in 2020, compared with 24 in 2019. Long-standing concerns about impunity for those who attack or threaten journalists persist, but 2020 did see some progress here: a civil servant was sentenced to 18 months in prison for threatening two reporters, telling one he would "create a funeral" for her.

The number of defamation lawsuits and, therefore, the threat of abusive defamation actions continue to drop.

Multiple Channels Indicators

- People have rights to create, share, and consume information.
- People have adequate access to channels of information.
- There are appropriate channels for government information.
- There are diverse channels for information flow.
- Information channels are independent.

The very ownership structure of most influential national media creates pressure on journalists to self-censor or to choose carefully which topics to cover and how to cover them. Media owners are usually businesspeople with diverse portfolios who use their media as leverage to secure lucrative government contracts or as a blunt weapon against their competitors. "Not one owner of a television station is a journalist. They invest in media only to protect and defend their other businesses from the state

and politics,” said Hasipi, the journalist from Tetovo who collaborates with several national and local media and works as a correspondent for a daily newspaper in Kosovo.

Although all print media get their share of government subsidies, some panelists see this money as corrupting. “If a media fund is created, self-censorship will get even worse. I don’t know if we could even consider them journalists and media or simple channels for disseminating information from the government or the political parties,” said Tahiri, the SEE University professor.

The citizens of North Macedonia have access to proper ICT infrastructure, and Internet penetration in the country is near 80 percent. The country is well covered by broadband Internet, and all urban and major rural areas are covered by cable network operators that offer, in addition to television, Internet connection and, in some cases, landline or mobile telephone services. Such bundled services are offered at affordable prices. Panelists did note that in smaller urban and rural areas, usually, just one cable company operates (in addition to the major national telecommunications companies and mobile operators), making those areas more vulnerable to service disruptions or delays.

Some panelists noted that new foreign “over-the-top” services, which offer programming via the Internet and bypass traditional broadcast or cable providers, are so far unregulated. “Packages of 200 free channels are offered. It’s not regulated how use will be measured or charged or how we’ll prevent or sanction if they offer content that’s not acceptable here,” said Liljana Pecova-Ilievska, director of the IMPETUS Center for Internet, Development, and Good Governance in Skopje.

Broadcasting and transmission capacities are regulated. Two digital multiplexes are reserved for the public service broadcaster, and two are allocated for commercial users. Commercial radio is regulated by the broadcasting and electronic communications regulators. Despite several changes to the way members are appointed to the governing bodies of

the broadcasting and communications regulators, suspicions persist that these boards make political calculations or politically motivated decisions.

Some panelists commented that rural or poorer citizens of North Macedonia have far fewer options for access to ICT infrastructure. The turn to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed that many elementary and high school students, especially in rural or poorer areas, do not have access to a reliable Internet connection or the devices they need to attend class. “My score here is lower because I think vulnerable groups remain marginalized, and the media don’t invest in instruments that would enable them to access news and information,” said Nikodinovska, from the MIM. Panelists also noted that

some vulnerable groups, especially young women and girls in more conservative communities, may have limited or no access to technology or online content because of established gender roles in those communities.

“Not one owner of a television station is a journalist. They invest in media only to protect and defend their other businesses from the state and politics,” said Hasipi.

The Commission on Freedom to Access Public Information was paralyzed by vacancies in 2018, and hundreds of cases piled up while the organization waited for Parliament to appoint new members. That disaster, as well as complaints about lengthy response deadlines, added momentum to a movement to change the law. Among the notable amendments to pass was a requirement that political parties provide requesters with information on their revenues and expenses. In general, panelists noted that after a period of constant improvements in FOI legislation implementation in 2018 and 2019, 2020 saw some backsliding.

Panelists said no opinion polls or other research has been done to see how often citizens use the law to request information. Officials’ public statements or remarks in various forums indicate that most FOI requests come from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and journalists, said Biljana Bejkova, executive director of NGO Infocenter in Skopje.

The current government, in power since 2017, has promised to pursue a

policy of radical transparency, but panelists said it often amounts to lip service. “They’d create some transparency tool, get it online, and then stop updating the data. Also, I think they manipulate the information published there and don’t give us the real data,” Jovanovska said.

In polarized North Macedonia, public statements by government spokespeople and officials are inevitably filtered through a political or ideological lens. Some panelists said spokespeople generally provide reliable and truthful information, but others said they suspected the information is manipulated.

Panelists said requests for information are handled differently depending on who they come from. Pecova-Ilievska said an FOI request from IMPETUS, her organization, was ignored, but when a news organization made the same request, it got a prompt response. Similarly, Hasipi said, “I’ve been sitting at a political party office for eight hours, waiting for a statement after an important meeting, only to learn that they’ve already given the information to other media close to them.”

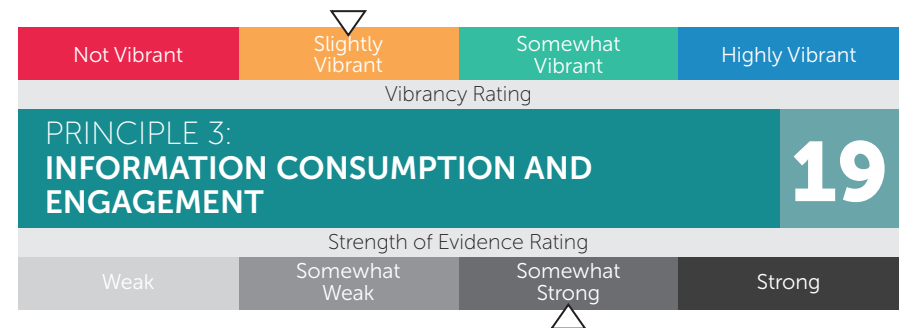
North Macedonia’s tight rules against media concentration have prevented the creation of powerful media groups that could sway public opinion, but they are outdated and do not recognize the new abundance of transmission channels (digital broadcasting, cable, satellite, Internet protocol television, etc.), nor do they allow for consolidation of the media market. The result is a fragmented, overcrowded scene that does nothing to ensure the quality of information available to citizens. The law is applied fairly and correctly, but those whom it prohibits from owning broadcasting companies--such as political party leaders, members of Parliament, or other officeholders--easily get around it by using proxy owners. The media law also grants authority to the broadcast regulator to keep a registry of print media and to monitor whether print media companies keep their obligations to be transparent about their ownership, management, and annual financial results.

Over the past year, the public service broadcaster has launched a 24-hour service in Albanian and special channel for programming in other minority languages, as well as sports/entertainment and children’s channels. Its funding stream has switched from a fee levied on

households with televisions to the state budget, putting it in an even tighter squeeze. It receives only about two-thirds of the prescribed funding (determined by a formula in the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services) and remains underappreciated. Panelists said the move to finance the service from the state budget makes it more vulnerable to government pressure, even if the current government seems to take a hands-off approach.

Panelists agreed that the public broadcaster provides sufficiently objective and impartial news and information programs but complained that it focuses on pure reporting, with no substantial investigative journalism. “The newsrooms are badly understaffed, and the public service rarely covers local communities and doesn’t have a proper correspondent network,” said Snezana Trpevska, a researcher at Research Institute for Social Development (RESIS).

Some panelists said the government seems increasingly to use the state news agency, MIA, as a mouthpiece for its policies. They pointed out that its management and steering structures are appointed by the government and not selected in a public competition. “The government places stories there. If there are questions that the public needs answered, [officials] go to be interviewed by MIA, knowing they won’t be asked any unpleasant questions,” Jovanovska said.



How people consume and engage with information has long been a source of concern for North Macedonia’s media community, in line with global trends. The emergence of amateur content providers, such as bloggers and influencers, along with social networks’ propensity to spew

falsehoods and hate speech alongside legitimate news and information have given new urgency to issues such as media and digital literacy.

At the same time, periodic revelations about the abuse and misuse of social media users' personal information, leading to serious violations of privacy, and cyberattacks on news and government websites demonstrate the need for increased awareness about digital security.¹

Further, in a society divided by ethnicity, language, and religion, the uses and abuses of information, especially in elections and the government's decision-making processes, are critical issues.

The score of 19 for this principle reflects those concerns, with Indicator 15—community media provides information relevant for community engagement—carrying the highest average score, while Indicator 12—people have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate—received the lowest average score.

North Macedonian legislation on privacy and protection of personal data is fine and was amended in 2020 to harmonize with the EU's new General Data Protection Regulation, which the country is obligated to do as a candidate for EU membership. Given North Macedonia's penchant for inconsistent implementation, however, panelists said the jury is still out on how well the newly amended law will function.

Panelists said some media outlets have published information that could help identify people in their stories, against the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, even when they are in vulnerable positions and need anonymity. An ethics code that permits such disclosures only when in the public interest offers insufficient guidance. "I believe media outlets, just like all other public or corporate entities, should prepare and implement proper rules and procedures on collection and safekeeping of personal data," said Pecova-Ilievska from IMPETUS.

Panelists also agreed that while digital security tools are widely

available, knowledge and awareness of the issue, or of the way social networks' algorithms and targeted marketing work, are scarce. "We lack proper digital literacy skills, which is clear from the fact that everything we do is a reaction after the fact. From top to bottom, people don't know how systems work," said Buldiovski of the NewMedia.mk agency. He said North Macedonia also does not require that all entities that collect and manage citizens' data have a registered representative in the country.

The media in North Macedonia occasionally report that they were subject to distributed denial of service (DDoS) and other hacker attacks. Among the several reported victims on Election Day 2020 were the State Elections Commission, news aggregator Time.mk, several news organizations, and the Interior Ministry. The attacks prevented timely reporting of results. At the time of writing, no culprit or motive has been identified.

Media literacy has been a focus for the media and civil society. The broadcasting regulator, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AVMS), which is charged with promoting and fostering media literacy, organized its second annual series of workshops, debates, and conferences on the subject in October and November.

Panelists agreed that the level of media literacy among citizens of North Macedonia depends in part on their social background, economic status, and level of education. Media literacy is not part of the education system, although schoolchildren learn about media culture, which MIM's Nikodinovska said amounts to superficial lessons about various media and their roles but does not

Information Consumption and Engagement Indicators

- People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.
- People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.
- People engage productively with the information that is available to them.
- Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs.
- Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

¹ Panelists repeatedly referred to the scandal over the "Public Room," an all-male group on Telegram that shared explicit images, videos, and contact information of women and girls who were allegedly available for sexual encounters. Similar scandals have erupted periodically involving Facebook and other messaging services. There have been calls to criminalize those and similar offenses.

involve critical thinking. Panelists said existing school programs on information literacy are inadequate, although they acknowledged that the current government seems serious about incorporating media literacy into an ongoing reform of elementary education.

Panelists praised civil society efforts on media literacy, including a collaboration of the public service broadcaster MRT and the MIM on educational and promotional videos that aired weekly on the MRT1 channel. They also noted groups that hold workshops on media literacy, including a series of local programs for schoolchildren under the larger CriThink project by the Metamorphosis Foundation and the Eurothink Center for European Strategies.

On the other hand, panelists said most of these programs are for high school students, and they rarely address adults or senior citizens. Some doubted if media literacy programs would even work on adults. “I think it’s an illusion to think you can change the mindset and the way adults think. It may be possible for a fraction of them, but it’s difficult to change established thinking patterns,” Trpevska from RESIS said.

Fact-checking organizations in North Macedonia do not keep track of how many people use their services, but panelists said the fact-checkers do not tend to be impartial and objective anyway. “We have a bunch of fact-checkers who aren’t neutral or balanced. For instance, they’d go so far as to analyze political jokes making fun of the government, while they ignore some issues and don’t do stuff that they should,” said Dzgal from the International Balkan University.

Similarly, panelists doubted that appeals to the public to double-check the news with multiple sources do much good. “Political and ideological orientation plays a role in that regard,” Nikodinovska said, arguing that even if someone goes through the trouble of checking other sources, they will likely be sources aligned with their own thinking.

She said she is not sure if people can tell the difference between professional journalism and quality news and what gets posted on many online platforms.

Panelists also doubted that journalists and civil society activists working with marginalized groups can fully exercise their freedom of expression. “They face a lot of hate speech and verbal attacks. It ultimately erodes their free-speech rights,” Trpevska said.

In a [2020 study](#), 76 percent of respondents told researchers from RESIS that they had gotten their information from television the previous day, and an identical 76 percent said they had gotten their information online. Twenty percent said they had listened to the radio, and 17 percent said they had read print media. Those results are encouraging if, as panelists assumed, professional media still offer professional and objective information.

The same poll found significant differences in media choices by age groups: 15- to 49-year-olds reported using the Internet every day (with 15- to 29-year-olds getting their information exclusively from the Internet), while those 50 and older rely primarily on television (with two-thirds of them never online).

“You invite the two opposite poles of a story, and they don’t come to find some common ground. They’re there to present their positions and leave... If society doesn’t promote it, you can’t expect true debate in traditional media, in Parliament, or online,” said Buldiovski.

Some panelists said that, far from facing any consequences for exercising their freedom of speech, people in North Macedonia are sometimes too free to say anything. “The first issue is that there are no consequences whatsoever for those who violate even the most basic rules of what is acceptable expression. The second issue is the communication noise. So much is being said that it’s difficult to separate the important from the banal and the mundane,” Dzgal said.

Other panelists disagreed. They said the country’s polarization and party politics’ domination of the public sphere keep a lot of people from expressing their views in public. “Many people believe they or members

of their families may suffer consequences because they expressed their opinion,” said Ljupco Murgoski, owner and editor in chief of *Zenit*, a weekly newspaper in Prilep. “Even pensioners fear for the safety of their relatives’ jobs.”

Panelists said there are many platforms for public debate but questioned their inclusiveness and the usefulness of the debate that goes on, whether in the traditional media or on social networks. Several panelists said that, thanks to North Macedonia’s polarization, most people work in echo chambers and tend to enter discussions only with the like-minded. They bemoaned the absence of a culture in which a change of position or opinion is possible. “You invite the two opposite poles of a story, and they don’t come to find some common ground. They’re there to present their positions and leave,” Buldiovski said. “If society doesn’t promote it, you can’t expect true debate in traditional media, in Parliament, or online.”

The media in North Macedonia, panelists agreed, have few resources to invest in researching their audience and its needs, even as technological solutions and instruments continue to multiply. There is only anecdotal evidence that the leading national broadcasters invest in market and audience research.

Often, some panelists argued, media do not realize the opportunities offered by the new tools, and the ties between the media and their audiences have been severed. “The traditional media here, both the commercial and, unfortunately, the public broadcasting service, approach the audience as consumers, as a market, and not as citizens,” Trpevska said. “The public broadcasting service is in the process of adopting a five-year strategy, and the whole document mentions the word ‘audience’ only once. They don’t view the diverse groups in society as publics, as audiences that PBS should talk to in order to define its editorial policy and design its programming.”

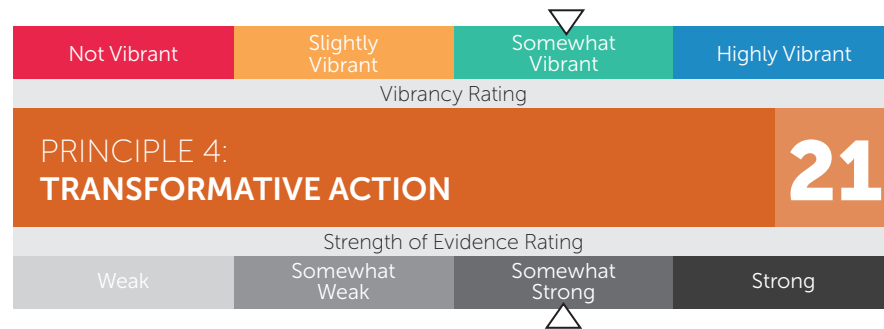
Panelists also said the media ignore the difference between the public interest and what the public is interested in and wants to view or read. “It’s the media that create the audiences, not the other way around, and the audiences have little influence on the media’s decisions on which

types of content they offer. The media are interested in numbers of clicks and viewers and have no interest in building, creating a critical and aware audience,” Dzgal said.

Formally, North Macedonia has few community (or nonprofit) broadcast media—just three student radio stations and one Catholic radio station in the southeast. But it has plenty of websites—especially those operated by NGOs that work with specific social groups—that function as community media. Panelists agreed that they do an excellent job serving their communities and, importantly, do not spread misinformation. Similarly, several online media outlets have become nonprofits, and they do the best journalism in the country, especially in investigative reporting.

The general public and even members of the media are not very familiar with the concept of community media as grassroots, public service outlets (as defined by VIBE), which might explain the panelists’ focus on local commercial media, defined geographically, in this part of the discussion. “The local media are in decline, first, because of the fragmentation and inability to survive in such a fragmented market, and, second, the social networks have largely replaced them in terms of serving the needs of different communities,” Dzgal said.

Panelists said there’s a lot of room for growth in community/nonprofit media, but it needs more comprehensive regulation. “That sector of nonprofit broadcasting needs to be stimulated and developed,” Trpevska said. “The regulator has some policies, but I don’t think they’re adequate. Funding remains the main problem. We need to consider some form of public funding for community media, knowing that community media, especially community radio, can satisfy very specific needs of very specific communities.”



In a society where people are dug into their political, religious, linguistic, and ethnic identities, reporting and other content stand little chance of bringing about transformative change. Instead, despite a core of serious, impartial, and objective media that try to bridge those gaps, the information scene in North Macedonia is a world of echo chambers and severely strapped producers and distributors of information of deteriorating quality.

Amid this media segregation, panelists said, audiences and different groups believe the information they get is objective and accurate, while the information offered by and to the other side is biased and partisan.

The score for this principle, 21, seems to reflect that division almost perfectly. The most highly scored indicator in this principle examined civil society's use of quality information to improve communities, while the indicator on individuals use quality information to inform their actions carried the lowest score in this principle.

"There is the worrying trend of segregation, of people not wanting to hear what the other side has to say—they find it disturbing and unpleasant," Dzigal said. "They do go on the social networks to have heated arguments, but when they receive information, they accept only what they like. We now have echo chambers, even on TV."

Panelists agreed that there are nonpartisan sources of news and information but worry about their reach and influence. Nikodinovska from MIM said media that were widely considered objective and critical under the previous government seem to have become tame since the

Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) party lost power in 2017. There are a few media that operate without links to political parties or other centers of power, she said, but "the problem is that they don't command large audiences." Nikodinovska said media that are clearly ideologically aligned wield much more clout.

Television channels, especially national terrestrial broadcasters, make reasonable efforts to include representatives of all sides of a given issue on their many political talk shows. Usually, that means inviting members of the two major political parties or experts associated with those parties.

There is some evidence, including the RESIS study mentioned earlier, that people follow various types of media. Dimitar Micev, the general manager of the TV VIS regional broadcaster in the southeast, said that

55 percent of people who have responded so far to its ongoing online survey said television is their most trusted news source, followed by the Internet, at 25 percent. "In practice, that might mean that people get their information first from the Internet, but then go to traditional media to check it," he said.

Panelists were not convinced that people base their decisions and choices on quality information, whether it's deciding whom to vote for or how to protect themselves in the pandemic. Panelists said growing disinformation campaigns have helped conspiracy theories take deep root, and Dzigal said

Transformative Action Indicators

- Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.
- Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.
- Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.
- Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.
- Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

mainstream media have been unwitting accomplices to that when they have “deplatformed” certain subjects and effectively pushed them into the shadows.

Some panelists offered their own experiences during the COVID-19 epidemic to illustrate the point but also to point out the lack of quality of the public discussion in North Macedonian society. Trpevska said she wandered into an echo chamber and was pounced on when she responded to an online comment by an anti-masker. “I tried to say something about it, and I was immediately subjected to serious attacks,” she said.

Other panelists said whether people base their decisions and actions on properly researched information or disinformation also depends on their education and the people around them. “What I find important in that regard is the general erosion of trust in institutions, which has been building for decades. It’s not new, but it seems to escalate in times of crisis like this epidemic. The flood of disinformation, the ‘misinfodemics’ of last year resulted in people being unable to discern true information from false,” Nikodinovska said.

While panelists said they were disappointed that some prominent figures in civil society had taken jobs in the new government, they agreed that civil society groups base their work and decisions on sound information. “After all, there are people there who worked with the media, people who have completed trainings in public communication,” Trpevska said.

The panelists also agreed that civic groups in general disseminate quality information and do not spread disinformation. Those organizations are also ready and willing to regularly engage with the media. Hasipi, the Tetovo journalist, said in his region, civil society groups are “very active in the area of environmental protection and prevention of pollution. They always cooperate with the media in efforts to increase awareness and inform the public about their respective area of interest. They’re also available if you need an opinion or explanation and don’t hesitate to speak in public.” Panelists also agreed that civic groups actively

fight disinformation and try hard to increase their advocacy efforts to promote policy and legislative initiatives.

As far as the government’s procedures for informing the public, the panelists agreed that, if anything, they are too robust. Officials from the president’s office to the smallest city halls are so intent on controlling the public conversation that, in addition to traditional methods such

as press conferences and media and public appearances, they invest heavily in producing their own content, which they then distribute to the media. “A team from my station went to an event, and suddenly there are cameras and microphones with the logo of the municipality that organized it,” said Gavrilov of the Kanal 77 radio station

in Stip. “I immediately told them to leave in protest and not cover the event.”

State and local government agencies produce livestreams, photographs, and video footage from their events and public appearances, which the media usually use because it saves them money, staff time, and the use of their own equipment. “I don’t want to criticize the journalists, but the trend is bad. It’s the government and the political parties that set their agendas, providing them with ready-to-use information and content. Why would anyone refuse to use professionally produced information and content that’s already there?” Dzical said.

Some panelists said officials offer this surfeit of slickly produced material instead of real information. “I think they just create an illusion of transparency with the information they provide,” said Jovanovska from the Nezavisen.mk website. “Only rarely do they hold real briefings where you can ask really subtle questions on sensitive topics. I call it empty talk.”

Jovanovska recalled an event organized by the government and streamed on three Facebook profiles—of the government, of a junior partner in the ruling coalition, and of the president—with each stream

“When the pressure of public opinion and the media grows unbearable, only then do the government and other authorities take concrete actions,” said Bejkova.

showing only the segments when their representatives spoke. “That’s not transparency,” she said. “They suffocate us with empty talk. On the other hand, you try to get some actual important information, ask an important question, they’re nowhere to be found.”

Panelists agreed that all participants in the country’s political discourse, in government and in opposition, marshal facts, statistics, and other evidence to support their positions on various issues. No panelist would judge the role misinformation plays in the public discourse, reiterating that newsrooms are so understaffed, and the media so lacking in resources, that they have little means to hold politicians accountable. Panelists said the watchdog role is increasingly left to specialized investigative journalism operations that are usually financed by foreign donors.

Official corruption at all levels remains a major problem in North Macedonia, which recently received its lowest ranking on Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index since the organization started ranking countries in 2012. Officials had tried to downplay the country’s miserable 111th-place finish out of 180 spots by noting that the index measures perceptions, not necessarily reality, but panelists were not having it. “One of the basic rules of public relations is that perception is as important as reality,” Dzical said, “People vote on the basis of perceptions.”

Panelists agreed, though, that graft has lessened and that the government reacts publicly to reports of corruption, even if it often goes no further than a public condemnation or a pledge to take action. “The government reacts with declarations of intent, but its institutions need to act promptly, in accordance with the law,” Pecova-Ilievska said.

“I don’t think corruption is punished enough, and there seems to be no sense of moral responsibility for officials and public personalities, which is a problem we’ve seen go on for years,” Nikodinovska said.

In late 2020, a court in Skopje dismissed claims from seven journalists who sued the government over attacks they suffered when a mob stormed Parliament in 2017. The court rejected their argument that the state and its institutions failed to keep them safe while performing their

professional duties, and in the case of one plaintiff, said, “The claimant is not a journalist because he comes from an online media outlet.” The reporters’ appeal of the decision is pending.

Panelists took a similar view of officials’ abuses of office or authorities’ violations of people’s democratic rights. While not as inert as they used to be, officials still talk loud and carry a little stick about such abuses, unless there is a public uproar. “When the pressure of public opinion and the media grows unbearable, only then do the government and other authorities take concrete actions,” said Bejkova from NGO Infocenter.

Panelists could not think of a clear-cut case of the government using disinformation, but they did express doubts about its decision-making processes. Pecova-Ilievska noted that the government squanders its visibility and its opportunity to channel public discourse in positive ways; instead, it wastes time on press conferences that do not inform and rebuts statements from the opposition. In its efforts to control the conversation, “it underachieves in its communications with the general public,” she said.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

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Sead Dzigal, lecturer, International Balkan University, Skopje

Goran Gavrilo, general manager, Kanal 77 radio station, Stip

Urim Hasipi, freelance journalist, Tetovo

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Dimitar Micev, general manager, TV VIS, Strumica

Ljupco Murgoski, owner and editor in chief, *Zenit* weekly newspaper, Prilep

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Memedaliu Vedat, editor in chief, *Koha* daily newspaper, and member of the programming council of Macedonian Radio and Television, Skopje

MODERATOR

Dejan Georgievski, executive director and president, Media Development Center, Skopje

SERBIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 1



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

15

In 2020, the parliamentary elections in June, a record budget deficit voted by parliament in December, corruption, and the COVID-19 pandemic all impacted Serbian media.

The main opposition parties boycotted the elections, so the leading party, the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), won 188 mandates (75 percent of the total), resulting in a one-party political system in Serbia. According to the Serbian Fiscal Council, by the end of 2020, “The budget revision envisions by far Serbia’s biggest fiscal deficit since the start of publishing data.” However, Serbia’s GDP was estimated to drop just 1.5 percent, significantly less than the 5 percent expected of other countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

The year was burdened with a number of serious instances of corruption, almost all discovered by investigative journalists. According to GRECO,¹ Europe’s anti-corruption body, Serbia is five years late in fulfilling GRECO’s 2015 recommendations for joining the European Union.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, 107 doctors and 32 other medical workers have died, and the country has seen citizen protests.

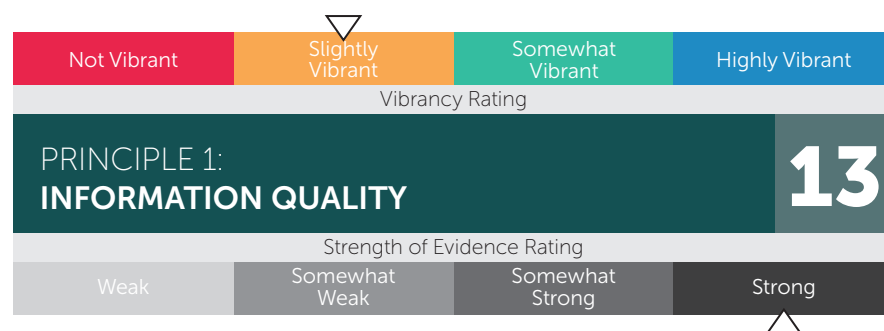
Panelists all gave similar scores for the principles and indicators. The overall country score is 15, with Principle 1 (information quality) and Principle 4 (inclusiveness and diversity of content) scoring 13. Principle 3 (information and consumption and engagement) reached 14, and Principle 2 (information flows) scored highest at 17. The turbulent past year produced two new media phenomena: unprecedented

noncritical coverage of candidates during the election campaign and media merely transmitting authorities’ information during the state of emergency (in almost 95 percent of all stories, according to research conducted by BIRODI.)²

The press violated the Journalist’s Code of Ethics, established and monitored by the Press Council—an independent self-regulatory body for Serbia’s media sector—in 3,643 texts. The year also saw the explosion of fake news and extensive efforts by the ruling party and president to prevent any media criticism of authorities. For the first time in two years, several journalists were arrested, and 189 attacks on journalists were registered, of which 32 were physical attacks and 14 were attacks on journalists’ property. The nonfunctioning rule of law remains Serbia’s main challenge, and its impact is felt within the media sector.

1 The Group of States against Corruption, Strasbourg, France

2 Bureau of Social Research, Belgrade



The extremely large number of registered media outlets in Serbia could provide an infrastructure for high-quality and diverse information. However, sharp division in the media sector, which itself is a consequence of an increasingly polarized society, resulted in a lower score for Principle 1. There are two main media groups: those that produce quality content in accordance with professional standards and, by far the larger group, those that produce an abundance of content in an unethical and irresponsible way. The latter group does not respect facts and does not truthfully report political developments. According to research from the Center for Strategic Policy (CFSP) in Belgrade, every sixth title in Serbian print dailies was fake news. Panelists gave the VIBE indicators examining quality information on a variety of topics, along with the indicator on inclusivity and diversity, the highest scores in this principle, while giving their lowest score to the indicator studying sufficient resources for content production.

All panelists agreed that with more than 2,500 registered media, the infrastructure exists to produce varied content. But at the same time, there is not enough staff for high-quality productions; in other words, given the number of media outlets active in Serbia, there are not enough highly trained media professionals to produce professional-level content. Though 30 television scripted serial programs were filmed, with limited staffing, commercial stations with national coverage tend to produce things like reality television and talk shows. The public broadcasters RTS and RTV have a variety of genres, while the feature television content is mainly on cable channels.

Just as journalism is polarized, so, too, is the university education for journalists. The panelists had differing views on journalism education, with some feeling graduates are unprepared to work in the newsroom. Others feel journalism cannot be learned in schools or through training programs from nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) but only through direct experience in the industry, thus making professional development contingent on the quality of the newsroom in which journalists work. Others believe that in order for students to gain employment at a quality newsroom, they must learn fundamentals at school. Journalism education is broad and universal because of the varied number of media and how rapidly the industry is changing. Education at the University of Belgrade Faculty of Political Science is of high quality, but there are many low-quality private institutions. The Faculty teaches the basics of journalism and prepares students to deal with the challenges of the profession. “Education for the profession is one of the better parts of the Serbian media environment. We have one of the oldest journalism education programs, which includes full-time undergraduate, master’s and doctoral studies at the University with comparatively high ranking at the Shanghai University list¹ in our region,” said Snježana Milivojević, a professor with the Faculty of Political Science.

A small number of content producers act in an ethical and responsible way and respect the facts, striving to publish only true content. Others knowingly violate all ethical principles. The Secretary General of the Press Council, Gordana Novaković, said the Council, an independent, self-regulatory body, received 165 complaints in 2020, twice as many as the previous year. The complaints mostly refer to violations of the first chapter of the Code of Journalists of Serbia: truthfulness of reporting. In 2020, the most common violation was not adhering to the presumption of innocence, followed by violations of the right to privacy. Professional consequences for publishing unethical and unprofessional content are weak or nonexistent and do not produce behavior changes. Media outlets rarely and selectively apply sanctions for violating the Code of Journalists of Serbia. “There are a large number of media outlets in Serbia, but they are most often either near the margins of respecting the professional standards of the Code of Journalists of Serbia or far below,”

1 <http://www.shanghairanking.com>

said Vesna Radojević, of KRIK Investigative Network in Belgrade.

Although there are numerous choices for media, some specialized topics, such as real economic trends, are rarely covered, especially in mainstream media news programs. “Professionally reported information, unfortunately, can be found in only a few media outlets,” said Milivoje Mihajlovic, assistant general manager with RTS Public Media. “In other media (controlled by the government), all information is contextualized for their audience.”

The level of thematic diversity in the media is insufficient, and the diversity of represented views and values is even worse. There are media that report on national, international, and local topics, but local coverage is often weaker and some topics on ethnic communities are poorly represented in the mainstream media. Local content is best covered by local websites. The everyday problems of the population are a rare topic in all media, and news on national politics dominates even social media platforms. “In Serbia, media and content pluralism is endangered, and media that have an independent editorial policy are marginalized and inaccessible for the majority of the population,” explained Nedin Sejdinović, a columnist and editor-in-chief of *Autonomija* in Novi Sad.

There are appropriate journalism schools and different trainings for journalists, but education for editors is lacking. Tabloid editors do not respect professional and ethical standards, as behavior is not sanctioned. “Most of my colleagues from the faculty ended up working at the tabloids, where they adapt to the outlet’s editorial policy and produce content not based on evidence,” said Radojević. “The big problem in editorial departments is poor development of young journalists.” Editors do not care about professional advancement and do not transfer editorial knowledge or experience to them.

Media try to put content in the appropriate context, but it is usually according to the political framework they are in favor of, rather than the public interest of the audience. Serbia is dominated by print and electronic media that do not hesitate to present obvious untruths. However, there are also professional media that try to provide audiences

with accurate and relevant information, but their influence is much smaller. In addition to spreading fake news, tabloid media often publish information from police investigations, which should not be available until they are closed. The assessment of whether information is fact-based shows that the current environment and commitment to the profession is divided and that it is worse than in previous years. In particular, panelists assessed that authorities extensively spread fake news to present themselves in a good light. Fake news is their most important tool to gain voters. There are no professional ramifications for spreading false information.

Most misinformation is spread through tabloids and social media networks. There are no effective sanctions for unprofessional work, which could end this practice and prevent its recurrence.

Political officials do not hesitate to lie at press conferences and contribute significantly to the spread of fake news and misleading information. False information and, even more often, half-truths from the government were evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, the BIRN newsroom revealed that Serbian authorities were hiding data on the real number of those infected. “Disinformation is part of everyday life, and unfortunately it is directly connected to the influence of the government on the media sphere,” said Sejdinović. “With disinformation, the government creates public opinion.”

In 2020, Facebook entered a partnership with Truth-O-Meter (Istinomer) and AFP’s fact-checking service for Serbia, which has contributed to the fight against misinformation in terms of reducing the virality of incorrect content. According to IREX Serbia, one fake news story, through various pages and profiles, is shared an average of 927 times. From March 12 to April 12, 2020, a total of 43 false narratives were shared through the media and social networks and were shared 241 more times by online and traditional media, with more than 220,000 shares on Facebook. “A large number of media outlets are spreading false or misleading information without any hesitation, which is confirmed by the analyses from fact-checking platforms,” said Slobodan Kremenjak, an attorney at ZC Law Office.

Foreign governments do not spread false news directly, with one exception: the network of Serbian radio stations that broadcast “Sputnik Serbia,” a branch of Russia Today that promotes open political propaganda. In particular, Radio Sputnik interprets certain news events in such a way as to oppose Serbia’s accession to the European Union. “The influence of foreign governments is not noticeable. It comes down to the fact that domestic media, almost uncritically, transmit information from foreign media that are under the influence of foreign governments. But that cannot be considered a direct influence of foreign governments on the domestic media,” explained Mihajlovic.

The intention to inflict damage is often the only motive from the president, prime minister and MPs. Their goal is to present political opponents as traitors, foreign spies, robbers, and liars. This is always done through dominant media under the authorities’ control. “There is a lot of hate speech, and government representatives are leading the way,” said Bojan Cvejić, the executive director of Danas. When the government, directly or through media, creates and disseminates content intended to cause harm, a small number of media may request a formal apology or a resignation, usually unsuccessfully. The regulatory body for electronic media does not react to hate speech or malicious information, and the Press Council does not have enough strength to stop the increase of this phenomenon. After journalist Ana Lalić was arrested due to her coverage of the government’s distribution of personal protective equipment to medical workers and subsequently released, pro-government media initiated a hate speech campaign against her. A total of 106 articles were published, followed by 1,700 readers’ comments on 16 observed portals. The daily newspaper *Kurir* published eight articles containing adverse claims relating to Lalić: “Irresponsible journalist Ana Lalić released despite lying,” and “journalist without honor and shame.” Despite the fact that her reporting was accurate, *Kurir* still wrote an article entitled, “Journalist Ana Lalić consciously lied: she violated the code ‘to instill

fear among the people.”

Hate speech and untruths are the standard rather than the exception in tabloids and tabloid television, aimed against political opponents, public figures, and critical media outlets. “The tabloid media see their only function as blaming the current opposition to the government. The content of these media is synchronized with the campaigns of government representatives; they use the same rhetoric and whole phrases,” said Sinisa Isakov, a professor of media and technology at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad. There has been an increase in hate speech against migrants and neighboring countries, both in media and on social media networks. This xenophobic reporting does not produce a reaction from state institutions. There are no effective sanctions for unprofessional behavior from journalists, and editors are essentially under no self-regulatory restrictions. The absence of appropriate sanctions, in fact, encourages further unprofessional, and often uncivilized, behavior. During 2020, a slightly stricter policy

was introduced for YouTube content creators; now they are obligated to mark inappropriate words if they want to keep advertisers.

A small number of media outlets in Serbia respect inclusivity and diversification, while tabloids generally address only Orthodox Serbs. Marginalized groups are poorly presented in the media. Thanks to the existence of specialized media, project

funding, and professional independent media, there is some content dedicated to inclusion, equality, and respect for diversity. However, the situation is far from satisfactory and is deteriorating. The media of marginalized groups have extremely low circulations and listenership/viewership.

In Serbia, there are a significant number of media outlets in the languages of national minorities, but they are unevenly distributed. Only in Vojvodina is there a stable network of media that inform citizens in minority languages. In 2020, the production of minority content

“There are a large number of media outlets in Serbia, but they are most often either near the margins of respecting the professional standards of the Code of Journalists of Serbia or far below,” said Vesna Radojević.

on Radio-Television of Vojvodina was threatened due to the mass termination of contracts with the part-time associates who covered minority programs. The other public-service broadcaster, RTS, does not have adequate programming in the languages of national minorities. “The lack of information about the experiences and views of people of different ethnic, racial, and/or religious backgrounds is obvious, and it is noticeable even in the media that are otherwise of high quality and maintain appropriate standards,” said Kremenjak. Additionally, very little content is adapted to the needs of blind and other handicapped persons.

Information Quality Indicators

- There is quality information on a variety of topics available.
- The norm for information is that it is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.
- The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.
- The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.
- Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Gender equality is a problem throughout the Serbian media sector, despite the Government of Serbia’s inclusion of gender equity in its Media Strategy, which was adopted in early 2020. Newsrooms are mostly female; in some instances, newsrooms have just one male employed, and he is the editor. Women directors and media editors are rare, although most journalists in Serbia are women. The audiovisual sector, reporting, content writing, and on-camera jobs are also primarily staffed by women; audiovisual newsrooms are close to 70 percent female. They have difficulties with professional

growth and struggle to reach management and editorial positions. Few women are also part of the ownership structure in media. The leading print media and television outlets have never had a female director or editor-in-chief. Also, the representation of women in all informative contents is 20 percent. “The general atmosphere is utilitarian. It is not subject to critical thinking or dialogue, even at the family level. The cult of ‘paterfamilias’ dominates here; people at all levels advocate

authoritarianism,” said Mijat Lakicevic, of *Novi Magazin*. “It is a cultural problem of society: people uncritically accept everything that is served to them.” Gender equality is much more prevalent on social media networks and other less institutionalized and less controlled ways of transmitting information. “Information on the experiences and views of women, Muslims, Catholics, etc. is less accessible to citizens. The program is created according to the interests of the majority of the population, and men continue to dominate the world,” said Milica Šarić, editor-in-chief at the Center for Investigative Journalism.

The VIBE indicator on sufficiently resourced content production is the lowest-scored indicator in Principle 1. Panelists gave the lowest scores to the sub-indicators on government subsidies or advertising contracts not distorting the market journalists’ earnings, polarization of advertising, and transparency of state subsidy distribution.

In a country with 2,500 registered media (or one media outlet per 2,800 inhabitants), there are not enough financial resources to support the normal operations of the average media outlet. While there is not yet any specific research that has studied the effect of the COVID global pandemic on Serbia, data presented in a USAID-supported forum in Fall 2020 showed that the advertising market in the first part of 2020 contracted. In 2020, the European Union provided short- and long-term financial support of €2.4 million (\$2.9 million), through a specific grant scheme to help Serbian professional media overcome consequences of the pandemic.

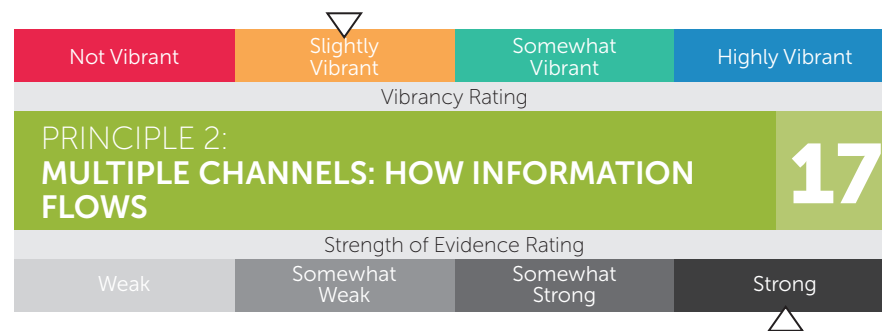
Among the outlets are as many as 224 television stations, only a few of which can ensure the smooth functioning and production of decent content. The number of outlets demonstrate a lack of regulation in the media market in Serbia. The market is also burdened with nontransparent financing and state interference. Very few media can effectively plan and conduct their business. The local media are in the worst situation by far, essentially just trying to find ways to survive the year. Only a small number of corporate media outlets, founded by foreign companies, have adequate production resources. “Professional content producers don’t have enough resources to work, so media

managers almost always fail to resist financial pressures,” explained Mihajlović.

In 2020, according to data presented in a USAID-supported forum in Fall 2020, the total advertising budget placed in Serbian media fell below 2019 levels. Television accounts for 53 percent of advertising and Internet advertising is 20 percent. International social media companies continue to draw revenue away from Serbian media outlets; in 2020, Facebook alone captured 90 percent of the digital advertising revenue in the country.

State funds create unfair competition in all fields, and the advertising market in Serbia is very politicized: When the government changes, leading advertisers also shift their ad placement strategy. “State advertising subsidies define the market because they are directed to state-friendly media,” said Gordana Bjeletić, the editor-in-chief of *Južne vesti*. The problem is so large that the government sends inspectors to private companies that advertise in non-regime media.

Technological developments have enabled the production of content with cheaper tools, such as mobile journalism. Though it is rare, some outlets manage to cover part of their business costs with subscriptions or other readers’ support. Within the USAID Strengthening Media Systems Project, implemented by IREX, the Podcast.rs platform was developed, on which about 170 potential podcasts were registered. A performance analysis has not yet been completed, so the effects of the project are unknown. Podcasting is becoming increasingly popular; many content creators have tried to experiment in the field, but the audience has not changed its passive attitude. Crowdfunding is a potential source of revenue, and it has been tested by media outlets in Serbia on a limited basis. “For innovative financing methods such as crowdfunding, more money is spent organizing crowdfunding projects than is raised through its implementation,” said Sejdinović. Miša Tadić of Radio Boom 93 explained, however, that some nontraditional funding types are practiced in a few dozen outlets, usually supported by foreign donors. Lastly, very few journalists are decently paid, and most do extra work to survive.



The main obstacle to information flows in 2020 was the risks to journalists. Although the Public Attorney says that the number of physical attacks on journalists and threats to their safety has dropped significantly, databases kept by journalists’ associations do not match those records. Four journalists were arrested, and more than 100 were harassed. Two unknown assailants broke into the home of Jeton Ismaili, the editor of the Albanian minority portal Folonline, and threatened to kill his wife, who was with three children. On social networks, women face a large number of threats and harassment. Several ownership monopolies of print, online, and cable media contribute to lower information diversity.

There is legal protection of journalistic freedom, but in practice, the situation is different. “The old story is repeated,” said Kremenjak. “We have constitutional guarantees, we have laws, but there are problems in implementation.” The year was marked by a number of arrests of journalists, including the arrests of a cameraman and reporter from KTV in Zrenjanin. During the July protests in Belgrade against government measures to combat the coronavirus, there were numerous physical attacks against journalists, as well as the destruction of equipment and obstruction of the journalists’ work. Journalist Igor Stanojević received several blows with a truncheon and then was detained despite the fact that the police knew he was a journalist. The most significant case in 2020 was the arrest of Ana Lalić, a reporter with the Nova.rs portal. Lalić was arrested after reporting on the lack of personal protective equipment for medical workers at the Clinical Center of Vojvodina. “Legal protection of freedom of speech and press exists, but the

government has reached the ranks of the judiciary,” said Milica Šarić. “The government is trying to restrict freedom of speech in every possible way.”

There is no formal censorship, but a high degree of self-censorship exists, particularly on subjects critical to the government. “I don’t think that the government actively and often censors the media,” said Stefan Janjic, of the Fake News Tracker. “The media loyal to the authorities certainly know what kind of reporting is expected from them, so there is no need for preventive or suspensive censorship.”

The confidentiality of sources is protected in law and in practice, but there are exceptions. In the case of Ana Lalić, there was strong pressure on her to reveal the sources of her reporting, and her two telephones were confiscated in the search for the source. This is a good illustration of the government’s relationship to the judiciary and its relationship to legal norms. “The confidentiality of sources is legally guaranteed, but wiretapping and monitoring of journalists is a nonviolent violation of this right,” explained Šarić.

Multiple Channels Indicators

- People have rights to create, share, and consume information.
- People have adequate access to channels of information.
- There are appropriate channels for government information.
- There are diverse channels for information flow.
- Information channels are independent.

According to research from the Serbian Statistical Office on ICT usage, as much as 80 percent of households have access to broadband. However, a 2020 report from the Republic Agency for Electronic Communication (RATEL) found that only 65 percent of households (1.65 million) have broadband access. Both documents registered growth. In the same period, access to media content increased by 2 million people, a growth of 6.4 percent. This includes a 10 percent increase in

IPTV users and a 16 percent growth in DTH users, a consequence of the increase in media consumption through mobile phones.

There is a solid information infrastructure, but it is unavailable throughout the country. Cable operators are divided, so not all citizens can see alternative television stations on all networks. Telekom Serbia, of which the state owns 58 percent, holds 50 percent of the broadband market and 40 percent of the media content distribution market and refuses to include the 24-hour news program “N1 TV,” which is considered to be the most professional television news program in Serbia. In 2020, Telekom Serbia continued to invest in the network of optical cables to end users, offering an Internet speed of 1 Gb/s, but only in densely populated areas and large cities, which already have good broadband access from ADSL and KDS technologies. The state has a special fund for the development of electronic communications, but it is poorly used to finance the development of infrastructure in areas where it does not exist at all.

Few websites were blocked; during 2020, the government primarily blocked foreign online betting sites, in line with the Serbian regulations on lottery games. However, the Minister of Internal Affairs, Aleksandar Vulin, pledged to abolish anonymity on the Internet.

Most people can afford television and cable, but access to the Internet or to expensive political weeklies is more difficult. “As many as 60 percent of voters do not use the Internet,” said Tadić. “There is a basic infrastructure in Serbia for informing people, but for primarily economic reasons, sometimes citizens cannot access information,” said Lakicevic. According to the Statistical Office of Serbia’s publication *Use of ICT in Serbia 2020*, 59 percent of households with a monthly income below €300 (\$360) have a home Internet connection.

Regulations allowing the right to free access to information exist and are used specifically by investigative journalists, but there are still serious obstructions in implementation. “There is a big difference between the norm and reality,” Lakicevic said. “Laws generally meet European standards, but they are poorly or selectively enforced.”

In 2020, state institutions used the coronavirus pandemic and state of emergency to ignore the Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance and all its provisions. Subsequently, the practice of providing

information of public importance was further reduced, although due to COVID-19, the need for information was greater. Requests for information were ignored, and often no explanation was given. In 2020, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance reacted positively to journalists' requests sent to the Clinical Center by ordering it to submit information, but the Center did not respond to the Commissioner's order. Penalties for not responding are weak and ineffective.

The number of complaints to the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance is increasing, as are the number of government documents that are declared official secrets. Data on large procurements, including those for the construction of traffic infrastructure and medical supplies and devices due to COVID-19, were not available to the public.

Serbian citizens are systematically prevented from accessing important information during the broadcasting of parliamentary sessions on the public-service broadcaster. As the support for all of the government's proposals in parliament is guaranteed, a unique development happened during the December proposal for the Serbian 2020 budget rebalance. Instead of discussing important economic and social topics, MPs for hours were ad hominem attacking nonparliamentary political opponents who were not present. "Broadcasts of all-day parliamentary sessions of the practically one-party parliament no longer enable insight into different political views but turn the viewers into passive observers of the Parliamentary 'reality program.' They also leave no room for the media to investigate the consequences of proposed laws," said Isakov.

Spokespersons of state institutions differ drastically. Some respond quickly and reliably to inquiries, while others are absolutely passive, with no communication to the media at all. Courts and prosecutors have particularly bad practices. "Information services in some ministries are oversized. The departments have their own journalists and cameramen for propaganda spots creation. Spokespersons are on duty for good news, which the government wants to send to the public, and then they ignore all questions that do not fit that image," said Bjeletić. Radojević added, "During the coronavirus pandemic and especially during the state of emergency, most state institutions abused laws on access to information of public importance. The government has even tried to

censor local governments and ban them from giving timely information to the media."

Authorities use public appearances and press conferences to provide incomplete or untrue information and manipulate facts. Spokespeople very rarely manage to build a positive reputation with journalists or the public. "Government spokespersons exist more to defend their bosses from the public than to inform the public," Lakicevic said.

Laws regulating media concentration are in line with European standards but are inconsistently and selectively enforced. There are no specific sectoral regulations that deal with concentration in media-related industries. General regulations on the protection of competition are applied, but they have not prevented, for example, the creation of a duopoly in the field of media content distribution, where both SBB and Telekom Serbia are fighting for users by limiting the availability of content on a competitive network. Both complain to the Commission for Protection of Competition, which neither acts nor resolves complaints.

National television and radio frequencies are allocated in a suspicious manner and are not withdrawn for violating regulations. When renewing the licenses for terrestrial broadcasting, REM did not evaluate the behavior of any media during the previous period. All licenses were automatically extended for all outlets, including two commercial television stations with national coverage that air primarily reality television programs.

There is still no separation of distributors from content owners, which was a valid practice until 2011. In the electronic media sector, the two strongest distributors control the entire media scene. Three regulators—RATEL, REM, and The Commission for Protection of Competition—should protect the end users by enabling the appearance of all main media in both networks, but none of the regulators have done so.

Public-service broadcasters only broadcast the views of the ruling coalition. Debate programming does not exist at all. "The public-service broadcaster is not a public service; it is the state television," said Cvejić. "Both public media services are absolutely not independent from the influence of authorities," add Sejdinovic. "We have entered a phase

when this is no longer hidden.” Still, in 2020, the RTS public broadcaster became a platform for education programming amid school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic.

All panelists believe that at most mainstream media outlets the influence of owners on editorial policy is visible. In one example from November 2020, the owner of the opposition weekly *NIN* changed the front page selected by the editor, which clearly shows how much the founders of media influence editorial policy. *NIN* intended to have a photo from the Arms Fair from two years ago on the front page, which shows a close-up of a sniper aimed at President Aleksandar Vučić. Ringier Axel Springer, which publishes *NIN*, announced that the intended front page, which had already been published online, was inappropriate, especially in a country where one prime minister was assassinated.

“The editorial policies of many media organizations are influenced by the owners and the owners’ relations with politicians and advertisers. The Serbian public-service broadcaster absolutely avoids any move that would criticize the government,” said Šarić. “The ability of the government to change funding for the public-service broadcaster prevents an independent editorial policy. REM as a regulatory body has repeatedly shown its dependence on the current political scene.”

Most of the media in Serbia depend on state subsidies and advertising. Thus, reporting on those businesses is often off-limits, with the business interests of advertisers influencing editorial decisions. “At Danas, newsroom and business operations are separate, but they do intertwine,” said Cvejić, who serves as executive director of *Danas*. There are a small number of media outlets with independent editorial policies, but they also depend heavily on donor support for project activities.

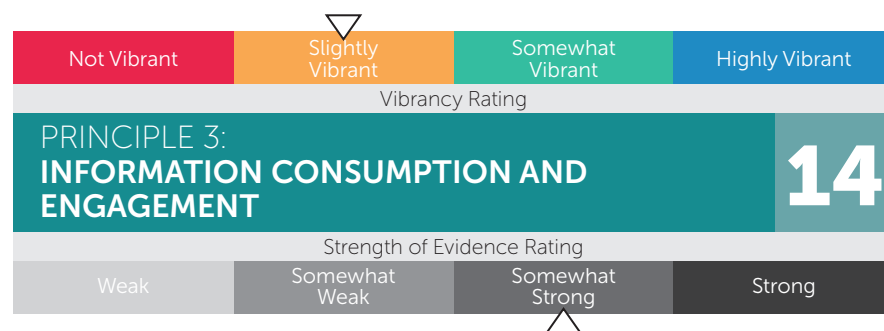
Public-service broadcasters are financed from their advertising

activities, subscription fees, and the state budget. The planned amount of 2.15 billion dinars (\$21.6 million) for RTS was reduced to 1.67 billion (\$16.8 million) during the budget rebalance at the end of 2020, while the amount for RTV remained at the planned 900 million dinars (\$9.04 million). Citizens’ subscription costs have increased to 299 dinars (\$3) monthly for the year 2021, but this is still insufficient for the two public-service broadcasters to function independently and professionally. RTV Vojvodina, a provincial public-service broadcaster, was partially relocated to a newly built facility. However, only one-third of the

equipment was provided so that most of the television production gear, including for the news program on both channels and in all languages, still comes from the old, inadequate facility. Money to finance the new equipment was unavailable in 2020 and is not foreseen in the budget for 2021. “The public-service broadcaster is huge and has three sources of funding. It would not have survived without budget funds. The public-service broadcaster must have stable funding,” said Mihajlovic.

The activities of regulatory bodies are biased; they tend to act slowly or not at all when anomalies in the media space arise. At the beginning of 2020, the National Assembly filled two seats on the REM Council as part of the inter-party dialogue under the auspices of the European parliament. Two people were elected, but just 10 months later one of them resigned over dissatisfaction with the way the new president of the REM Council was elected.

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According to the last census in Serbia (in 2011), 2.68 percent of the population is without schooling, 11 percent has incomplete primary education, and 20.76 percent has only primary education. As such, media literacy is quite low. Only some schools have adequate media literacy education programs, and developing a critical understanding of media content is rare. There are no government-organized adult media literacy initiatives. Instead of providing people with the tools to analyze and evaluate, the government instead asks citizens to believe that decision-makers are infallible.

Data privacy is not sufficiently respected in Serbia. While Serbia adopted a law on personal data protection in 2018 that meets the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, implementation of it has been weak. The IT sector lacks adequate skills, which was demonstrated by the establishment of the COVID-19 Information System. This system, introduced by a government decision, obligates health institutions to keep data, including location data, on people who have been tested for, diagnosed with, or treated for COVID-19, as well as those who have died. The system also contains information about contact tracing, and institutions are required to input their data daily. According to the Share Foundation, after the system was introduced, anyone could access all data because access codes were available. Similarly, in March 2020, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection announced that parents of schoolchildren frequently appeal for the Commissioner's intervention, stating that in some schools, teachers require children to provide information on their health and their family's health. Parents indicate that through modern electronic

means of communication (Viber, Facebook groups, emails, etc.), teachers require this information to be submitted per the school administrators or the Ministry of Education Science and Technological Development. "Legal protection exists but only on paper," Lakicevic said. "In practice, if someone accesses your private data, you have no way to determine who did it, and state officials cannot or will not help."

Many judicial and other regulatory bodies do not know enough about the law, so they sometimes protect data that they should not protect or reject FOIA requests.

International organizations active in Serbia are investing significant funds in digital literacy and security. As a result, positive developments are noticeable in some outlets and among journalists, but not among the general population. Additionally, new tools have emerged to defend against attacks. "I have not heard of research that measured the level of digital literacy or knowledge of how algorithms work. However, progress has been noticed on portals, which increasingly highlight data on cookies," said Janjic.

Information Consumption and Engagement Indicators

- People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.
- People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.
- People engage productively with the information that is available to them.
- Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs.
- Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

All media have the ability to apply quality protection mechanisms against DDOS attacks, but actual usage is unknown. Knowledge on how digital technologies and social network algorithms work is low, especially among the middle-aged and older population.

Most panelists believe that real problems are not being publicly discussed in Serbia. There is no dialogue between political parties, and even the most banal issues are not discussed at all. There is a clear divide between opinions for and against the

government. This leads to both confusion in public opinion and a general polarization of the population.

Media literacy is one of six elective subjects, of which each high school chooses four. In practice, most high schools in Serbia choose media literacy as one of those four subjects. However, in 2020, the number of schools choosing media literacy as an elective did not expand, compared with previous years. In primary schools, media literacy topics are provided for a few hours as part of other subjects, like language arts. Some of the high schools, including some gymnasiums (advanced secondary schools) that are the most numerous promoters of media literacy, have not chosen media literacy as an elective for their students due to lack of knowledge about the subject within their teaching staffs. However, there are some informal groups of students who are able to work with librarians who share an interest in media literacy.

Fact-checking portals are still underrepresented and not extensively available or adequately promoted. The initial manipulative statements, or “fake news,” have a far greater reach than fact-checking efforts and evaluations. Throughout 2020 in Serbia, the IREX media literacy program “Learn to Discern” actively trained a number of citizens. However, the program targeted the youth population, seeking participants aged 30 and younger. The Learn to Discern program also produces a podcast that discusses false news and misinformation in Serbia and beyond.

No research has been conducted that measures the level of media literacy and resistance to misinformation, though that resistance is evidently low. Citizens readily believe articles and publications from pro-government media, demonstrating a lack of media literacy skills. Several examples from 2020 reinforce this. On October 10, 2020, the pro-government tabloid *Informer* wrote that the Democratic candidate for the U.S. presidency, Joe Biden, would abolish the Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina if he won. On November 22, 2020, Sputnik Srbija

published text reading: “American scientists promote the concept of eating human flesh” with the headline “YOU FEEL SORRY FOR ANIMALS, MAKE FOOD OF YOURSELF!” On June 12, several media outlets reported that a group of armed men occupied the construction site of the Islamic Center in Novi Pazar; the Ministry of Internal Affairs denied this claim a few hours later.

USAID’s Media Initiative and Partner Support Program, implemented by Propulsion Fund, offers new opportunities for news consumers. The program enhances citizens’ understanding and knowledge about key concepts, skills, and issues relevant to media, digital, and information literacy. The program partners with institutions, educators, the media,

nonprofits, and the corporate sector. Programs and manuals for working with the state administration are also being developed.

Journalists and NGOs exercise the right to freedom of speech, but there are more pro-regime-oriented outlets and groups that abuse that right. The confusing media environment is systematically created, primarily through misinformation and

conscious deception. Freedom of public speech is threatened at almost all levels.

Since there are no platforms for public debates, social networks serve as the venue. Although such debates are dynamic and independent, the dialogues are often virtually destroyed by organized party activists who, through meaningless insulting or biased comments, actually stifle constructive exchange. Debate platforms rarely help to foster pluralism of opinion and ideas. Government officials are reluctant to appear in media critical of them, and opposition representatives rarely appear in pro-government media. “Public dialogue does not exist from the lowest level upwards, and that is stated in the European Commission report on Serbia. An example is a group of citizens in Novi Sad who protest against aggressive urban projects but fail to organize relevant public debates even within the local communities where these projects occur,” said

“There is a big gap and hostility between professional media that try to work responsibly, regardless of who holds the levers of power, and other professional media organizations that produce biased reporting,” explained Radojević.

Sejdinovic. “What is especially disappointing is how impossible it is to organize such a dialogue on the public-service broadcaster, which is the right place for such a discussion.”

Misinformation, malicious information, and hate speech generally dominate in public and on digital media networks. Public bodies, regulators, ombudsmen, and platform moderators do not interfere or regulate and rarely impose severe penalties, and there is no evidence to suggest that complaints are resolved in a fair and balanced manner.

The protests in July 2020, provoked by authorities’ reintroducing a curfew, demonstrated the distrust citizens have in the official data on the number infections and/or deaths during the coronavirus pandemic, as well as their disdain for the measures implemented during the first two months of the crisis. Just before the June parliamentary and local elections, all measures were completely abolished. Citizens perceived the abolishment of previous measures, coupled with the announcement of new measures, as election manipulation and believed the true number of deaths was hidden. In its report released on June 22, BIRN revealed a higher number of deaths stemming from the pandemic. Large protests as a form of civic initiatives replaced public debates on critical topics. Although large protests seemed to replay public debates, even those big protests, which were brutally broken up by the police, did not lead authorities to agree to discuss the topics that prompted the discontent. “The debates initiated on social media have not changed the behavior of the authorities, but that is why they regularly provoke orchestrated attacks on anyone who speaks differently and on every media outlet that broadcasts it,” said Isakov.

There are positive examples where media content is developed according to the needs of the audience, but panelists are not familiar with the ways in which most outlets in Serbia adapt and produce content that caters to the interests of their audience. Google Analytics is available to the portals, while larger media use the services of specialized agencies, such as IPSOS, Nielsen Audience Measurement Srbija, and TNS Medium Gallup.

Most outlets do not have the financial resources for specialized research,

so they turn to a cheaper alternative: monitoring the public attitudes themselves (for example, by monitoring the page views of articles on their sites).

The only type of research that is systematically conducted is commercial market research, which shows the ratings of individual shows but does not care about the audience, just the advertising space. “No one is engaged in systematic qualitative audience research,” explained Milivojević.

“At the daily newspaper *Danas*, we do our own research,” Cvejić said. “We analyze people’s comments and use publicly available data from various published research and analyses. We ask subscribers what they are interested in.” Tadić added, “At Radio Boom93, we work like *Danas*. We internally research what our audience would like to have on the program, and we have several analytical tools, like Google Analytics. Two years ago, we started using a tool called Content Insight, which shows what our audience follows the most. This was obtained with support from USAID’s Strengthening Media Systems (SMS) project, implemented by IREX, but most outlets cannot afford this tool. It is also wrong for local media to draw conclusions from general media research. Small local media can only increase the viewership, readership, and audience by researching their own local environment.” In the context of public funding of media projects of public interest, it was envisaged that before announcing a competition for such projects, citizens would be questioned about what media content is missing in their local area. However, in practice this was not done.

“The media very rarely publish corrections of incorrect information,” Janjic said. “With misinformation about the coronavirus pandemic, FakeNewsTracker found that only in 4.2 percent of cases did media outlets remove the disputed information from their websites when it was proven to be untrue.”

There are initiatives for cooperation between media or the nongovernmental sector and the state, but they are mostly reduced to very specific short-term goals or projects. Cooperation between media and civil society organizations (making joint gatherings, addressing

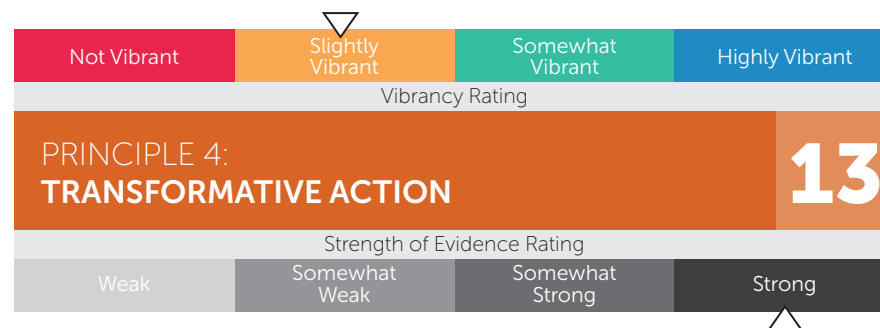
individual topics) is not rare. “There is a big gap and hostility between professional media that try to work responsibly, regardless of who holds the levers of power, and other professional media organizations that produce biased reporting. The situation is the same with nongovernmental organizations. Often the state treats certain NGOs and media as enemies and do not provide them with quality information,” explained Radojević.

Some small progress came from the Working Group on the Safety of Journalists, which was established in December 2020. One of the first decisions of this group was a binding instruction to public prosecutors to act urgently in cases where the safety of journalists is endangered. There was also some small progress in cooperating with authorities to better inform the public about the work of courts and police.

Media with all the attributes of community media do not exist in Serbia. There are mostly private media outlets in local communities that deal with the problems of local societies, but none of them are funded by local governments or citizens. There are also civil society media outlets, but they function differently from the classic “community media” and are mainly Internet portals. “Community media exist, but they are not professionally developed, and they do not have enough funds to grow into strong media,” Mihajlović said. “In Vojvodina, there are stable minority-languages media whose programs are broadcast by the public broadcaster RTV.” Šarić said, “My knowledge of community media is very limited.... For example, I know that the media that report on the Hungarian ethnic minority are focused on their needs. I know they get funding from the Hungarian government for that job, but I also know that such media often represent the interests of the government, which does not always mean true and accurate reporting.”

In Serbia, there are local newspapers, such as *Kikindske*, *Vranjske*, *Vršacke novine*, and *Kragujevac Svetlost*, that focus on issues important to the local community. There are numerous local television and radio stations, but the former are mostly under the control of the authorities, and the latter primarily broadcast entertainment programming. Citizen participation in community media funding is not enough to cover their costs.

“There is a tendency to treat nonprofit media as community media. There are some small local media that we can recognize as community media,” said Milivojević. Isakov disagreed, saying, “There are hardly any community media. Journalists and citizens have not sufficiently recognized the power and capabilities of this type of media.”



Very few citizens consume multiple sources of information, especially those from ideologically disparate camps (i.e., citizens that support the government do not consume media that criticizes the authorities and vice versa). During the coronavirus pandemic, it became apparent that people neither seek out accurate information nor use resources to distinguish fact from speculation. Panelists were very critical of the government’s use of fake information, and they argued that poor quality information does not support good governance and democratic development.

With the exception of a couple of weeklies and one daily newspaper, content in Serbia’s print media and tabloids share the same themes in their reporting as well as the approaches they take in reporting on those themes. On social media networks and portals, the picture is significantly different, but generally the political orientation for or against the government is more important than objectivity. Discussions on these platforms are often based on insults, accusations, and hate speech between citizens, and they are most often conducted through fake profiles. Nonpartisan sources of information exist, but they are more expensive or more difficult to access. People who participate in sharing information with opponents do so primarily through the social network Twitter.

Transformative Action Indicators

- Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.
- Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.
- Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.
- Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.
- Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Since there are no debates, there is a lack of access to experts with authentic and reliable information. “We do not have access to experts, as they do not want to give statements,” Bjeletić explained. “Academics, professors, specialists, etc. avoid it so as not to be persecuted later on social media or because they are afraid of losing their jobs. Very few want to speak, so the nonpartisan sources of news, data, and information are not available to us. During COVID-19, medical experts spoke, but that is an exception.”

According to a survey conducted in October 2020 by the Atlantic Council in Washington D.C. titled “The Suspicious Virus:

Conspiracies and COVID-19 in the Balkans,” a large number of Serbian citizens believe in conspiracy theories. The survey states, “Most Serbian citizens believe that ‘pharmacomafia’² is involved in the spread of the virus, around one-third of respondents think that the Government of China produces the virus in a laboratory (i.e., that the virus fled from the Wuhan laboratory), slightly fewer respondents believe that Bill Gates is responsible for the virus, while the least of those link the pandemic to 5G technology.”

It could be said that some civil protests were based on believing truthful information. The protests themselves were a form of “debate” based on information from civic initiatives. However, not many people were involved.

² “Pharmacomafia” is a term used to describe the belief that pharmaceutical companies intentionally manufacture viruses in an effort to increase their sales of drugs as well as their profit margins.

The mainstream media, or the media with the highest viewership and readership, may provide quality information but also try to provoke emotional reactions with misinformation. Therefore, it is difficult to say that most citizens base their views on important issues on quality information. “The coronavirus pandemic has clearly shown that the media channel the behavior of citizens,” said Mihajlovic. The impact of misinformation is prominently seen during the ongoing pandemic, as many people refuse vaccinations because they believe in conspiracy theories.

The link between politicians and citizens is very weak and essentially one-way. Politicians “talk” to citizens only during the election season. The electoral system is partly to blame for that, since people vote for the party and not individuals. This means that citizens, practically speaking, do not elect their own representatives. Citizens vote for the ballot that bears the name of the leader, not future deputies and counselors.

When it comes to health, behavior is somewhat more reasonable, mostly among the middle aged (40 to 60 years old). However, as a consequence of low trust in officials, including the Medical Crisis Headquarters, during the COVID-19 crisis there were countless examples of misconduct— at sports and religious events and gatherings, the opening of shopping malls, retail events such as “Black Friday,” and campaign rallies during election season. But still, most citizens followed the medical recommendations, wearing masks and respecting social-distancing measures.

“In 2020, disinformation-based campaigns called for violence against migrants, as well as the demolition of 5G transmitters, due to the suspicion that they had a fatal impact on public health,” Janjic noted when discussing disinformation. “However, the 5G network in Serbia has not yet been established, and there are only a few experimental uses.”

More frequent civil actions and initiatives dealing with the protection of the environment and the health of citizens were noticeable in 2020, but they are still rare despite increasing citizen support. In general, Serbian citizens make life decisions based on quality information, though not political decisions.

There are numerous NGOs that cooperate well with the media and often use that cooperation to transmit information related to their missions. Some NGOs—including the Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI), Belgrade Center for Security Policy (BCBP), and the Center for Research Transparency and Accountability (CRTA)—and the media often act together in defense of their public interests.

Civil society organizations are weak, only sporadically deal with topics important to citizens, and are visible mainly on the Internet and social media platforms. The visibility of their research and activities in media is still insufficient. “As a journalist, it is sometimes difficult to get quality, clear information. For years, there has been a lack of civil society, which should improve its public relations,” said Sejdinovic.

“The mainstream media often ignore the work of CSOs, especially if their conclusions do not support policies that they more or less openly support,” added Kremenjak.

Most high ratings for the indicator examining civil society’s use of quality information are the results of the actions of long-established CSOs, primarily NGOs. In recent years, the ruling party (SNS) has established its own NGOs, largely a front for action in favor of the government. As an example, one NGO—The Council for Monitoring, Human Rights and the Fight against Corruption – Transparency—proposed legislation criminalizing the “attack on the mental integrity and tranquility of a family member of the highest state officials.” Other NGOs influence the public with their extreme right-wing and anti-vaccination views and bias toward Russia with hate speech. Diversification of civil society is underway, and the GONGO (government-organized non-government organizations) sector is expanding. “There are three groups of CSOs,” Sejdinović explained. “First, there are GONGO organizations, whose numbers are growing. Second are organizations that, due to mutual projects with authorities, blunt the critical edge and obscure real information. The third are CSOs that create and exchange quality information with the population.” Janjic added, “The leading

“Uncovering corruption, human-rights violations, and attacks on civil rights does not lead to changes in governmental practice. The government defends its own at all costs,” Isakov said.

CSOs are mostly oriented toward the protection of human rights. If they do not participate directly in the fight against misinformation, then, in most cases, they do not encourage its dissemination. Cooperation between the media and CSOs exists but can be improved.”

Press conferences exist, and most media are allowed, but they are mostly used as a platform for establishing narratives, agendas, and attacks through ordered questions to government officials. Media often receive incomplete and manipulative answers to their questions, and it is not uncommon for government officials not to answer questions that come from independent, professional media. Authorities often announce press conferences shortly before they start, hold them outside the cities, and do not invite all media. These press conferences are also arbitrarily organized, without a clear mechanism for journalists to know

what information they can obtain. Often at such conferences, journalists are forbidden to ask questions. In 2020, the government’s COVID Crisis Headquarters held closed press conferences, without allowing for questions, or organized conferences online.

Few government actors hold press conferences. Usually, the president holds them, as well as sometimes the prime minister or other ministers. “There are not enough regular press conferences. Here in Nis, the police administration used to hold press conferences every Tuesday. Now there are no more,” said Bjeletić. “Regular press conferences have been canceled at all levels, and when one is organized, no discussions are allowed. The only exception is at the COVID Crisis Headquarters.”

The government does not consult experts or citizens but only select henchmen, disguised as experts, and institutions under their control, who confirm the already-made decisions of the government and government bodies.

Investigative media that present their findings and/or the views of civil society organizations that differ from the interests of the government and local authorities are not only unwelcome, but these entities are

also targeted as enemies. “Press conferences are scheduled ad hoc or in advance, but as a rule they are political campaigns for improving the reputation of the ruling party,” Mihajlovic said. “Copying uncritical government statements is a serious problem.” There are no political discussions and debates in Serbia. Often, facts are manipulated in order to propagate certain political agendas, and true debate is avoided.

As a rule, authorities do not pay attention to allegations from investigative media that point to corruption or systematic violations of human rights, nor do they make excessive efforts to change such practices. They primarily deal with those who present such information by accusing them of malice and advocating for the opposition. This shows that there is pressure from media, NGOs, and the public on the government in cases of corruption and violations of civil liberties, but that the system usually does not work despite the existence of independent institutions and legislation.

The government treats every criticism as an attempt to overthrow the government. “Uncovering corruption, human-rights violations, and attacks on civil rights does not lead to changes in governmental practice. The government defends its own at all costs,” Isakov said. In 2020, whistleblowers were harassed, including doctors who spoke publicly about the poor conditions in medical facilities. Reporting that prevents or reduces the frequency or severity of corruption by national or local authorities is rare. In most cases, information about instances of corruption is completely ignored or spun. “Very rarely does information about government violations lead to sanctions. One example is from Požega, where local activists discovered abuses of power from municipal leaders. The Prosecutor’s Office responded, and the perpetrators were arrested. However, there are not many such examples,” Lakicević said. No major investigation into corruption scandals revealed by investigative media in 2020 has resulted in the sanctions of those responsible or in the initiation of court proceedings. Discovered scandals are often defended with media spin. “When an outlet discovers corruption, the government reacts by attacking such media, not by attacking the case of corruption,” said Bjeletić. “On the contrary, it defends corrupt actors.”

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

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Bojan Cvejić, executive director, editor-in-chief, Internet portal and podcast of DANAS, Belgrade

Mijat Lakičević, influencer (own blog); journalist, *Novi Magazin* and *Peščanik* weeklies, Belgrade

Nedim Sejdinović, columnist; influencer; editor-in-chief, *Autonomija* monthly, Novi Sad

Slobodan Kremenjak, attorney at law, ZS Law Office, media lawyer, Belgrade

MODERATOR

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A teal-colored background featuring a white topographic map pattern with contour lines and elevation markers. The word "CAUCASUS" is centered in a large, white, bold, sans-serif font.

CAUCASUS

ARMENIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 1



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

23

In 2020, two events—COVID-19 and the war in Nagorno-Karabakh—dominated in Armenia. Both had consequences for media freedoms; however, the panelists agreed that although overall free speech did not suffer much, COVID-19 was an ordeal for the government and the economy.

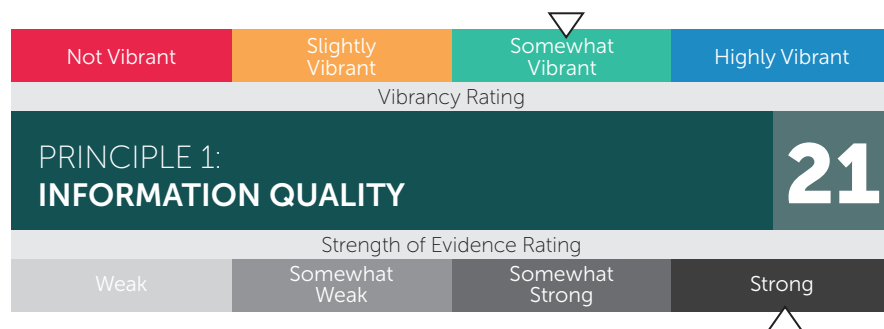
On September 27, 2020, the 1994 cease-fire was violated by a large-scale offensive of Azerbaijani forces. There were credible accounts of journalists being specifically targeted by Azerbaijan's high-precision weapons. Weapon remnants collected at the site by Human Rights Watch (HRW) corroborated the use of guided munitions. Despite wearing press credentials, a number of journalists were injured by the attacks.

According to the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, there were widespread reports that Azerbaijan, with Turkey's assistance, relied on Syrian fighters—whose relatives were promised compensation and Turkish nationality—to shore up and sustain its military operations in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone, including on the frontline. They also expressed serious concern over videos that appear to show war crimes being committed.

The panelists agreed that misinformation, disinformation, mal-information, and hate speech have been abundant during the reporting year. The polarization of society is also at a very high degree. On the night of November 9, after 44 days of war, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan signed a trilateral cease-fire agreement—brokered by Russia—that stipulated (among other things) significant territorial concessions to Azerbaijan and the deployment of around 2,000 Russian peacekeepers along the border in Nagorno-Karabakh and along the Lachin corridor, the only road to Nagorno-Karabakh from Armenia.

Public unrest followed Pashinyan's abrupt and somewhat unexpected signing of the agreement that was largely regarded as capitulation. Government buildings, the parliament, and Pashinyan's residence were stormed by hundreds immediately following the announcement of the trilateral agreement. Citizens started calling for Pashinyan's resignation; however, he refused to step down. Pashinyan later broached and then equivocated on the possibility of snap elections; as a result, opposing forces united to promote a joint candidate, Vazgen Manukyan, to become the transitional prime minister to oversee fresh elections, claiming that current authorities would rig the elections to remain in power otherwise.

Panelists assessed that freedom of speech and other civil liberties were marred by COVID-19 restrictions, imposed by the government in a haphazard attempt to somehow control or regulate the information chaos. While the restrictions were later dismissed, the backlash during this relatively short period was lasting. Ignoring the arguments from a multitude of journalistic organizations, state-funded public television was again allowed to air commercial ads (originally banned in December 2014) - the government approved the amendment, and it was subsequently adopted by the National Assembly. Panelists agreed that the transparency of media ownership has not seen any significant progress and is still a major issue. Personal data protection legislation is still very weak. Cybersecurity, digital security and information security still need major improvements to address the existing and potential challenges. They also observed that while there is political will to promote media literacy, the efforts are not enough and the results—the speed with which they are achieved—are not inspiring. Finally, they believed that nonpartisan news and information sources are rather exceptions than a rule, and unfortunately independent voices usually do not enjoy big audiences.



This principle along with Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) tied for the lowest scores of this study. This is mostly due to the low scores on the indicators dealing with misinformation, disinformation, mal-information, and hate speech. Ironically, most of the panelists also agreed that the rise in hate speech is also partially due to the higher degree of free speech, allowing anyone anywhere to say anything he or she wants. Additionally, existing trends, such as a shrinking advertising revenue, are exacerbated by the global pandemic and challenge the media's general financial health.

There is adequate infrastructure to produce varied content through digital and broadcast media; however, print media are dwindling. Nonetheless, the quality of information has suffered. As Anahit Nahapetyan of *Artik News* observed, “A journalist doesn’t bear any responsibility for presenting [his or her] views whatsoever, and this results in journalism being degraded and its credibility falling.”

Training professional and nonprofessional content producers on how to create ethical, evidence-based, and coherent content is mainly limited to trainings by media organizations, such as the Media Initiatives Center, Journalists for the Future, and so on. There are journalism schools that focus mainly on future professional content producers and that try to keep abreast of new media, new technology, and new techniques and realities, but the panelists did not identify many of those.

Content producers that act in an ethical and accountable manner, respect facts, and strive to represent the truth are scarce. Edgar

Vardanyan, editor-in-chief at the Boon Foundation and a political analyst, said that “a significant part of journalists and media has just put them aside; there is no restriction whatsoever.” Nelli Babayan, a reporter for Aravot.am, observed that the spread of misinformation doesn’t usually result in professional ramifications. Samvel Martirosyan, an information technology (IT) security expert, added that in response to fake information, a journalist may receive great support from other colleagues and activists. “Objective, quality reporting doesn’t get widespread support or praise. Seldom will you see a quality journalist’s piece receive encouragement. They won’t say, ‘Wow, great job, what a great investigation,’ . . . but if they do something silly, it suddenly gets best of praise and support,” says Martirosyan.

There are no universally accepted and adhered to ethical standards among media professionals. Such criteria are regarded differently by other media representatives and professional and nonprofessional content producers, depending on their current business and political affiliations. Certain content that previously was considered hate speech now may be considered normal, and vice versa.

Journalists hold government officials accountable “by challenging them with all sorts of information claims,” Vardanyan observed, “Much of the questioning is based on false or manipulative information, but even so, the journalistic community as a whole [has turned into] such an institution [today] that [it] keeps public officials vigilant.”

“At least public officials are obliged to respond, and it’s a quite new phenomenon,” agreed Martirosyan, “You might not be satisfied with the response or the result, but at least a journalist’s public status forces a public official to respond.” However, often these words are taken out of context, exaggerated, or sometimes even fabricated. Government officials commonly say things that are explained in a totally different manner after being held accountable by journalists.

Overall, media content covers a variety of topics, including political and social issues. Specialized and thematic reporting also exists but on a smaller scale. Media covering national and international news can be easy to find. International news is mostly reproductions and translations

from other international news sources.

A majority of panelists agreed that—except for COVID-19 and the war—the government does not create or disseminate false or misleading information.

Owners, benefactors, and investors usually enjoy unlimited control over content and are often the initiators, authors, and sources of the content. “It often happens that a nonprofessional content producer, who, say, has 5,000 friends [on Facebook], goes live and speaks about things [they are] not an expert on, and it gets more shares than the content of a professional content producer, which is fact-based and/or expert-based,” observed Hakobyan.

Fact-based, well-sourced, and objective content is possible, but the panelists agree it is quite rare. The news spectrum is rife with misinformation, disinformation, mal-information, and hate speech. This was true before COVID-19 and the war, and it was especially intense during those events, both within the country and externally. There are many content producers that intentionally create or disseminate false or misleading information. Many professional content producers intensively use nonprofessional content producers, in the form of Telegram channels,¹ Facebook, or YouTube. A news piece is published in Telegram and then picked up by professional content producers. Commonly, a piece from the same content producer can be true, semi-true, fake, or manipulative. A recent example is a publication in a Telegram channel about Pashinyan’s wife, disclosing that a mansion in Dubai was gifted to her. A photo of the “title transfer” was included; in reality, the photo was a gas bill. But this information was picked up and republished by professional content creators.²

1 Telegram is an instant-messaging application similar to WhatsApp. Channels are a tool to broadcast one’s public messages to large audiences and offer a unique opportunity to reach people directly; notifications are sent to users’ phones with each post. Telegram channels can have an unlimited number of subscribers, and only admins have the right to post information.

2 “Ալիևների անշարժ գույքի փաթեթն է, թե՞ գազի անդորրագիրը. Աննա Հակոբյանիս վերագրվող «գույքի» հետքերով [Is it Ali’s real estate package or the gas receipt? In the footsteps of the ‘property’ attributed to Anna Hakobyan],” *fip* [Fact Investigation Platform], January 21, 2021, <https://fip.am/14526>.

Information Quality Indicators

- There is quality information on a variety of topics available.
- The norm for information is that it is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.
- The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.
- The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.
- Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The panelists agreed that when it comes to foreign government disinformation, mal-information, and hate speech, neighboring Azerbaijan is unparalleled. For years, the country has spread disinformation, mal-information, and hate speech on a governmental level. Well before the war, Vagif Dargahli, the Azerbaijani Defense Ministry spokesman, threatened to bomb Armenia’s Metsamor Nuclear Power Plant to cause harm to Armenia, according to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Additionally, the president of Azerbaijan has called BBC reporting fake news in response

to a BBC reporter’s evidence of numerous accounts of civilians being targeted by the Azerbaijani forces. And Armenian-language Facebook pages were created for the sole purpose of spreading disinformation and mal-information and were created to resemble real Armenian pages and media with the intent to mislead the Armenian population.³

Internally, hate speech has reached unprecedented peaks. Arman Tatoyan, Armenia’s human-rights defender, has expressed serious concern about growing hate speech on social media that has reached alarming proportions in the country. Both pro-government and opposition factions accuse each other of employing troll factories; however, neither accepts their existence. Early in 2020, Henrik Hartenyan, a member of the Yerevan City Council, posted a screenshot of a girl’s Facebook profile, clearly calling for harassment during an ongoing conflict between the Armenian prime minister and the head of

3 Norayr Shoghikyan, “Azerbaijan waging informational war with FB account with 72 Likes—Aliyev’s ‘sponsored’ fakes,” ArmenPress.am, October 24, 2020, <https://armenpress.am/eng/news/1032673.html>.

the Constitutional Court. The post was followed by a backlash, public outrage, and condemnation from his fellow party members.

Suren Deheryan, of Journalists for the Future, observes, “Recently, we see that many information streams are increasingly based on opinion, which the professional media professionally turn into ‘facts.’ . . . If we [investigate] it, we’ll realize that it’s based on partial truth [that] is built on lies.”

Information is created in the languages and formats in which people need it. Information exposes the majority of citizens to a wide range of ideologies and perspectives. There are no formal or informal restrictions, so if there is a need for a certain type of information, it will be included in the content.

Gender balance in the media sector remains skewed: women journalists tend to outnumber men, but media management is dominated by men. Moreover, marginalized groups not represented or underrepresented in the mainstream media have alternative methods and platforms for expressing their views, and these are not obstructed either formally or informally. However, society at large is resistant to receiving information, experiences, and viewpoints about genders other than those traditionally accepted in the country. These attempts have been booed by the public at large, such as a transgender Armenian woman who spoke at Armenia’s parliament during a hearing on human rights. Information on the experiences and viewpoints of people of various ethnic and religious backgrounds is mostly unobstructed. A program on public television, “Side by Side,” showcases the culture, traditions, and daily lives of ethnic religious minorities and other nationalities living in Armenia. Public Radio of Armenia airs programs in Assyrian, Greek, Kurdish, Russian, and Yezidi; it broadcasts daily programs in Russian, Greek, Turkish, Georgian, Assyrian, Arabic, Azerbaijani, Persian, Kurdish, and Yezidi.

COVID has had major impact on Armenia’s economy because of the local

lockdowns; however, international travel restrictions and disrupted global supply chains has impacted the overall operating environment hard, including the advertising market, resulting in major cuts and disruptions in most of the advertising revenue for media. Martirosyan, speaking of the current advertising market, said, “How many shows are left on TV? They mostly broadcast reruns. But of course, if you’re a Telegram channel, it doesn’t take a lot of expenses.”

Sufficient financial resources are not always available to most editorially independent professional content producers. Those professionals with such resources are usually not editorially independent, as they are being funded by people who have set up these media with the sole purpose of serving their mostly political agendas. Those media that theoretically could produce quality information do not produce it because they are not watchdogs.

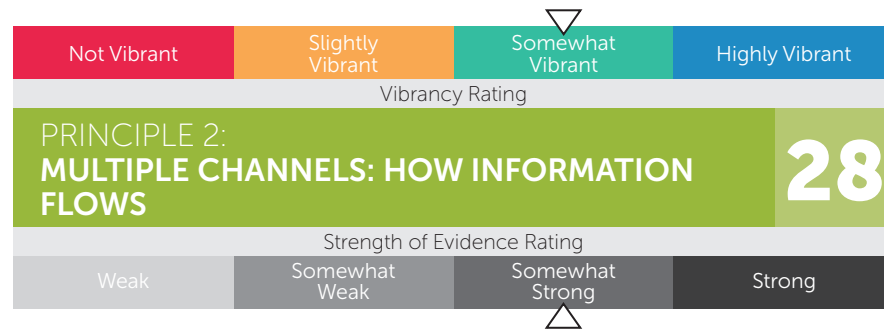
Vardanyan assumed that many outlets do not have sufficient resources because many journalists’ goals today concern quantity; outlets cannot pay journalists well, and so while journalists could produce less—but higher-quality—content, quality has suffered. Many journalists are quite young, he adds, as there is not enough money in journalism.

Apart from shrinking, the advertising market is also transforming rapidly from the previously traditional channels to new and developing ones.

While Armenia’s advertising market has become less politicized since the 2018 revolution, it is still unusual for a business closely allied with the opposition to advertise in a media outlet aligned with the government and leading political coalitions (and vice-versa). The shifting advertising budgets from local media to external international companies, social

media advertising, and influencer advertising is growing larger with each passing year. “Starting from late 2019, big advertising budgets [have] shifted toward influencer marketing, to Instagram bloggers, [and] to TikTok, and the media outlets have to survive somehow along with this,” observed Martirosyan.

“A journalist doesn’t bear any responsibility for presenting [his or her] views whatsoever, and this results in journalism being degraded and its credibility falling,” said Nahapetyan.



The panelists scored this principle the highest of all VIBE principles in this study. Other than COVID19 restrictions, the sub-indicators dealing with freedom of speech and the right to create, share, and consume information were assessed by the panelists as fairly liberal and having improved over previous Media Sustainability Index (MSI) studies of Armenia. Overall, the information and communication technology infrastructure is adequate for current needs. Access to information laws mostly conform to international standards and norms, and media are increasingly exercising their right to it; however, more, tighter, and faster collaboration is expected by the panelists. However, the sub-indicators dealing with the transparency in media ownership and ownership influence on editorial policy have not seen any improvement since the MSI.

People have an unobstructed right to create, share, and consume information, and legal protections for freedom of speech and freedom of the press exist. “The government doesn’t censor the outlets, and in terms of enforcement, the situation isn’t that bad either, but [the enforcement] is worse than the [quality] of laws,” observed Vardanyan.

COVID-19 has caused the government to impose some restrictions on media and content producers.⁴ On March 16, 2020, the Armenian government declared a state of emergency, and the police forced more

than 20 media outlets to amend or delete information that officials thought might spread public panic. The strict rules prohibited publication of information about the COVID-19 outbreak in Armenia and abroad, including rates of infection and death. A State of Emergency Command decided if any published information violated these restrictions, with possible fines of over \$1,000. These restrictions had real world consequences. The newspaper *Aravot* was obliged to amend an article on the concealment of coronavirus cases in Russia; another paper, *Hraparak*, was forced to retract a story about complaints by prisoners who were no longer being permitted to receive parcels from family members. Eleven Armenian-based journalism organizations issued a joint statement that read, “Since enforcing these provisions [on media restrictions], their implementation has been ineffective, disproportionate, [and] unreasonable and is not in the public interest.”⁵ Following backlash from Armenian journalistic organizations and the media—including international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and Reporters Without Borders—the restrictions were changed and eased nine days later. Martirosyan observed that it was the first time in Armenia that bloggers were also censored.

Vardanyan commented, “I don’t think the government is actively attempting to erode freedom of speech and freedom of press through legal or extralegal means. I would say it’s the other way around. One of the factors limiting free speech is the aggressive speech and policy of some [opposition] circles [that contain threats of violence]. This forces many people to exercise self-censorship—not to make sharp comments, criticism.” He adds, “It’s an exceptional situation where, [though] the government doesn’t exercise censorship over media, some opposition circles [attacking differing opinions] prompt professional and nonprofessional content producers to self-censor.” This same phenomenon was observed by the panelists in 2018, albeit with reference to pro-government supporters.

4 Council of Europe, “Emergency Restrictions Force Media to Suppress Independent Information on COVID-19,” COE.int: Armenia, no. 32/2020, March 25, 2020, https://www.coe.int/en/web/media-freedom/detail-alert?p_p_id=sojdashboard_WAR_coesojportlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_col_id=column-3&p_p_col_count=7&sojdashboard_WAR_coesojportlet_alertPK=64943676.

5 “Լրագրողական կազմակերպությունների հայտարարությունը արտակարգ դրության ժամանակ տեղեկատվության տարածումը կարգավորելու վերաբերյալ [Statement by news organizations on regulating the dissemination of information during a state of emergency],” Aravot.am, March 20, 2020, <https://www.aravot.am/2020/03/20/1101255/>.

The government does not pressure information and communications technology providers to censor media. Journalists are not imprisoned or killed for doing their jobs. However, at least two cases of violence against journalists were recorded during 2020: one on June 14 during a protest by the supporters of Gagik Tsarukyan, the leader of Prosperous Armenia Party, and another on June 16, also during a protest by Tsarukyan supporters. An internal investigation was launched, and the supporting evidence was sent to Special Investigative Service.

Information and communications technology infrastructure meets the information needs of most people. Telecommunications and Internet infrastructures extend to all geographic areas, both urban and rural; however, high-speed broadband and fiber-optic Internet can be a problem in distant areas. Alternatives do exist; all telecommunications providers offer 4G Internet, but it can be unstable or difficult to access in some rural areas or geographical locations.

Most citizens have the economic means to access most information channels, including radio and television. Free terrestrial broadcast of channels is available—15 channels broadcast in Yerevan (the capital), including one public, three Russian, and one Commonwealth of Independent States interstate channel(s), and eight channels have nationwide coverage, including one Russian and one public channel. There are 22 radio stations in the capital and four radio stations with nationwide coverage. Some local television and radio stations also exist in select cities outside of the capital. Digital or social media are also accessible to most—Internet connections start from AMD 3,000 (\$6) per month, and some phone plans provide free access to select social media and messaging apps.

Right-to-information laws exist. They mostly conform to international standards and norms, and media are increasingly exercising their right to information. However, the Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression (CPFE) recorded a total of 81 cases of violations of the right to receive

and disseminate information in the first three quarters of 2020.⁶ In one example, Sona Amiryan, of Antifake.am, sent a request to the Civil Aviation Committee asking for information on the committee chair's salary and the bonuses received. The committee refused to provide the requested information, citing the Law on Personal Data Protection. The Freedom of Information Center of Armenia (FOICA) sent a new inquiry with the same questions and received a similar rejection, which FOICA deems groundless. As in previous years, the practice of delaying a response to journalists so that the topic loses its relevance is still employed by some state bodies.

“There is also the problem of ‘state secret’—which, not being clearly defined, is often used to reject information [requests]. This problem will persist—people will seek information, and state entities and their

representatives will [not] provide it, referring to the law; people will disagree, saying that it's not a state secret, and the argument will go on and on,” said Vardanyan.

Government information is mainly sought by professional content producers, less by nonprofessional content producers, and hardly ever by other representatives of the general public. Government entities have spokespeople or information offices;

however, they still prefer to communicate through social media posts and live broadcasts rather than directly through press conferences with media representatives.

The Fact Investigation Platform (FIP) published a fact-check study⁷ of

“It's an exceptional situation where, [though] the government doesn't exercise censorship over media, some opposition circles [attacking differing opinions] prompt professional and nonprofessional content producers to self-censor,” said Vardanyan.

6 Committee to Protect Freedom of Expression, “Quarterly Report of CPFE on Situation with Freedom of Expression and Violations of Rights of Journalists and Media in Armenia (July–September, 2020),” Khosq.am, October 15, 2020, <https://khosq.am/en/reports/quarterly-report-of-cpfe-on-situation-with-freedom-of-expression-and-violations-of-rights-of-journalists-and-media-in-armenia-july-september-2020/#>.

7 “«100 փաստ-3». Նիկոլ Փաշինյանի ճիշտ և սխալ պնդումները [‘100 facts-3.’ Nikol Pashinyan’s right or wrong statements],” FIP.am, January 31, 2020, <https://fip.am/10226>.

Multiple Channels Indicators

- People have rights to create, share, and consume information.
- People have adequate access to channels of information.
- There are appropriate channels for government information.
- There are diverse channels for information flow.
- Information channels are independent.

Pashinyan's third volume of "100 Facts About New Armenia," which was presented during a meeting with journalists in January 2020. According to FIP, out of 100 facts, 66 were true, seven were mostly true, two were not true, 22 were still under the process of being checked, and three were impossible to check.

Transparency in media ownership is a pressing issue in Armenia, and a new law on mass media (or amendments and additions to it) was supposed to cover this issue; however, it was not adopted in

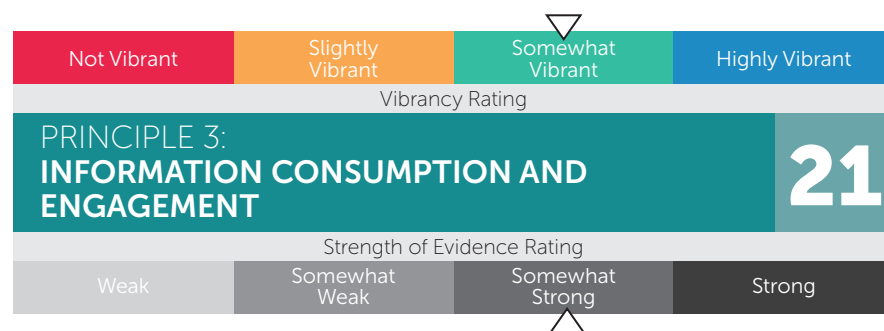
2020. The media and journalist associations have been calling for a new law on mass media, but despite their efforts, the process is slow.

People can freely establish media. Broadcast media are subject to licensing and spectrum allocation by the Commission on Television and Radio (NCTR), Armenia's regulatory body. Through competitions, the NCTR grants frequencies and licenses to television and radio. Half of its eight members were previously appointed by the president, and half were selected by the parliament. Currently, the number has been reduced to seven, and they are all selected by the parliament (where the My Step Alliance enjoys a majority of seats—83 out of 132). The panelists mostly agreed that licensing procedures are applied in a fair and apolitical manner. "If the committee were to make a politically dictated decision, it would deprive TV5 or ArmNews TV of the license and grant it to H2, which has comparatively milder opposition [to the government]," suggested Babayan. Armine Gevorgyan, a journalist with Armenian public radio, had expressed doubts, saying that some regional channels, which had been operating for years, were deprived of a license on unclear grounds. A private multiplex that would enable all regional outlets to stay on the air never became a reality.

Public-service media provide informative and educational news. The panelists noted that public media serve all members of the public in a nonpartisan manner. However, public radio does a better job of this than public television, which—although showing tremendous improvement in serving the public—still has a way to go to become truly public and free from any political influence. "Both the opposition and the authorities get upset with our news, which means we're doing the right thing," said Gevorgyan. As to why public radio is freer than public television, Martirosyan noted, "The minute public radio has as large an audience as public TV, it'll stop being as free."

The majority of media companies are influenced by their ownership. Owners exercise unlimited control over the content. The relatively independent media can be said to have more editorial independence; however, they are not immune to advertiser influence in the sense that they are highly unlikely to publish anything that might be critical of advertising clients—especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the advertising market has dwindled dramatically. The panelists noted that advertisers are very jealous and that professional content producers are very wary of publishing any negative content about them because any negative information might trigger advertisers to withdraw their advertising. The panelists could not remember any published critical content regarding most of the rich major advertisers in recent years. "Problems [with them] are sure to exist, but have we ever heard about any critical content about them?" questioned Babayan.

Through amendments to the Law on Television and Radio Broadcasting, state-funded public television is again allowed to air five minutes of commercial ads per hour (originally banned in December 2014). And although 10 journalistic organizations released a joint statement calling these changes unacceptable, as they would undermine advertising revenue for private media outlets, the government approved this amendment, and it was subsequently adopted by the National Assembly.



This principle tied Principle 1 for the lowest score of all VIBE principles in the Armenia study. Indicators examining media literacy and media's engagement with audience needs were scored the lowest. While there is political will to promote media literacy along with basic digital and data literacy, these skillsets are still at quite a low level, and these subjects are not widely taught at schools and/or universities.

Martirosyan reminded the panelists that in June 2020, the data for COVID-19 infections were leaked: "This [was] due to the lack of legislative regulations, because every 'janitor, doorkeeper' had access to this data; they were sending these data to each other through emails." He said that after the leak, his [IT security] company was invited to conduct a training on IT security and hygiene for those who had access to data for COVID-19—infected patients. "Do you know how many people were supposed to come? Around 4,500 people. Just two hundred people showed up—nominally it was deemed that the training was conducted and [Tigran] Avinyan's decree executed [Avinyan was, at the time, the head of the commandant's office and was in charge of designing and implementing COVID-19 prevention and management measures, rules, and regulations]," explained Martirosyan.

According to Martirosyan, personal data protection legislation is very weak—mainly because the fines, if at all provisioned, are insignificant,

“My impression is that the majority of media outlets do not look at the needs of the audience. They're more interested in what they want to convince the audience of, in what they want to dictate to the audience,” said Vardanyan.

and no one has ever been fined in the past six years. Martirosyan's organization has worked with media outlets and other professional content producers to instruct them in digital security training and tools and in digital hygiene practices and to ensure these practices are strong and their websites are digitally secure.

However, not all media outlets are willing to cooperate and to give access to their digital data. "When we offer help, some think we are sent by the government, some think we're sent by the NSS [National Security Service], others think we're sent by the opposition to install 'bugs.' We have a situation when we have ultimate paranoia and negligence at the same time," summed up Martirosyan. However, he mentioned that there is progress that is unfortunately based on negative experience. Digital tools are available to help media outlets prevent distributed denial-of-service (DDOS) attacks.

Basic digital and data literacy skills are at quite a low level. Since these skills are not widely taught at schools or universities, most learn through self-education. A very small part of the population is aware of the algorithms driving social media, the mechanics of advertisement targeting, and other ways in which personal information is used to target users. Marine Gasparyan suggested that perhaps the younger generation is better aware of digital realities. However, Martirosyan disagreed, saying, "One of the myths is that the younger generation has better knowledge of digital tools, hygiene, etc. They think that if a preteen knows how to use YouTube, [they have] great digital knowledge and know how everything works [on the Internet]. In the same way, the [majority of] youth [are] digitally illiterate. It's just [that] they are more comfortable with digital and new technology," he added.

There is political will to promote media literacy, but there is a long way to go. "At the moment, I'm in a working group that is developing informatics lesson criteria. So, we'll have it in about 10 years," Martirosyan sarcastically said. "It's terribly slow, terribly bureaucratized,

[and] our educational system will never make its way through like this. First, the criteria need to be developed, then the programs, then the textbooks—you can figure out how much time it’s going to take, can’t you?” he added. Schools include civics and media and information literacy, but these are optional courses not in the core curricula, and the materials are mostly developed and provided by media development nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Fact-checking tools or websites are not widely used by people; most even are not aware of their existence. Two websites are available: one is FIP.am, set up by the Union of Informed Citizens with the support of Open Society Foundations Armenia (OSIA), and the other is InfoCheck.am, set up by the government.

Vardanyan brought up the example of Detector.am, of which he is editor-in-chief. Detector.am is implemented by the Boon Foundation and funded by OSIA and Black Sea Trust. It is not a classic fact-checking website, but it is rather aimed at more in-depth analysis of manipulation, mal-information, misinformation, disinformation, and populism. “The website has a lot of traffic, but the problem is, the majority of readers are looking for things other than analysis. They’re not developing skills from our articles but are more looking for sensational news,” says Vardanyan. “In this respect, I’m pessimistic. I don’t think the majority of the population can benefit from these resources. On the other hand, it can help some segments of the population—intellectual, active people, university or high school students for one—to become more [media] literate,” he added.

Journalists and civil society activists extensively use their freedom of speech and right to information, but there are times when it is not always easily accessible. As discussed earlier, CPFE noted 81 violations of the right to receive information in January–September 2020. As for the general population, although they use their freedom-of-speech rights, they usually do not exercise the right to information. “The population isn’t aware of the possibility to apply for information. For example, how many people—ordinary citizens outside of media, of the NGO community—do you know that are aware of e-Request.am?”⁸

8 e-Request.am is a unified portal for online requests, including information requests.

Information Consumption and Engagement Indicators

- People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.
- People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.
- People engage productively with the information that is available to them.
- Media and information producers engage with their audience’s needs.
- Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

Martirosyan observed. Public debate is mostly on Facebook, and it is seldom civilized, intellectual, or fact-based.

Deheryan noted that there is progress and that people are applying to ombudsmen more than before. However; the panelists agreed that, in general, people refrain from reporting misinformation, mal-information, or hate speech to public councils or ombudsmen, Deheryan recorded progress: “Compared to previous years, people today turn to the Ombudsman more than before, which means that the human-rights defender’s office, in particular, has gained more trust

[from the population].”

The situation with qualitative and quantitative research has not changed much, compared with information reflected in the previous Media Sustainability Index studies of Armenia. There are outlets that conduct research to understand their potential audience’s needs and interests, but such research is mostly conducted in-house rather than through a third party. Nonetheless, these types of situations are not in the majority. In general, other content producers, both professional and nonprofessional, draw their understanding of their audience’s needs mainly from social interaction and engagement—“likes,” comments, shares, views, and other interactive forms of feedback with their content. Nevertheless, this cannot always yield precise conclusions. “Google Analytics is one of the tools; however, if it shows that a specific story was read so many times, does it mean that people were really interested in the topic, or [did] the title just hook their attention? But because the advertisers look at traffic statistics, we also have to develop the topics that were previously highly read,” observes Babayan.

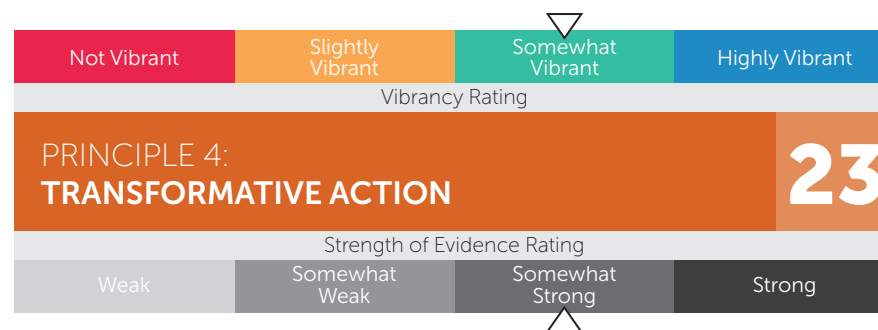
“My impression is that the majority of media outlets do not look at the needs of the audience. They’re more interested in what they want to convince the audience of, in what they want to dictate to the audience,” said Vardanyan. “That’s basically why they don’t conduct research,” agreed Melik Baghdasaryan, owner of Photolure. Vardanyan also added that a priori, the content producers think that content of a sensational nature is sure to draw many readers; hence, the headings quite often do not match the content of the article.

The media have open processes or audiences to provide feedback through letters to the editor or online comment sections. However, these are mostly located not on their websites but on their Facebook pages. Even if they have a comments section on their websites, such a section is seldom used; again, the media’s corresponding Facebook pages are where the most comments are. Most media outlets and digital platforms rarely moderate comments on their social media presences, and so the comments can be very obscene, filthy, and abusive—full of hate speech, derogatory language, and expletives. These comments are posted both by pro-government users, supporters of the current authorities, and their “haters.”

Transparency in authorship is a usual feature of many reputable media outlets; however, there is a vast array of online media that do not mention any authorship at all. “I often come across advertising content in media which isn’t labeled accordingly, and I think this is also a sign of a non-transparency of a media organization,” observed Babayan. Regarding networking together for productive information-sharing, Baghdasaryan said that “as a rule, they don’t share information; they compete.”

The panelists agreed that community media do not exist in Armenia or are minimal; additionally, Armenian law does not have any special provisions for community media. Hakobyan mentioned the example of Yerit TV.⁹ The outlet’s Facebook page was created in August 2020, and it describes itself as “a variety of beginning journalists. We’ve realized that we have a lot to say from the youth’s perspective. We’re going to bring up

issues of pertinence and interest to the youth. Here you can come across anything but news and rumors.”



Nonpartisan news and information sources in Armenia exist, but they are very few. As with previous trends in Armenia, the primary mission of the majority of outlets is serving the agenda of their owners with political interests, rather than to provide objective and impartial reporting. Public debate occurs usually through digital forms such as social media platforms, but these are often just mutual badmouthing and not productive exchanges of differing views. Populism and demagoguery usually shape people’s views on political or social issues instead of quality information.

Very few nonpartisan news and information sources exist. Of these, many do not have extensive audiences. “Editorial independence is also interconnected with a media outlet’s audience, and the bigger the audience, the less [of a] chance [it has] of staying independent,” observed Deheryan. He added: “These media with smaller audiences enjoy a higher degree of credibility, provide plurality, and enable you to get information without stress, without looking for tricks and manipulations.” Babayan commented, “In any case, we [all] have [identified] our own credible sources of information whenever we want to get trustworthy pieces of information. [There] are not many, but they do exist.”

The mission of these outlets is pursuing essentially other goals rather than objective, nonpartisan reporting in order to service the agenda of their founders or stakeholders. As a result, there is more of a motivation

9 Yerit TV [Youth TV], Facebook page, undated, <https://www.facebook.com/yeritv/>.

to set up media—from broadcast to Telegram channels—rather than pursuing objective coverage. “Because misinformation is also abundant, one needs to be very media literate to identify these sources,” said Gayane Mkrtchyan, a reporter for the Institute for War and Peace Reporting.

“Society has become a victim amid the different camps of journalists,” said Deheryan, implying that many journalists are activists and so support their own stance rather than cover events objectively. Vardanyan agreed: “We have always talked about a vast majority of media being hyperpolitical; they are mere tools in the media war, and they are used to destroy their opponents.”

“You don’t want to read the outlets that you know will have mostly misinformation; you want to limit your reading to one or two consistently nonpartisan sources,” agreed Vardanyan. He added, “We—the experts—often don’t follow information hygiene because we open Facebook and find all sorts of things there and don’t realize where we read information, and that eventually has its influence on us.”

People exchange information with others who have different viewpoints through digital and social media platforms and hardly ever through the comments sections of web-based media. These discussions, however, are seldom a civilized intellectual exchange of opinions but are rather exchanges of hatred, insults, and expletives. This is due to huge volumes of fake users who can be found in all camps. A few of the panelists assumed that the opposition employs fake users who “support” the current authorities in an overtly silly or abusive manner to discredit them. “To the best of my knowledge, troll factories were first set up in Armenia in 2012, before the elections, by an opposition party,” explained Martirosyan. And there are not just two camps—pro-government and opposition—but several.

Martirosyan maintained that opposition fakes are easy to track down. “When an opposition figure signs up for Twitter and suddenly gets 200

likes in a matter of minutes, it’s pretty straightforward [that the accounts are fake].” Martirosyan concluded that it is difficult to uncover fakes that support the government. “Here we have a problem because in reality there is a huge volume of government supporters of [an] unclear nature, and the majority of these are not bots. [It is difficult to identify] which part of those is steered [by the government or its proxies] and which part are real people just using fake profiles [to conceal their true identities] to support the ruling coalition.”

Because media literacy is at quite a low level, people’s views on political or social issues are not often shaped by quality information but rather by misinformation, populism, and demagoguery. “Because the majority of people deal with poor- rather than good-quality information, we can assume that public opinion is shaped more by misinformation. After some time, people have the opportunity to adjust their views; you can’t fool people for long in Armenia. Eventually they come to learn the truth,” said Vardanyan.

“**Editorial independence is also interconnected with a media outlet’s audience, and the bigger the audience, the less [of a] chance [it has] of staying independent,” said Deheryan.**

Fact-based health and safety recommendations are also a problem. Mixed messages from the government undermined trust and created an atmosphere of COVID-19 agnosticism. The absence of clear policy left the population to figure out their own “truths.” Mask use is a good example: originally the official message was that masks do not really help, but later on, the official order changed to wearing masks inside and outside, and violators faced fines.

Overall, civil-society organizations (CSOs) rely on quality news and information when explaining their objectives. They share quality information with the public, and they do not disseminate misinformation or mal-information. CSOs also actively reduce the spread of misinformation by providing fact-checking tools and resources. Media outlets engage with CSOs to cover socially important issues. Civic participation in key discussions—such as policy formation and legislative change—is frequent; however, such input is not always integrated in the legislation.

“As a representative of the NGO sector, as a journalist, I have participated in many discussions in governmental or parliamentary working groups on policy formation and legislative change. The platforms were in place and functioning, and they were accepting recommendations and suggestions. On the [Television and Radio Broadcasting] media law we made more than 10 suggestions, out of which seven were accepted and incorporated,” said Deheryan.

Since the 2018 revolution, the government started using a new way to engage with society, bypassing the press conferences and media by becoming content creators through live streaming on Facebook and YouTube. Presently, however, the press conferences are back, although at a lesser volume, and streaming has also been reduced, perhaps due to the press conferences.

Arevhat Amiryan, of Vorotan.am, said, “[The government] bases their decisions on their opinions.” Hakobyan agrees: “Or they don’t explain their decisions at all.” Gasparyan added that “the government creates facts and bases their decisions on these ‘facts.’” Babayan explained, “In the case of appointments and discharges, no explanation is given. [It is understood] that the prime minister doesn’t discharge the minister of education, science, culture, and sport based on what is written in media—it’s usually a political decision.”

The panelists also noted that the information coming from official sources was quite confusing at times, with Gevorgyan stating, “First, at a press conference, the health minister says that it’s not dangerous and that he’s going to send his child to school, and then 10 minutes after the press conference the prime minister goes live saying the schools will be shut down starting the next day because COVID-19 is dangerous. I, being more or less [media] literate, can figure things out [about what’s going on], but it is so confusing for [others], and don’t tell me it was because of lack of information.”

“Due to COVID-19, the government ‘taught’ us a new format of getting information through one single channel—the Armenian Unified Infocenter. To tell you the truth, for me, as a media representative, the coordinated information coming from one channel doesn’t seem

Transformative Action Indicators

- Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.
- Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.
- Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.
- Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.
- Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

trustworthy by its essence because it’s a uniformed, coordinated, preplanned stream of information for the public,” observed Deheryan. Martirosyan added, “The government communication channels in Armenia are shaped quite strangely in a sense that for one official it might be Facebook; for another, it’s press releases; for the third, it’s spokespeople. So public perceptions of a government official’s trustworthiness depend on the person’s political views, on the government official’s personality, and on the type of channels of communication employed by the official.”

The panelists could not remember many cases of corruption that were revealed by the media in 2020; most were revealed by law enforcement bodies. The panelists also could not verify that the existence of quality information has prevented or lowered the incidence or severity of corruption.

“Whatever and whenever issues are covered in media about human rights, this-or-that government representative is sure to respond, [to] comment within a certain period of time. The question is whether these responses please us in terms of quality, but a response is sure to follow,” Vardanyan maintained.

Speaking of civil liberty violations, Vardanyan suggested that the government is excessively soft in its reaction with respect to some unlawful occurrences due to fears of accusations of being a dictatorship. “You see an evident violation of law, but the government reaction to the violation is very soft; people might accuse [the prime minister], saying

[that] in addition to being a traitor, [he is] also a dictator [regarding losing the war in Nagorno-Karabakh and the prime minister being called a ‘traitor’ by some representatives of the extra-parliamentary opposition],” Vardanyan explained.

Many panelists note that the many civil liberties limitations imposed by the government were due to COVID-19. There were strict rules prohibiting publishing any information about the virus outbreak in Armenia and abroad that might spread panic. One reporter, Marine Kharatyan, was ordered by the police to delete a Facebook post she wrote about a large factory that was requiring employees to come to work regardless of whether they were running a fever. Filmmaker Tigran Khzmalyan was ordered by the police to remove a Facebook post citing a Euronews article on how the dead were buried at night in Bergamo, Italy. A doctor, Artavazd Sahakyan, was ordered by the police to remove a Facebook post asking the government to do more to enforce “social distancing” because Yerevan streets were still crowded despite the state of emergency. Most complied with the requests.

Several environmental-rights defenders were detained for “not obeying police orders” during peaceful gatherings in Yerevan in support of the environmental protests in Amulsar, Vayots Dzor region against the construction of a gold mine by Lydian Armenia CJSC. These people were taken to various Yerevan police stations and released three hours later.¹⁰

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

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Samvel Martirosyan, media expert; IT security expert, Yerevan

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Melik Baghdasaryan, owner, Photolure, Yerevan

Arevhat Amiryan, owner and editor-in-chief, Vorotan.am, Sisian

Tamara Hakobyan, host, Radio Marshall, Yerevan

Pap Hayrapetyan, editor-in-chief, *Sevan*, Sevan

Anahit Nahapetyan, owner and editor-in-chief, *Artik News*, Artik

Armine Gevorgyan, journalist, Public Radio of Armenia, Yerevan

MODERATOR AND AUTHOR

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¹⁰ “Armenia: Arbitrary arrest of several environmental rights defenders,” FIDH.org, August 14, 2020, <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/armenia-arbitrary-arrest-of-several-environmental-rights-defenders#:~:text=Ara%20Karagyozyan%2C%20who%20were%20participating.Nina%20Karapetyants%20and%20Mr.&text=The%20activists%20were%20placed%20under.were%20released%20within%20three%20hours>.

AZERBAIJAN

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 1



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

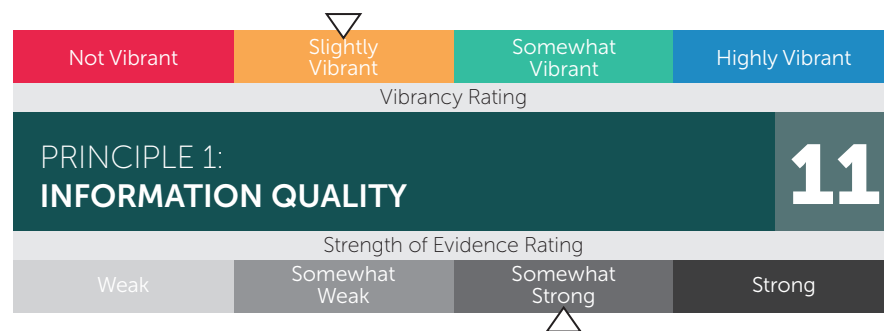
OVERALL
SCORE**11**

Throughout 2020, media in Azerbaijan have either stagnated or deteriorated because of COVID-19-related restrictions beginning in March, followed by the war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh toward the end of the year. At this time, Internet speeds were regulated for security reasons, limiting access to news; media critical of the government were also blocked. Social media platforms remain the only space where freedom of expression can be observed; however, there is a high degree of self-censorship to avoid punishment on sensitive topics. Low media literacy, hate speech, and/or extreme nationalism clashing with the handful of progressive/liberal views still exist.

There is a wide gap between the infrastructure of Baku-based media and the media in the provinces. In any case, it is the government—or oligarch-owned media—that has a good infrastructure. However, this does not guarantee editorial independence or result in the production of quality content. Working for state-owned or controlled media does not translate into decent salaries for journalists.

Fact-based information is rare, and misinformation is rampant. The handful of independent media exist mostly online and have very limited staff and funds to create objective information. No business is allowed to advertise with local independent media; thus, their lifeline for decent financial independence is entirely cut off. Their outreach can be large, but because of existing barriers (e.g., blocking), virtual private networks (VPNs) are needed to access the websites, thereby excluding most of the older generation.

The war with Armenia in the fall of 2020 increased the viewership of state-owned television stations, as people wanted to avoid fake news on social media; however, mal-information and dehumanization of the enemy still existed. News production in Azerbaijani and Russian is common, but the same cannot be said about minority languages. Independent journalism remains an extremely high-risk profession, with constant intrusions of privacy, intimidation, or harassment by police or special forces. It is also extremely difficult or impossible for independent journalists to get the information they need from government ministries. At one point, media-related national laws were progressive, on par with Europe, but these laws and their implementation have been deteriorating each year.



Quality content production and its audience remain a major challenge in Azerbaijan. There are quality content producers--especially by Azerbaijani language services of international media like BBC, RFE/RL and VOA-- as well as few small online local media. However, their ability to expand their audiences have been limited by administrative measures of the authorities from year-to-year. The remaining independent media in Azerbaijan also lacks production equipment. In the meantime, state and oligarch-backed media outlets—which typically are much better equipped, have sustained online presences, and have more powerful transmission signals--have deep reach within Azerbaijan. However, their audiences are also selective on what to believe and what not to believe, creating information bubbles. Mal-information and misinformation are rampant under these conditions. On issues such as the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict and rhetoric about the enemy, audiences in general trust these state and oligarch-back media. However, on topics like internal policies and national budget spending, their audiences do not trust them. Revenues of independent media operating within Azerbaijan are also controlled by authorities pressuring small- and medium-sized businesses on where they can and cannot advertise.

Media infrastructure in the provinces is almost nonexistent, and any such infrastructure is owned by an oligarch, leading to a lack of frequent news coverage from the regions of Azerbaijan. Provincial governors also put extra pressure or surveillance on local journalists, as they do not want any negative news about their provinces aired to the national audience.

There are several independent courses on journalism funded by

international donors, but they suffered greatly during 2020 because of the pandemic and war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh. At the two state-owned universities where journalism faculty members are allowed (Baku State University and Baku Slavic Languages University), the education quality is not up to modern standards. The majority of graduates go elsewhere to find jobs.

Baku-based journalists, who compose the majority of the fleet, have not been able to travel during 2020 because of pandemic restrictions and were censored when reporting on the war. These two major events have also required journalists to be impartial and follow high journalistic standards. However, mainstream media have published materials full of hate during the war, and no one has been disciplined for this.

Although there are ethics standards set by the Press Council of Azerbaijan, they are not implemented or taken seriously. Television and radio stations sometimes have stricter standards than online or print media, but there is no outside regulator or professional ethics standard.

Baku may be flourishing with content, but the majority of this content is false or harmful news produced by unprofessional journalists. Even then, the content can be a copy and paste or unauthorized translation from other resources. Some of the copy and paste is from social media posts with no fact-checking involved.

Media that are financed by the state and by oligarchs and have staff may produce original content around nonpolitical, insignificant topics and blow them out of context. The majority of capital-based media outlets produce news that is sensational rather than contextual. The media owners' financial resources make such news more popular than that of professional media. A lack of local alternatives forces people in the provinces to buy propaganda masquerading as news.

Digital media that is aired in Azerbaijan and in the Azerbaijani language can be divided into two groups: diaspora media that is aired from outside of the country over the Internet (some of which are blocked and can only be accessed through a VPN) and media that is produced from within the country. This diaspora media gives the majority of the public its more-or-less impartial information. RFE/RL, BBC, and Voice

of America (VOA) contribute to the diversity of news and balanced journalism, but despite this, none of them are in the top 10.¹

Television and radio stations, popular websites, and most newspapers are primarily owned by the ruling elites, with the only exception being (the independent) Turan Information Agency. There are also a small number of independent news outlets online, as well as those run by the opposition. Not all of them have physical offices, making it difficult to produce quality content. Getting information from government officials is another challenge.

During the past decade, no serious critiques have been allowed in the media; any interviews cover only nonsensitive topics, and no government criticism takes place. One of the longest-running newspapers, *Azadliq*, stopped functioning in 2016. Subsequently, there are no independent newspapers still being printed, but podcasts featuring independent voices are still available.

The traditional media do not have an independent editorial team, as they are supposed to do what their owners tell them. When breaking news happens, reporting may be several hours late because of reporters not receiving instructions from above or from the central censor on how to cover the incident.

During the war, fake news and glorification of war crimes were produced by nonstate media to get more views. Because of the pandemic, journalists have to have a special permit to leave their houses during lockdown. Independent small media have not received such permits, as they are often critical of the government. Government officials never hesitate to pressure or sue journalists they do not like and to use their own media to blackmail and attack these journalists.

Journalists used to be able to cross-check or verify facts, but the government has taken steps to restrict this access. Misinformation or

disinformation is shared by online yellow media, and when the truth surfaces, they never apologize or remove their fake news. The Ministry of Interior has announced that it reprimanded 15 individuals for spreading misinformation during the pandemic, three of whom received jail terms, but there is no transparency regarding these arrests.

Officials fill the media with incorrect information or exaggerated statistics. There are minor initiatives to fight false/misleading information in media, such as Fakt Yoxla (Check Facts). However, officials are never held accountable for the misinformation they spread, even if such information is found to be false by fact-checkers. The main reason for the spread of misinformation in media is that editors take the official news as truth and copy it to their websites without verifying or cross-checking with other sources.

It is hard to say that the government does not create or disseminate content that is intended to harm. In previous years, the media has published content that included mal-information discriminating against religion, gender, and ethnicity. A local media resource, QueeRadar, monitors all Azerbaijani media and reports. There is hardly any positive coverage by state and oligarch-backed media of the LGBTQ community or their issues; however, the Azerbaijani language services of international media (BBC and RFE) and independent media like Abzas.net do cover LGBTQ issues appropriately.

During the war, using hate speech was normal in Azerbaijani media. Generalizations are common for Azerbaijani media; in general, European media and social media users who try to preserve their neutrality or who sympathize with non-military, ordinary Armenians also face hate speech, mostly from Azerbaijani social media users. In addition to the mal-information on ethnicity, harmful language (such as criminal, terrorist) is used about detainees, violating their rights of being innocent until proven guilty in court.

Some panelists believed that the reason for the widespread use of mal-

During the past decade, no serious critiques have been allowed in the media; any interviews cover only nonsensitive topics, and no government criticism takes place.

1 Amazon, "Top Sites in Azerbaijan," Alexa.com. Undated. <https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/AZ>.

information is that even knowledgeable employees of the government-controlled media are under pressure and closely surveilled. As a result, they only express their criticism against political opponents of the government and against Armenians, since these targets will not put those journalists on the radar of the authorities. No news has surfaced about foreign governments or their proxies creating or disseminating content that is intended to harm in 2020.

There is news and information in Azerbaijani and in the second-most commonly used language, Russian. Azerbaijan is a small country, but there are villages that have never seen a real journalist. The state-controlled mainstream media rarely highlight the social and economic problems of these communities. Many people do not know how to use the Internet or social media. One of the country's largest minorities—the Talysh, who live in the south—have a newspaper (*Tolisho Sado*) in their language, but two editors-in-chief from this newspaper have served prison terms for various charges in previous years (one of them died in prison).

Other ethnic minorities mainly do not have any barriers to promote their culture but neither do they get much support. National TV channels and programs may occasionally cover their traditions or religious rituals. Some religious communities have resources of their own; if they are loyal to the authorities, their news may be aired on TV. However, sexual minorities are subject to propaganda or prejudice. National TV channels and media will almost never report from LGBTQ or feminist protests or events since they are seen as a threat to the political system.

In many instances, communities whose viewpoints are excluded and marginalized groups who are not represented in the mainstream media use social media to express their views. It is only the diaspora or international media in Azerbaijani that highlight the problems of these groups—if the viewer can bypass the blocking through a VPN. The lack of open communication with marginalized groups deprives the entire society of learning about their issues and building stronger ties.

The majority of journalists are women. While some may be in a managerial role, most of the media is owned by men. Journalists cannot

declare their different gender/sexual identity and work in the media openly, although presenters can act, dress, or talk differently than their formal gender identity at some TV channels.

Information Quality Indicators

- There is quality information on a variety of topics available.
- The norm for information is that it is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.
- The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.
- The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.
- Content production is sufficiently resourced.

There are no independent financial resources that guarantee the independent functioning of Azerbaijani media. *Azadliq* newspaper's print version completely died, and it switched to an online version. Other small-to-medium independent media outlets, such as Meydan TV and Arqument, are struggling to make ends meet and must ask their viewers to help them financially. The older generation relies on—and purchases—only print versions of newspapers.

In previous years, the government has issued free apartments to journalists loyal to it. Fortunately, there are still a few small media outlets and news agencies like *Turan* that have rejected such “deals.”

Currently, independent media, bloggers, and other media celebrities get revenue from social media; however, it is forbidden for media, journalists, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to get outside grants without a prior (and seemingly formidable) four-stage approval by the government.

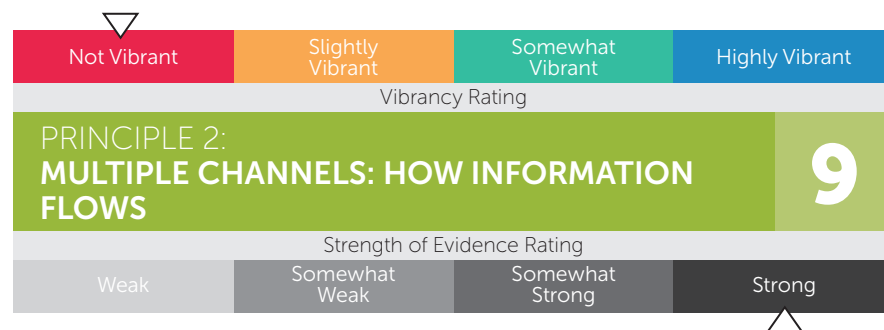
The Media Development Agency, founded by the president in January 2021, says that it will ensure the media's freedom and funding. However, it will be governed by the president, who also approves its board members. The agency's predecessor is the State Support Fund for Mass Media Development, whose funds were mishandled.

Financial resources for media outlets are not declared anywhere; the

only exception is for Azerbaijan's public television, as it is part of the budget approval process each year. There are also no resources in the country to identify the cost of advertising, and so small businesses use Google and Facebook advertising.

Journalists are generally poor and underpaid. Even salaries at the best-paying media outlets are low. Salaries at state-owned newspapers are higher, but they hardly produce any valuable content. The financial situation of journalists who work for independent media outlets are even worse. They do not have the luxury of changing their jobs for a better salary unless they betray their ideals to work for the opposite side. Their only solution is to have more than one job.

Advertising is politicized and fully controlled. In Azerbaijan, criticism and advertising are mutually exclusive: The more criticism of the government that is published, the less advertising revenue that is received. Thus, the majority of advertising goes to state-affiliated TVs, radios, and their websites. According to one panelist, the current annual advertising market is around AZN 7–8 million (\$4.1 million - \$4.7 million); another panelist believed that Azerbaijan's independent media will continue to rely on international donors for this reason.



Almost all panelists agreed that information flow is restricted through various administrative and legal measures. Laws have been amended to mask ownership of media that have been greenlit by the authorities. Moreover, these owners exercise editorial control of their media. Independent journalists seeking government information either face delay or denial. If they manage to uncover this information and publish

material that is critical of the authorities, they risk being targeted systematically or randomly with arrests and police brutality during reporting from rallies and other protests. As part of the culture and governmental bureaucratic hurdles, information in minority languages is scarce or limited to official news.

Despite Azerbaijan guaranteeing freedom of the press both in its constitution and by joining international conventions, this is not the case when it comes to media freedom and journalist safety. In many cases, the censorship rules and the methods of punishment are informal. Journalists are punished on made-up charges far more frequently than for libel. This situation in turn frightens the next generation of journalists.

Several social media personalities have been detained or fined for criticizing the government's quarantine policies and actions. While filming a protest against election fraud in front of the Central Election Commission on February 11, journalists were met with police brutality and were interrogated along with everyone else for hours. None of the state-affiliated media reported this incident.

Currently, two journalists—Polad Aslanov and Afghan Sadygov—are said to be serving prison terms for political reasons and are holding hunger strikes to protest their unfair trials. Laws are drafted and adopted so that journalists who show independence can be prosecuted. Such laws can be adopted at any time by a fraudulently elected parliament. These changes serve to further limit freedom of press. Mobile phones have been smashed and cameras confiscated during—and because of—reporting on controversial subjects. Journalists are not only harassed for doing their jobs but also are cornered by officials and law enforcement agencies.

For example, one panelist narrated how they traveled to Mingachevir to report on war-shelled houses and their surviving residents. On the way back, their car was stopped, and the crew was taken to the police department. Although this journalist had a press card and travel permit, their recording was erased from the camera, and they were ordered to leave the city. The explanation given was that they did not have “a permit from the presidential administration.” A similar incident

happened to a journalist during their travel to Gandja, another war-torn town during the 2020 clash. The crew was stopped, and they were told that they could film only if a call came from the presidential administration. Unfortunately, independent journalists do not have the luxury of asking for permission from the administration: Given the background of journalists who criticize the government, it is unlikely they would get it.

Information and communication technology infrastructure are in place in urban places and mostly meet the information needs of the people, but citizens with disabilities cannot fully use the infrastructure. There have been issues with Internet speed in recent years. The speed is even lower in rural places where fiber-optic, high-speed Internet is not available, and plans to expand it into the regions have been delayed. The cost of having Internet access is not affordable, given the income level of the population. This may explain why the majority of people still get their news from rabbit-ear or roof-antennae TVs. In general, state-owned channels have better signals throughout the country. Cable TV stations are only available in major cities, not in rural areas. There is no closed captioning for news programs; only the state TV (AzTV1) has this.

Issuing licenses for new television or radio frequencies (those you can get with a regular home antenna) is under strict control of the government. The government also controls Internet providers, and through them it can control content and block websites it considers unpleasant or uncomfortable, such as Meydan TV and Azadliq radio (RFE/RL).

The Internet was cut or its speed was controlled throughout the war with Armenia. The download/upload speed was especially slow at the frontline regions. Users quickly learned VPN technology to access blocked resources. Despite the calls of human rights activists and journalists, the Internet was not restored until after the war was over on November 9. This has affected not only media users but also schoolchildren who had to study from home because of pandemic restrictions.

It has been quite a challenge for journalists to get information to produce the news, even with Azerbaijan's 2005 Law on Access to

Information. When the law was adopted, it was the most progressive law in Azerbaijan, even meeting European standards. However, each subsequent year, the most advanced sections of this law were removed or changed. Simultaneously, significant changes were made to the Law on Mass Media and to the Law on Information and Protection of Information to give the government more influence and control over the media. For example, the changes made to the latter law make it easy to

block news websites.

Multiple Channels Indicators

- People have rights to create, share, and consume information.
- People have adequate access to channels of information.
- There are appropriate channels for government information.
- There are diverse channels for information flow.
- Information channels are independent.

Journalist inquiries to government offices either remain unanswered or only partially answered. Officials avoid contact with independent journalists, avoid their questions, or never answer them. Another trick is to give false or exaggerated information to journalists. While every ministry has a website, they are not updated regularly, possibly on purpose to avoid giving information to journalists. To impede journalist investigations, the government shut down the state tax registry a

few years ago so that journalists cannot easily find companies owned by the ruling family or affiliated individuals.

Sometimes court cases to access government information pile up, and if one is lucky, the court will decide in one's favor in a short period of time. Turan Information Agency is a leader in filing such cases. But not all of these offices follow the letter of the law and may not implement the court's verdict ordering them to give information. Public officials at ministries often do not answer their phones, or if they do, they are rude to journalists. One panelist shared that the Ministry of Emergency Situations refused to give information on the national budget's allocation for housing renovations after the major 2012 earthquake in Zagarala, calling this information "for internal use only." Journalists

think that, given the massive corruption in government, the culture of secrecy is natural to them.

The ombudsman's office that normally would help journalists get information is nonfunctional. The office has taken no administrative action to help journalists get information, has never sued any government office, and does not deny it.²

There are no laws in place that require transparency in media ownership, and information on ownership is considered a state secret. The list of TV and radio licenses are closely controlled by the government, and new ones are issued to individuals or companies within the circle of the ruling elites. Licenses are issued by the National Television and Radio Council, but the procedure is not transparent. There is a list of documents that should be submitted to request a license, but such a request is unlikely to pass the first stage. Thus, it is easier for most content producers to launch YouTube-based TV channels.

There is a strict state monopoly for issuing frequencies for FM radio and TV stations. Any attempt to establish an independent or professional radio/TV channel by a local or a foreigner is doomed to fail. There are no truly independent TV or radio channels in the country. Public Television and Radio, as well as the state-owned AzTV, are under the strict control of the government.

Some progress is seen both in quality of content and innovation in some recent shows on Public Television. For example, the popular *3D* show has a fictional host interviewing opposition figures (who would not be invited to other channels) and some government officials on subjects that are banned or that would not be discussed in other state-controlled TV and media. The YouTube or Facebook viewership of these clips is between 100 and 800, depending on the interview. The channel reaches the homes of more than five million people. One relatively recent and

progressive show on Public Television is *Sabaha saxlamayaq* (Let's not keep it until tomorrow) that discusses issues women face. However, Public Television also produces and airs radical shows that reflect the views of the hierarchies. For example, *Halbuki* is a literal translation of *Odnako*, a similar show on the Russian government's Channel One that aims to reveal foreign enemies and defend domestic values to distract public opinion from current issues.

Public Television follows the lead of other mainstream, government-controlled media for news. In the best-case scenario, it criticizes some minor officials or social problems but would turn into a propaganda

tool for the country, if necessary, during crucial times. The Institute for Democratic Initiatives has monitored nine media outlets prior to and during the parliamentary elections, with the results showing that all information broadcast on Public Television was in favor of the government and its supporters.

Major issues—such as an assassination attempt against the governor of Gandja, protests around the trial of suspects whose bullying against a schoolgirl drove her to commit suicide, and the trial of politician Tofiq Yagublu—are never on the news on state-controlled electronic media.

Internet service providers control the Internet and download/upload speeds. Providers also block access to undesired news and information websites, some of which has been identified through internal regulations and motions. Both in-country and out-country news resources were blocked in earlier years—such as Meydan TV, Turan TV (website), Azerbaijan Saati (website), and local resources such as *Azadliq*. Internet service providers also discriminate against their clients, disconnecting Internet or cutting power to prevent Internet access when necessary.³

Criticisms of the ruling party, the president, and the vice president are

Journalists are punished on made-up charges far more frequently than for libel. This situation in turn frightens the next generation of journalists.

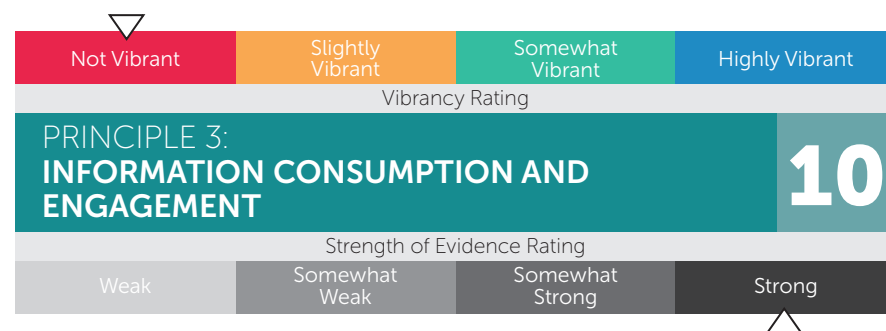
2 Azadliq Radiosu, "Dövlət orqanları 100 sorğudan 25-nə cavab verir." January 11, 2021. <https://www.azadliq.org/a/31041930.html>.

3 FaktYoxla, "Əli Kərimli qanunsuz olaraq informasiya blokadasına salınıb." April 27, 2020. <https://faktyoxla.info/articles/Eli-Kerimli-qanunsuz-olaraq-informasiya-blokadasina-salinib>; Khadija Ismayil, Facebook post. February 6, 2017. <https://www.facebook.com/khadija.ismayil/posts/10206483935775731>.

not aired on state, public-service, or any TV and radio stations. Only their critics get criticized on these channels, proving that media financing is politicized. The major media outlets are entirely funded by the state or from assets stolen by people who are in the government.

Governmental regulatory bodies that oversee frequency allocations, licenses, and telecommunications services are not independent nor politically neutral; they all serve the president, and the situation has only gotten worse with each passing decade. Major media outlets are financed by officials who hold senior positions in the executive or legislative government, and they do influence content.

Any businesses that advertise in media associated with the opposition or that criticize the government will automatically be confronted by the authorities. Advertising has always been under strict government inspection, ensuring that only government friendly media gets advertising. Whoever breaks this rule gets punished by administrative measures.



The year of 2020 was another awful year for the digital security of independent or opposition media journalists, website blocking, and distributed denial of service (DDOS) attacks of critical resources. Media literacy has not been promoted by the government, and thus, a new generation is being brought up to accept the official narrative as truth. Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, remain the only platforms for public debate, although not everyone dares to express themselves on sensitive topics often identified by authorities as “political” or “politicized”—such as holding the government accountable and official

corruption. Only a few media outlets are aware of the importance of audience analysis and have the skills to do it. With a few exceptions identified during the discussion, community media outlets are very few and do not have broad audiences. The same can be said about media for vulnerable/marginalized groups.

Freedom of expression has not improved from previous years, and people get detained or arrested on bogus charges—and face lengthy prison sentences—if they dare to attend an unsanctioned rally, despite it being included as a constitutional right. Some panelists noted some improvements in Public TV, which has given a voice to politicians and critics who were previously banned from appearing on its broadcasts; however, other panelists felt that this space is only for softer critics of the regime.

Very few media professionals or content producers are familiar with digital threats or how to use digital tools to protect themselves. Many still use Russian domain email addresses. Some learned how to use a VPN during the war when the Internet access was restricted. However, many citizens, especially older and middle-aged people, remain uninformed during this period due to lower technology skills preventing use of VPNs.

Local media do not attempt to train their staff. Only when such training is offered by a third party can media accept them. These trainings are not accessible for all. The majority of content creators are also unaware of basic digital and data literacy skills, including data optimization.

There are DDOS and other attacks to dissident media, including hacking of their media accounts. However, compared to four or five years ago, news resources that are at risk have better website protections, but that does not mean they are safe. In 2020, a DDOS attack was carried out against the “Movement” election bloc.

Digital threats include hacking into personal email, cell phone, and social media accounts of journalists and stealing journalists’ information and photos to use them for blackmail. The government monitors and controls social media accounts such as Facebook, Telegram, and so on. According to some claims, mobile phone operators have helped with the

hacking by providing two-step authentication codes to the hackers.

There are laws in place that should protect everyone from cybercrimes. However, given how law enforcement agencies have limitless power, these laws are useless.

Media literacy is at a very low level among the ordinary citizens and journalists. No effort is directed toward improving the situation, since critical thinking is not encouraged by the authorities. In many cases, viewers cannot differentiate fake news from real news, and they share fake news frequently. Generally, this happens on social media where the fake information is shared by young people multiple times. One panelist noted that ordinary users—non-journalists—have gradually started to differentiate high-quality news and content from low-quality ones.

Information Consumption and Engagement Indicators

- People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.
- People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.
- People engage productively with the information that is available to them.
- Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs.
- Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

There is a little information about media and information through Həyat Bilgisi (Knowledge of Nature) teaching in elementary schools. But since teachers' media literacy is not at the desired level, the children are not properly educated. Firudin Gurbanov, the deputy minister of education, has discussed the importance of increasing media literacy courses in schools, but the reality is that in education—from elementary school to high school—pupils learn from textbooks that propagate loyalty to the ruling party. Expectations of loyalty to the regime include the example of a foreign journalist who asked a question

of the president during a press conference right after the war ended. The president blamed the journalist for judging him and society, and even some practicing journalists criticized the foreign journalist for asking

tough questions—indicating that the majority in Azerbaijan do not understand what the media is supposed to do.

The media skills of some journalists are undeveloped; therefore, the journalists do not know how to produce content professionally—never mind understand the legal and ethical ramifications of unprofessional content. The majority of state or oligarchic news coverage is mostly one-sided, and those who are accused or blamed are never interviewed. Journalism classes at colleges are carried out by those who have no practical skills in media. Only a small portion of the population and journalists know how to check facts, recognize disinformation, and distinguish high-quality news from poor-quality news.

Freedom of speech and the right to information remain problematic. If citizens practice these “rights,” it is done at their own risk. Anyone can be fraudulently arrested for speaking out and can be treated brutally by the police, as was the case on International Women's Day (March 8) or following the parliamentary elections. The most prominent case has been the arrest of a leading opposition party member, outspoken activist Tofiq Yagublu, who was arrested for hooliganism after a staged car accident. In protest, Yagublu started a hunger strike. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Freedom House demanded his immediate release, and Yagublu was released on September 18, 2020.

Only independent or surrogate media—such as Turan Information Agency, Toplum TV, Meydan TV, RFE/RL, VOA, and BBC—can claim to have established virtual platforms for public debate. State-affiliated TV stations such as Public Television have made some changes in their behavior by inviting some people banned by the state, but these attempts are still tentative, as only certain subjects that are okay to discuss are chosen. Hard-core opposition is still left out, and sensitive topics are omitted.

Editors-in-chief of the media outlets that have published critical pieces about authorities have been invited to the Office of the Public Prosecutor and have received warnings to stop publishing such pieces and to remove such online materials immediately. These outlets have been blocked if the response was negative. Journalists critical of authorities

are not even admitted into press conferences held by the Management Union of Medical Territorial Units (TABIB), a government body that administers COVID-19-related measures. Citizens who live in suburbs and send complaints to the president often get punished with bogus, unrelated charges by either local or central authorities for daring to do so.

Ordinary citizens cannot host free town hall meetings, especially in public places. The same goes for political parties that have offices. Only the Musavat Party sometimes hosts town hall meetings on crucial issues; however, these meetings are closely monitored by the police, who interfere if necessary.

Some social media users (e.g., Facebook users) exercise their freedom of speech or post some objective fact-based information. Such users are faced with an army of trolls, who are said to be sponsored by authorities and who distort the subjects discussed or sensationalize insignificant subjects. Authorities have fined or imprisoned government-criticizing journalists who have performed their duties in public for violating the COVID-19 quarantine.

YouTube-based Azerbaijani channels whose hosts live outside of the country manage to get high views and discuss issues that would be too sensitive to consider within Azerbaijan.

Mainstream media that create sensationalist news or propaganda do not find out what the audience needs but decide for the audience what can or cannot be discussed. The truth is kept hidden, or it could be presented in an exaggerated format. These media outlets' social media pages delete comments with criticism and block or troll such users. Many of these websites are closed to comments. There is no option to write to the editor; the chief editor's name is not published. The exceptions to this are some independent media, including the Azerbaijani-language services of media such as RFE/RL and VOA, where comments can be published under articles.

Freedom of speech and the right to information remain problematic. If citizens practice these "rights," it is done at their own risk.

There is a union for editors-in-chief of a few relatively independent media outlets. The union meets and discusses what has happened recently, but their influence is very limited.

Some government agencies have recently responded to criticism through social media. This is a new and positive trend, considering that a few years ago they were ignored.

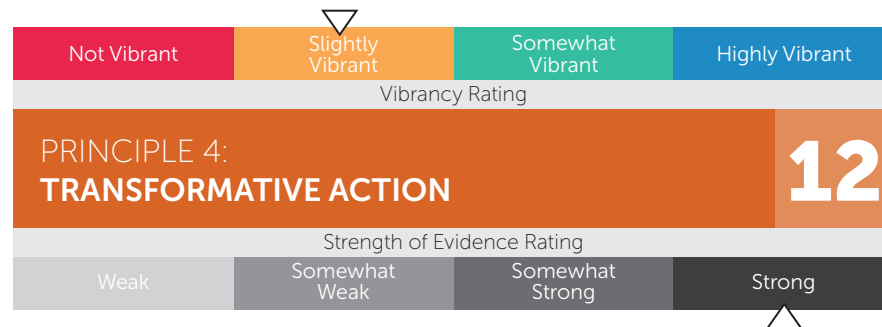
Since mainstream media's agendas come directly from the government, they do not care what the audience wants. The only shows that may follow audience interest are entertainment programs, such as soap operas, lifestyle talk shows, and so on.

Many panelists did not have good examples of community media, but some notable examples include Maştağa TV (now Bakı Kəndləri) on YouTube or Salyan Xəbərləri (Salyan News) on Telegram. Such channels mainly cover social or cultural matters about their community rather than serious or political matters than might compromise their freedom.

Some other provinces have community media dedicated to their towns or regions, such as Mingəçevir işıqları (Mingachevir Lights) in Mingachevir or Cənub xəbərləri (Southern News) for Masally and surrounding areas. Their viewership is not significant. They are also under significant pressure from local authorities or the governor's office. Some districts have town newspapers—a hard-copy version, as well as a remnant of the Soviet Union—and it cannot be called real community media. And these media are, of course, still owned or operated by the local authorities or the governor's office.

A relatively new example of community media is Arabacı TV (which means several things in the Azerbaijani language, including "wheelchair driver"). It operates entirely on social media and dedicates itself to issues regarding physical disabilities. While the outlet does not want to have problems with the government, it has been quite outspoken lately about the problems of physically disabled veterans of the recent war.

Another example is the feminist YouTube channel Fem-Utopia. It covers topics that no other channel or media discuss. Minority Azerbaijan is another media outlet that covers issues of the Azerbaijani LGBTQ community. It is also active on social media, including Facebook. These two have never been observed to spread false information. Both of their respective communities provide support to these media through volunteering their time or providing donations.



A handful non-partisan media exist, and they aim to stand on their feet and expand their presence. Independent civil society organizations in Azerbaijan, which suffered during a 2013-2014 purge, are trying to make a comeback and re-establish their footprints. Access to high-speed internet in rural areas is still rare, which in turn limits population's access to more quality news and information. Given this lack of access, panelists noted that people are more susceptible to believe in conspiracy theories and hesitate to get vaccinated (with whatever is available in the country).

Nonpartisan news and information sources exist, such as the independent media previously discussed here. Other new additions are the recently revived Baku Press Club, a union of prominent and old-school editors, and Açıq Azərbaycan (Open Azerbaijan). Some of them (such as Meydan TV) have or used to have an extensive audience, and they do have digital information exchanges with audiences through social media platforms

such as Facebook. There are plenty of partisan media that include fake news, and this news is broadly discussed on social media as well. Any exchanges of information or constructive discussions happen almost entirely on social media.

There are no constructive discussions on or around the content created by TV channels. Many of their audiences are fans of entertainment shows such as *Səni axtarıram* (Looking for You, a show that searches for missing family members or friends), whose fraudulent episodes have been disproven during fact-checking.

People who live in rural areas cannot feasibly verify the information they hear or view given their poor, or nonexistent, Internet connections. As a result, these people draw conclusions or make up their minds about certain opposition politicians or popular activists based on blackmail-type coverage or mal-information from state-controlled TV stations. Those who are active Internet and social media users are in a better position to cross-check their information with other sources or make a judgment for themselves. However, this information often has no value. For example, more information does not change the outcome of fraudulent information.

One panelist believed that a delay in sharing accurate information by the government-controlled media causes an exponential spread of disinformation in the public, sometimes with anecdotal consequences. One such rumor artificially increased the price of ginger to a record high (10 times more than regular price), as it was believed to be a cure for COVID-19. Each time citizens discover disinformation or mal-information, they lose trust in any official news or information. This was

crucially important during 2020 when the leadership—using professional medical information—tried to convince people to wear masks, obey quarantine measures, and vaccinate, but the majority have not believed it and violated the measures. Conspiracy theories about COVID-19 being a tool to control or exterminate populations spread much more successfully thanks to

“The government is choking independent media so that they do not show corruption or election fraud; websites are blocked (except for YouTube) or journalists are arrested.”

Russian- and Turkish-language fake news published via WhatsApp and other apps. Some of this disinformation—such as spraying disinfectant over the entire city of Baku from helicopters or planes—was created in Azerbaijan.

Civil society still exists even after the raids of 2013–2014; however, their views are ignored by the authorities. In the past 10 years, repressive changes have been made to laws that once were considered progressive. These changes have seriously harmed the interests of citizens and civil society, and they have limited the activities of NGOs. Currently, the majority of NGOs are under close government surveillance, and this has also affected their independence. These NGOs function under harsh conditions but attempt to present the real situation with their research and comparative studies. Independent journalists use these NGOs' expertise in preparing their reports.

There are also plenty of government-sponsored nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs) in the country. GONGOs do exactly the opposite of NGOs and produce poor-quality reports that are not usable by independent media. While NGOs are struggling to get funding—especially from abroad given that there are no local funds available to them, as their bank accounts have been frozen since 2014—GONGOs are relatively better off with funding from the state-controlled Council on State Support to NGOs.

In addition to NGOs, civic activists try to introduce the public to quality information and universal values.

Government officials rarely hold press conferences or meetings with NGOs. If such meetings are held, then it is pro-government media and GONGOs that are invited to these meetings or press conferences, as the officials know that these organizations support them or will not ask the wrong questions. These officials distort facts and present disinformation as truth. This includes information about economic indicators, the unemployment level, population income, and socioeconomic conditions.

In 2020, in the 17th year of his presidency, Ilham Aliyev—who had only given interviews to Russian media (in Russia)—for the first time gave an

interview to local media. He also gave multiple interviews and broadcast live during the war with Armenia. The year 2020 has also been significant as the newly appointed presidential aide Hikmat Hajiyev and the newly appointed Minister of Education Emin Amrullayev have been giving interviews and holding open press conferences in a more progressive way than their predecessors. Throughout the year, the old guard minister of health did not appear on TV shows or interviews. Instead, the Cabinet of Minister's Operations Headquarters and the newly created public body TABIB and their team were organizing press conferences to provide updates to the public on the pandemic. It has appeared that the government has been forced to be accountable because of COVID-19, but not all (especially independent) journalists were allowed to attend these press conferences. Some of the excluded journalists published their questions online so that the journalists who were present at these

press conferences could ask the questions for them.

Transformative Action Indicators

- Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.
- Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.
- Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.
- Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.
- Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

In a strong society where there is government accountability, independent media's information about the violations of human rights and freedoms should influence change—or at least the outcome of elections. However, one panelist observed that this does not happen in Azerbaijan because the strong government does not care about these reports on corruption, excessive force, and election fraud, and the weak society cannot do much about it even if it were well informed. There are several journalists who have used modern ways to reveal huge corruption within the government. Their reports have been published in Organized

Crime and Corruption Reporting Project papers. The government denies these facts, even in the most obvious cases—for example, responding to videos from election day that show ballot stuffing by saying it did not happen or affect overall outcome. The only recourse the candidates whose rights are violated have is to submit their cases to the European Court of Human Rights a few years later and possibly receive monetary compensation; however, this does not change the fact that their parliamentary seats were stolen from them. It is for these reasons that the government is choking independent media so that they do not show corruption or election fraud; websites are blocked (except for YouTube) or journalists are arrested.

Another panelist observed that when approximately six governors (whose public arrests were shown on primetime news and on multiple channels) were detained or committee chairs were dismissed with corruption charges in 2020, the official media or security services filmed and showcased their unexplained vast wealth—multiple villas, expensive cars, and cash or jewelry—which was a result of internecine clashed between opposing factions within the government.

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

GEORGIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 1



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

19

Turbulence from the COVID-19 pandemic and parliamentary elections rocked the Georgian media and information system in 2020. Misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda swamped the information space, while the government tightened control over the media—leading to a deterioration of media freedom in the country.

COVID-19's adverse impact on Georgia's media showed in the treatment of journalists. First, the country's leading public health authorities shunned major media outlets for asking critical questions. Second, journalists' access to public information, already constrained before COVID-19, worsened. Finally, the upended economy damaged the overall media sector's financial health.

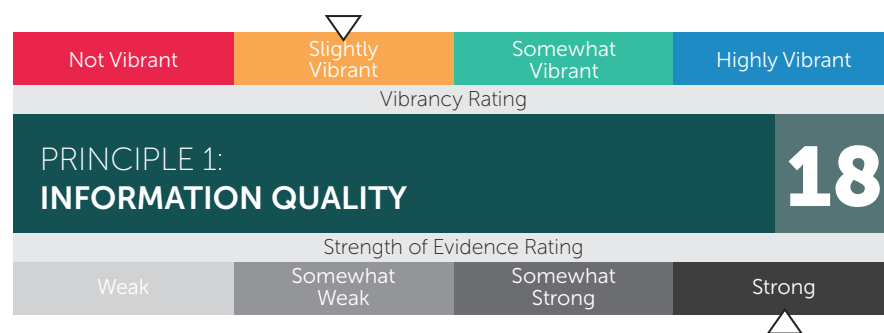
VIBE panelists criticized the government's inability to protect journalists through the parliamentary elections and their aftermath. Several journalists were injured and attacked during protests against allegedly rigged elections. Authorities also filed legal cases against journalists, charging Mtavari TV journalists, for example, with "sabotage" for allegedly misinforming people and discrediting the government.

The tension-filled pre-election period kept national broadcasters split along political lines. Only a few small, mostly online outlets provided unbiased, impartial news about political processes and candidates to help their audiences make informed choices. Political rivals spread propaganda in social media to discredit each other, denigrate critical media, and promote their own goals. Ruling party representatives commonly resort to smear campaigns

and cynical, derogatory statements toward critical and independent media, making it clear that the government does not expect to be held accountable by the media. Russian disinformation further polluted the information landscape. Conspiracy theories, fake news, anti-Western propaganda, and divisive narratives favoring pro-Russian politicians poured through social media to manipulate public opinion and obfuscate the truth.

Despite slight improvements, poor media literacy among citizens continues to be a challenge; public initiative and engagement with quality information are yet not sufficiently entrenched in the local culture. However, civil society is strong, working to promote a culture of diversity and inclusion and pushing the government toward democratic policies.

The first principle, on information quality, received the lowest score of 18. Principles 2 (multiple channels of information) and 3 (consumption and engagement) both received 19. The fourth principle (transformative action) received a slightly higher score of 20.



Overall, this principle was scored the lowest of all VIBE principles in the Georgia study. Sub-indicators on mal-information and funding received lower scores compared to other sub-indicators. Despite an abundance of information created by both professional and non-professional content producers, a plethora of misinformation spreads through print and broadcast media, digital media, and social networks. Mal-information and hate speech permeate social networks. Pro-Russian actors, as well as social networks, spread Russian disinformation.

Two major events—the COVID-19 pandemic and parliamentary elections—made the situation worse. Still, a handful of small, independent, mostly online outlets, including Netgazeti.ge, Batumelebi.ge, on.ge, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) Georgian Service, and Publika.ge, manage to produce fact-based, well-sourced, quality content for their readers.

Most panelists agreed the infrastructure for the creation and distribution of information is more or less adequate for most media. However, small broadcasters, print, and online media outlets suffer from supply shortages and a lack of quality equipment and infrastructure. Gela Mtvlishvili, director of Information Centers Network (ICN) and editor of online websites Mtisambebi.ge and Reginfo.ge, mentioned that poor Internet access is a perennial headache for his staff. Most high-performance publishing houses are centered in Tbilisi, which made access particularly difficult for the media outside the capital during the spring's pandemic lockdown, according to Ia Mamaladze, publisher of the newspaper *Guria News* in western Georgia.

The pandemic's negative impact on the education system, which led the government to close schools and universities and switch to online learning, reduced the amount and quality of practical training for journalists, too. Nata Dzvelishvili, director of Indigo Publishing, also teaches journalism at Black Sea University; she described the challenge of teaching online practical journalism classes, which normally rely on intensive fieldwork: "Such courses, in fact, failed in 2020."

Apart from these setbacks, the majority of panelists agree that there are ample opportunities for students, new graduates, and professional journalists to study. There are about 15 universities that offer journalism degrees, and there are no obstacles to enrollment. However, regional media schools are not usually equipped with high-quality instructors or technical facilities to ensure the preparation of skilled journalists. Media support organizations, such as Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSFG), Internews, and IREX, continue to provide various training and consultancy programs to national and regional media outlets.

Kamila Mamedova, founder of a community radio station in an ethnic Azerbaijani-populated region, said that language barriers hinder the participation of ethnic minority journalists in training programs. "The only exception is the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs Media Lab, which conducts trainings in the Azerbaijani language for local communities," she noted.

Panelists agreed that quality information that adheres to professional standards and ethical norms is available for the public, but the number of content producers who generate such content is relatively small. At the other end of the spectrum, politically biased mainstream broadcast or online media churn out a large amount of information that often blurs the lines between reality and manipulation. Nino Jangirashvili, director of Kavkasia TV, summed it up bluntly: "Most legacy and online media are not interested in facts anymore."

Dzvelishvili stressed that although the role of the mainstream television broadcasters in uncovering truth and revealing hidden facts is instrumental, "recently, it has become a common tendency for journalists to extend their opinions as facts.... Ultimately, this harms everyone. The public loses trust in media."

Journalists are held responsible for unethical and unprofessional reporting, the panelists generally agreed; however, they diverged on whether professional consequences stir any improvement of media performance. Natia Kuprashvili, director of the Journalism Resource Center, said that self-regulation mechanisms of some mainstream broadcasters have improved—with the exception of pro-government outlets. According to Dzvelishvili, individuals usually drive any positive steps taken by broadcasters, and they are not reflected in the long-term approaches of the outlets.

Citizens tend to direct complaints about perceived reporting errors to the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics (GCJE), which Tamar Kintsurashvili, director of Media Development Foundation (MDF), traces to the public's insufficient knowledge of how broadcast self-regulation mechanisms work. Citizen appeals accounted for 56 of 96 complaints submitted to the GCJE in 2020; the majority of these complaints concerned reporting accuracy.

Mainstream media content mostly focuses on the coverage of crucial national events, including political and social issues. Mamuka Andguladze, a media program manager at Transparency Georgia, said that media often fail to cover events in Georgia's occupied territories (Abkhazeti and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia) properly. The mainstream media also tends to neglect issues that “do not have political flavor,” such as citizens' discontent over illegal construction in the center of Batumi, the second-largest city in Georgia, according to Sofia Zhgenti, head of online service at Ajara Public Broadcaster.

Media cover foreign events, although the reporting is usually fragmented. For a few years, [Netgazeti.ge](https://netgazeti.ge), an online outlet, has reported about the South Caucasus countries. There are several other online outlets with a regional focus aimed mostly at informing foreign audiences, such as [Jam-news.net](https://jam-news.net), [OC-Media.ge](https://oc-media.ge), [ChaiKhana.org](https://chaiKhana.org), eurasianet.org, and a few others. Maia Mikashavidze, program director at Internews Georgia, notes that a couple of new programs—Politikis Formula (The Formula of Politics) on Formula TV and Mtavari Msoplioshi (Mtavari in the World) on Mtavari TV helped narrow the gap in foreign coverage by national broadcasters. In addition, Euronews started broadcasting in Georgian

providing local, regional and international news to its audiences.

Information Quality Indicators

- There is quality information on a variety of topics available.
- The norm for information is that it is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.
- The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.
- The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.
- Content production is sufficiently resourced.

Generally, the panelists agreed that journalists hold the government accountable for its actions, but they said it does not always yield positive results. Jangirashvili pointed to the unanswered media inquiry into government spending during the pandemic as an example.

Different actors circulate misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda through traditional media and social networks. The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020 and the run-up to the October parliamentary election amplified the problem.

Some panelists claimed that it can be hard to distinguish between misinformation and mal-information, but most agree that pro-government media trampled objectivity. Hatia Jinjikhadze, media program director at Open Society Georgia Foundation (OSGF), cited pro-governmental Imedi TV's coverage of the case of David Gareji, a monastery complex close to the disputed Georgian-Azerbaijani border territory, as a true example of disinformation¹—designed to reinforce the government's claims rather than inform the public. The coverage aimed to discredit the United National Movement (UNM) party, the largest opposition party, accusing it of handing over the disputed territory to Azerbaijan and blaming two cartographers, the panelists explained. During the pre-election period, Imedi TV promoted the slogan “Gareji is Georgia,” which other pro-government outlets quickly adopted, said Nino Danelia, an Ilia State University media professor.

1 Kincha, Shota. “Georgia Blames Former ‘Senior Officials’ for Davit Gareji Border Dispute,” OC Media. January 21, 2020. <https://oc-media.org/georgia-blames-former-senior-officials-for-davit-gareja-border-dispute/>.

Most panelists expressed concern about objectivity and impartiality in mainstream broadcasters, referred to either as critical or pro-opposition media. Kuprashvili recalled a statement by the director of Mtavari TV: “Emotions are more important than facts,” which she said exemplifies the outlet’s editorial agenda. Dzvelishvili sees a growing trend of media failing to search for facts, “They already have formed attitudes, and they try to strengthen those attitudes in their reports.”

Government and opposition political forces encourage the spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media, the panelists agree, with the government spending more resources on the activity and having a bigger sway over public opinion. In May and October 2020, Facebook announced plans to remove Facebook accounts, pages, groups, and Instagram accounts as part of a Georgia-focused network linked to the ruling Georgian Dream party, the UNM, Alliance of Patriots, and Georgian Choice. Outlets that traditionally spread pro-Russian propaganda, such as News Front, [GeWorld.ge](https://www.ge-world.com/), [Sakinformi.ge](https://www.sakinformi.ge/), and others, were also active in 2020; Facebook removed News Front from its platform in April.

Panelists believe that mal-information and hate speech spread through social networks and different platforms is harming the information space. Saba Chikhladze, social media manager at the RFE/RL Georgian Service, reviews content in social media to try to prevent the spread of misinformation. He said he sifts through at least 40,000 comments monthly, adding that it is especially difficult to moderate comments to live content. He said that it is not always trolls and bots that he has to tackle, but rather comments from regular people, which also should be examined carefully.

Most of the mal-information and hate speech in social media can be traced to Russian disinformation and propaganda efforts, although local media outlets with an anti-Western agenda and political actors with pro-Kremlin preferences contribute, too. The infodemic that followed the COVID-19 pandemic brought out a plethora of harmful content.

Russian sources spread conspiracy theories and disinformation about the Richard Lugar Center for Public Health Research in Tbilisi, which for a time was the only place testing COVID-19 patients. In Tskhinvali, the pro-Russian de facto authorities accused Georgians of attempting to bring COVID-19 to Tskhinvali from the Lugar laboratory² and accused the lab of pursuing biowarfare programs. Another widely circulated conspiracy theory disputed the existence of the virus that causes COVID-19. Disinformation involving vaccines, meanwhile, fed on rather strong anti-vaccine sentiment in Georgia.

Several organizations carry out fact-checking, such as [Factcheck.ge](https://www.factcheck.ge/), [Mythdetector.ge](https://www.mythdetector.ge/), the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensics Lab, and the International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED).

These organizations cooperate with international fact-checking platforms and social networks, such as Facebook. A media critique platform run by GCJE, [Mediachecker.ge](https://www.mediachecker.ge/), is aimed mostly at informing the professional media community and monitors ethical and professional journalism. ISFED’s pre-election monitoring of social media revealed that in the lead-up to

parliamentary elections, disinformation and discrediting content started to build up even more from Russian and domestic sources. One analysis of 900 pages (mostly on Facebook but also TikTok and Instagram) revealed 69 pages spreading value-based divisive narratives in favor of pro-Russian parties, 36 pages discrediting political opposition, 30 pages discrediting the ruling party and authorities, nine false media pages favoring the ruling party, 17 pages supporting the ruling officials, 18 pages supporting opposition parties, and 10 pages promoting the political party Alliance of Patriots.³

“Recently, it has become a common tendency for journalists to extend their opinions as facts... Ultimately, this harms everyone. The public loses trust in media,” said Dzvelishvili.

2 “What New Conspiracy Theories Does Tskhinvali KGB Spread about Lugar Lab?,” Myth Detector. June 10, 2020. <https://www.mythdetector.ge/en/myth/what-new-conspiracy-theories-does-tskhinvali-kgb-spread-about-lugar-lab>.

3 ISFED. “Social Media Monitoring,” ISFED. October 2020. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ODd5utOQoytK5UCpuLq9jGN-W4UZiTVG/view>.

External pluralism and diversity exist in the Georgian information system; Jinjikhadze said that even though one cannot always expect to familiarize oneself with multiple perspectives from a single media outlet, it is possible to obtain a full story by following different media.

More media have stepped up their coverage of minority communities, but many outlets fall short of diversity. Mainstream media coverage of such topics is usually shallow, Danelia said, while certain groups (such as Roma) are invisible, according to Zhgenti. Jangirashvili sees some improvement in the coverage of the issues related to sexual minorities, however. She recalled an RFE/RL interview with a transgender woman who had attempted to burn herself in public to protest the deplorable state of rights of sexual minorities in the country. Other media quickly picked up the report, she noted.

The Georgian Public Broadcaster usually does not uphold its programming obligation to produce minority-oriented programs. During the COVID-19 lockdown in early spring, the broadcaster failed to deliver crucial information to Armenian and Azerbaijani communities in a timely manner, according to a Human Rights Education and Monitoring Center report.⁴ That failure, along with poor communications by the local governments, is among the reasons for the virus's rapid spread in the Azerbaijani-populated Marneuli region.

Overall, minorities only tend to capture the interest of journalists during controversial circumstances or festivities, according to Dzvelishvili. Furthermore, while the Internet and social networks have provided marginalized groups the platforms for communication, information about their values and opinions is not usually shared with the wider public, Danelia said.

In terms of gender balance in the media, the panelists agreed both men and women work as journalists, editors, and producers, and there is a growing tendency for women to occupy top managerial positions. Ethnic diversity among media practitioners, however, is still an issue, failing to mirror the diversity of the country's population overall.

Financially, the media is suffering. Traditional funding streams are no longer sufficient, and professional content producers have to seek alternatives. Donors provide most of the funding for small independent media. Some media, especially online outlets, have tried to diversify their funding channels by adopting innovative approaches. For example, the online news outlet [On.ge](#) and *Indigo*, a niche print magazine that also produces online content, have tried native advertising, highly demanded by advertisers. Other online and print media provide services such as book and journal publishing to bring in extra income. However, since COVID-19 has wreaked havoc on business activities, many of these initiatives were suspended at *Indigo*. Mamaladze said that if not for the financial assistance from donors, her newspaper, *Guria News*, would not have survived.

Social networks have become major competitors for the media, siphoning off ads from small businesses. In June 2020, a group of Georgian media outlets and civil society organizations appealed to Facebook to make information about pre-election political advertising from Georgia publicly available to ensure transparency. Facebook reported total spending of \$1,106,424 on ads related to social issues, elections, or politics in the country since August 2020.⁵

Some media outlets adopted monetization opportunities offered by social networks. For example, the online [Mtisambebi.ge](#), along with [reginfo.ge](#) and its YouTube channel RegTV, produce a large number of multimedia products and has benefited from monetization on YouTube in 2019, Mtvlishvili shared.

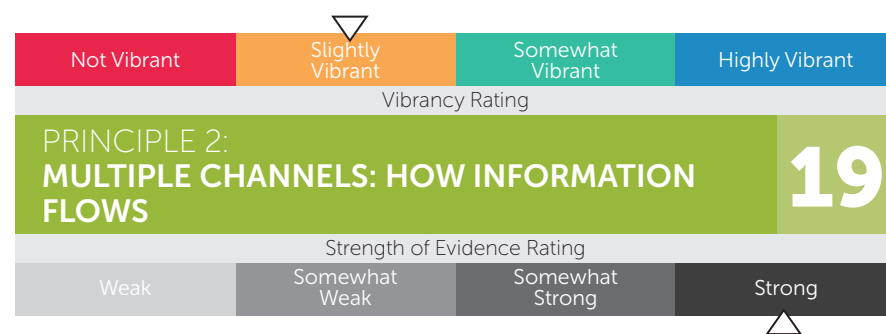
Government spending for the provision of information services, such as public service announcements, constitutes one crucial revenue source for the media. The government tends to reward media for loyalty, however. Kuprashvili and Kintsurashvili slammed the allocation of these funds as selective and biased and said that a quick glance at the state consolidated tender shows that pro-government media outlets enjoy privileged treatment. Additionally, some businesses that are affiliated with the government refuse to bring advertising to critical media.

4 Kavtaradze, Lasha. "The Needs of Ethnic Minorities, Public Broadcaster and Pandemics." EMC. July 21, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3b5uZ8w>.

5 Facebook. "Facebook Ad Library Report, Georgia." 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/ads/library/report/?source=archive-landing-page&country=GE>

Kintsurashvili added that the government started contracting online media to share posts on social media, giving some online media an unfair advantage, too. During the pre-election period, the Georgian Dream party also blacklisted several outlets, including [Reginfo.ge](#) and [Mtisambebi.ge](#), which Mtivlishvili connects to their critical positions on certain sociopolitical events in the regions.

The Georgian Public Broadcaster, mainly funded by the state, is the country's best-resourced outlet; it received GEL 68.7 million (\$20.78 million) from the state budget in 2020.⁶ According to the OSCE, that equaled the advertising revenues of all commercial television stations combined in the country.⁷ "The GNCC financial map shows that only the public broadcaster's financial resources are increasing," said Dzvelishvili. Adjara Public Broadcaster's resources are moderate in spite of its annual GEL 8 million (\$2.42 million) funding, Zhgenti noted, as "approximately 80 percent of its funding is spent on salaries."



Georgia has laws that protect freedom of speech and freedom of the press. However, those freedoms are under threat, panelists said, pointing to attempts to tighten laws and file more legal charges against the journalists from media outlets that have been critical of the government in the last year.

6 Pertaia, Luka. "The Budget of the Public Broadcaster Has Increased up to GEL 69 Million," [Netgazeti.ge](https://netgazeti.ge/news/411527/). December 4, 2019. <https://netgazeti.ge/news/411527/>

IDFI: "The Funding and the Ratings of Georgian Public Broadcaster after Three Years of Announced Reform." September 9, 2020, https://idfi.ge/public/upload/GG/Public_Broadcaster_Expenses.pdf

7 OSCE. "International Election Observation." <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/a/a/469020.pdf>

Mtavari TV, for example, was under investigation on suspicion of "sabotage," an article of Georgia's criminal code, accused of misinforming audiences and discrediting the government. Jangirashvili said that legal cases from 2019 against Zuka Gumbardze, now director of Formula TV, and Giorgi Gabunia and Nika Gvaramia, representatives of Mtavari TV, are disguised behind various laws, but in reality, they are brought on by the channel's critical editorial stance. While the government does not exercise direct censorship, panelists see a worrying tendency by the government and the allegedly pro-governmental Communications Commission to amend and interpret laws in a way that oppresses the media and restricts editorial freedom.

An amendment to the Law on Broadcasting entered into force in September 2020 imposes additional obligations on media outlets to protect children from harmful information and sets strict punishments for violations, including possible license revocation. A nongovernmental organization (NGO) appealed the amendment, which was introduced alongside the Code on the Rights of the Child in the Constitutional Court, pointing to vague areas in both laws. Panelists underscored the danger this amendment carries by granting the Communications Commission the right to determine what information is or is not harmful to children, thus censoring content and information flow. They also worry that the amendment might contribute to self-censorship among the media, driving some journalists to be overly cautious to avoid inviting scrutiny by the commission. The panelists view the Communications Commission's attempt to regulate obscene content as another declaration of intent to interfere and control media content and suppress freedom of expression.

Law enforcement also stepped up pressure on journalists to reveal sources of their information, which the panelists called out as a violation of local and international laws and another driving force of self-censorship among journalists. They pointed to Davit Kashiashvili, a journalist from Formula TV, who was questioned over his story involving the death of a young woman. "There are many brave journalists who will withstand such pressure, but not everyone can do it. One might rethink and abstain from covering controversial stories to avoid questioning," Andguladze said.

The deputy director of Adjara Public Broadcaster resigned under pressure in early 2020 after she accused a government-friendly director of the television station of pressing for a change in editorial policy following a tumultuous shake-up of leadership and staff in 2019. The panelists described these moves as examples of outright government meddling with media's editorial policy.

Multiple Channels Indicators

- People have rights to create, share, and consume information.
- People have adequate access to channels of information.
- There are appropriate channels for government information.
- There are diverse channels for information flow.
- Information channels are independent.

Journalists endured attacks and mistreatment as they tried to carry out their professional duties during the election season. Journalists and crew members of several media outlets—including Mtavari TV, TV Pirveli, Georgian Public Broadcaster, and [Publika.ge](#)--were harassed and physically attacked. At least seven journalists were injured after the police used water cannons against the protesters in front of the Election Administration of Georgia on November 8. The Ministry of the Interior launched

investigations into the cases, which were still ongoing when the VIBE panel convened.

In July, the Communications Commission attempted to introduce amendments to the Law on Electronic Communications and the Law on Broadcasting that would enable it to establish “a special manager” of telecom operators, which include broadcasters. After civil society organizations fought the measure, however, the original draft was rescinded, and a modified version was adopted.

The panelists gave poor marks to the government's communication with media; they noted alarming attempts across state bodies to discredit critical and independent media and professional organizations supporting media, such as the GCJE. The panelists said that the commission used the media critique platform [Mediacritic.ge](#), launched

under the umbrella of the Communications Commission with a declared goal of examining media content quality, as a tool for censorship. The name of the platform, [Mediacritic.ge](#), mimics the name of [Mediachecker.ge](#) run by the GCJE and replicates its activities—“an attempt to create the Charter's parallel institution,” Kintsurashvili noted. [Mediacritic.ge](#) discredited the independent media by accusing quality news portals like [Netgazeti.ge](#) and [On.ge](#) of publishing “fake news.” Instead of disclosing Russian propaganda, disinformation, and fake news, the platform goes after the quality media, panelists cautioned.

Laws on rights to information exist in the country and conform to international standards, but the panelists pointed to regression on the implementation side. The General Administrative Code of Georgia, adopted in 1999, regulates journalists' and citizen's access to public information. Still, many government and public institutions do not cooperate with the media in a timely manner, providing requested materials so belatedly that the information loses relevance for journalists and the public.

The panelists also gave poor marks to the government's communication with media during periods of crisis, preventing journalists and media actors from accessing official information. Access to public information was limited the entire year, Mikashavidze noted, because of the pandemic. “Initially, briefings were held very well,” Dzvelishvili said, but eventually the press office began limiting the information flow. Danelia added that officials discouraged critical questions regarding the pandemic and its handling by the government under the pretense that it could increase public anxiety. The panelists point to this regression as evidence of the government's lack of accountability toward media and civil society and say that pro-government media, including the public broadcaster, always enjoy first and sometimes exclusive access to public information. For some panelists, the fact that government representatives almost never participate in debates or programs on critical channels--appearing only on Imedi TV, the Georgian Public Broadcaster (GPB), and Rustavi 2--combined with their cynical treatment of critical media, further shows the government's selective approach, limiting access to public information and escalating the country's political and media polarization. According to the Institute

for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI)⁸ report in 2020, the average compliance rate of proactive accessibility of public information was 55 percent.

Overall, the panelists agreed that people still have access to information through various channels; they lauded the fact that the Internet became a constitutional right in Georgia in 2017. According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia's July 2020 survey,⁹ 83.8 percent of Georgian households have Internet access through fixed lines, and 94.7 percent of the population accesses the Internet through mobile devices. However, access to the Internet has become a problem not only in rural areas but also in big cities because of economic hardship brought on by the pandemic.

"Infrastructure may exist, but people cannot pay for Internet services," Kuprashvili said. The government-mandated switch to online education during the pandemic exposed "how big the problem is in the regions, leaving many children without education," noted Dzvelishvili. Fixed Internet services are not available or are of low quality in rural areas, and while people use mobile Internet as an alternative, it is comparatively pricey—eventually affecting viewership, particularly of online television. Frequent electricity shortages also limit public access to channels of information, especially in the regions and mountainous parts of the country.

Most panelists believe that licensing and spectrum allocation procedures for broadcast media, which used to be simple enough to enable anyone with citizenship to establish a media organization, have grown more

“We have two extremes here. There are the media that try to have as much paid and sponsored content as possible, and there are those that defend their editorial policy to the point of refusing vital funding,” said Dzvelishvili.

complex. Mariam Gogosashvili, executive director of GCJE, said the Communications Commission's approach to authorization procedures has changed in the last two years. Now, among other documents, the commission requires audit reports on a company's financial sustainability. Mtvlishvili, who applied for authorization to launch an online community radio in Svaneti, a mountainous region of Georgia, and was denied, describes the procedures as complex and unfair. "Audit

reports are expensive. The commission requested proof of financial sustainability, and we had donor funds. But if I were to voluntarily launch the radio? Why should this be complicated?" said Mtvlishvili, who lodged a complaint against the commission's decision in court.

The laws that regulate transparency in media ownership and funding apply to broadcast media but not print and

online media. The panelists agree that distribution channels are not monopolized but gave low scores for the public media, particularly the GPB, for failing to properly cover and create public awareness, particularly around issues related to minorities and disinformation. They name the critically acclaimed *Realuri Sivrtse* as the GPB's only quality program. The panelists also criticized the editorial agenda of Adjara Public Broadcaster in 2020, following the management change when the pro-ruling party candidate took over in fall 2019. Monitoring of Adjara Public Broadcaster by GCJE documented imbalance, bias, and news programs mostly devoid of any critical content, as Transparency International reports—¹⁰ a marked backsliding after several years of earning recognition for its balanced and impartial programming by local and international monitors.

National broadcasters tend to be influenced by their owners—and that influence is easily detected in their editorial policies and programming,

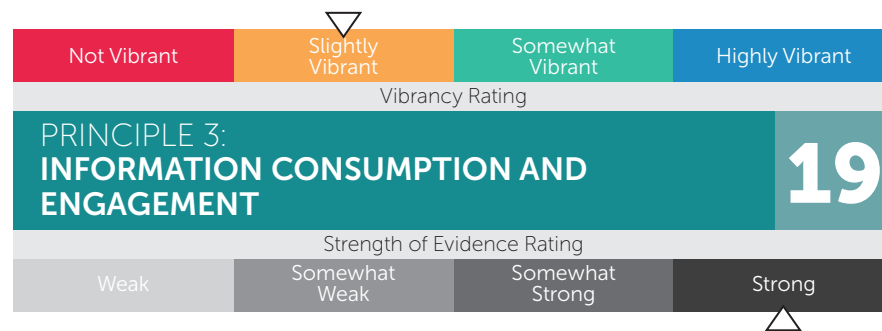
8 Avalishvili, Levan, Kldiashvili, Giorgia, Tushurashvili, Goga, and Topuria, Ket. "Proactive Disclosure of Public Information on Georgian Public Institution Websites," IDFI. June 2020. <https://bit.ly/3rY63GR>.

9 National Statistics Office of Georgia. "Indicators of Using Information and Communication Technologies in Households," National Statistics Office of Georgia. September 11, 2020. <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/106/information-and-communication-technologies-usage-in-households>.

10 Transparency International. "Georgian Media Environment in 2016–2020," Transparency International. October 22, 2020. <https://transparency.ge/ge/post/sakartvelos-mediagaremo-2016-2020-clebshi>.

the panelists said. Comparatively, “smaller media organizations are free from ownership impact,” according to Jinjikhadze. Business and commercial interests also impact editorial policy, the panelists said. “We have two extremes here. There are the media that try to have as much paid and sponsored content as possible, and there are those that defend their editorial policy to the point of refusing vital funding,” said Dzvelishvili.

Most panelists believe that government subsidies and advertising contracts are allocated to outlets that are loyal to the government and that there is a direct correlation between the winners of the government tenders on advertising and pro-government stances. Kvemo Kartli TV, which operates in an Azerbaijani-populated region, was named as an example of a nonstate TV outlet subsidized by the government, along with the English language online magazine [Agenda.ge](#)—founded by the government to influence English-language readers interested in the country’s news.



There are laws and tools that allow for safe information use and engagement. The Internet and social media are freely available, but privacy and security on the web can be questionable. The state cybersecurity system remains weak, and citizen’s media literacy levels are still low, despite some progress noted by panelists. The overall score for this principle was 19.

Georgia has laws that protect privacy and access to the Internet, which is partially supervised by the Communications Commission. In 2019, the Constitutional Court ruled against the commission’s right to identify

and order the removal of “inadmissible content” (as determined solely by the parliament). Privacy is mainly regulated by the July 2013 Law on Personal Data Protection. However, the panelists said that the law is frequently misused by state and public bodies to withhold information from the media. Mtivlishvili recalled that he appealed to a Ministry of Interior subunit, requesting the job title of one of its employees, but his request was turned down on the pretense of privacy. Another area where the right to privacy can be infringed upon is when the details of individuals’ private lives are disclosed by law enforcement, such as recordings of private conversations under the guise of high public interest. Journalists know to be cautious about discussing certain issues over their phones because of the fear of eavesdropping by security services. Mariam Gogosashvili and Levan Avalishvili, who is a program director and founder of IDFI, said that the current legislation pertinent to secret surveillance, under hearing at the Constitutional Court, fails to set strict guarantees for the protection of privacy.

In October, Irakli Kobakhidze, a Georgian Dream party leader, publicly summarized the dialogue that purportedly occurred between a journalist of TV Pirveli and one of the leaders of the UNM in Ozurgeti (Guria region). The journalist, whose name was mentioned, confirmed having a phone conversation with a party representative and the content of the conversation; the Media Advocacy Coalition appealed to the government, requesting an appropriate reaction to the alleged surveillance. Danelia recalled an experiment carried out by the civic activist movement *Sirtskhvilia* (Shame) to test surveillance of their private conversations. The police acted upon their phone call, confirming that law enforcement indeed was eavesdropping.

Cybersecurity is mainly protected under the Law on Information Security adopted in 2012. At the end of 2019, a Georgian Dream member of parliament (MP) initiated a draft bill of amendments to the law, which civil society organizations said created a risk of unbridled control over Georgia’s information system by the state security services. The draft bill was ultimately voted down during the fall 2020 parliamentary hearings.

Information Consumption and Engagement Indicators

- People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.
- People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.
- People engage productively with the information that is available to them.
- Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs.
- Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

There are training programs, courses, and open-access resources available to both professional and nonprofessional content producers about digital security, digital hygiene, and general issues of safety on the net. These trainings and courses are usually offered by private, nongovernmental, and media support organizations. For example, GCJE published guidelines for journalists on how to ensure cybersecurity and technical support during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kintsurashvili said that many journalists are not aware of the importance of security online, flagging it as an area in need

of more work. The trainings offered by IREX's Securing Access to Free Expression (SAFE) program seem to be the most widely used among the media community. Zura Vardiashvili, editor of online [Publika.ge](https://publika.ge), mentioned that prior to setting up the outlet's website at the end of 2019, he and his team members benefited from training sessions and guidance offered by the IREX SAFE staff. Regional media also benefited from those trainings and integrated what they learned into their daily practices, according to Mamedova. Chikhladze noted that the tools for cyber hygiene are widely available for download.

Citizens' knowledge of algorithms driving social media and targeted advertising differs by age, experience, and location. Even though there are very few studies that cast light on the media literacy levels of the Georgian citizens, Kintsurashvili sees some improvement in how citizens treat such information. Dzvelishvili still sees many people on Facebook, especially the elderly generation, who share fake news and bizarre advertising announcements without hesitation, however.

Although media literacy is included in school curricula, Danelia said that the quality of education in most schools is unsatisfactory because teachers lack the knowledge and experience needed to adequately incorporate competency within the curriculum. There are many media literacy programs, resources, and trainings available to citizens offered by NGOs. Often, these programs and courses target children and students but rarely older adults, Danelia added.

The Communications Commission, charged with leading media literacy strategy in Georgia, is also mandated to carry out projects aimed at raising media literacy levels in the country. The regulator has been criticized for its inability to adequately address the urgency of the media literacy needs among Georgian citizens. Moreover, Kintsurashvili and Danelia noted that the regulator's media critic platform ([Mediacritic.ge](https://mediacritic.ge)), a media literacy tool by definition, is propagandistic in nature and was set up as a censorship tool—not to ensure the media literacy of citizens. Kuprashvili, who served as a committee member of the contest “True or Invented” administered by the media literacy unit of the Communications Commission, said the game itself is interesting to schoolchildren and students, but she feels it would have been better if the activity were carried out solely by the Ministry of Education.

Panelists said that platforms similar to town halls exist. Dzvelishvili said that journalists and civil activists productively exercise their rights, but the people do not actively participate. There are public councils within city districts and in regional self-governance units, which are mandated to engage citizens in public debates on a variety of matters. Some panelists evaluated these public councils as pro forma. Many of those councils are staffed by the people who work for public organizations, Mtivlishvili noted, thus violating their mandates. Mamaladze explained that one reason people are reluctant to participate in public debates at local public councils is a lack of tangible results from such initiatives. The Public Defender of Georgia oversees the observance of human rights and freedoms in Georgia and is the platform citizens can address when they feel their rights are violated. There are also Civic Engagement Centers established with the support of USAID that offer a safe space for all to meet and discuss issues.

It is not uncommon for the government to set up targeted online platforms with the aim of artificially intervening in public debate, Kintsurashvili said, pointing to the online platform [STV.ge](https://www.stv.ge) funded from the state budget, which mostly shared news about the Georgian Dream candidate Irakli Chikovani in the run-up to the 2020 election.

The panelists see citizens playing a greater role in reporting misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech, actively filtering and debunking such practices. Kintsurashvili, whose organization is focused on media literacy levels among Georgians, has seen examples of citizens reporting suspicious content on social media too.

There is very little qualitative research that would let the media delve deeper and understand its audience's needs. Quantitative data are mostly available for national television broadcasters from TVMR and Kantar Media Group. Regional broadcasters are not usually measured within the regions they operate. Kuprashvili mentioned that the combined audience for all media that are members of the Alliance of Broadcasters placed them among the top 15 by audience size in the country. Online media use traditional web statistics and analytics tools, such as Google Analytics and Facebook Analytics. Dzvelishvili confirmed that it is very expensive for most small media to commission a study of its audiences. However, several large radio stations carry the measurement of their own audiences, although those data are usually privately owned. Measurement for print media is nonexistent. The audience surveys carried out by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) are crucial to obtain information about audience preference and media use patterns.

The government uses different tools and platforms to share information with journalists, including social media tools such as Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp—but Gogosashvili said the government shares information that is of interest to authorities, and there is no reciprocity there. As soon as journalists ask follow-up questions, Vardiashvili said, representatives of state and public communication offices “vanish from

those chats and groups.”

Panelists expressed concern that journalists who ask critical questions are labeled as opposition political party members and liars. Tbilisi's mayor, a leading figure in the ruling Georgian Dream party, held a campaign against the spread of disinformation and fake news accompanied by a poster with the logos of the three television stations—Mtavari TV, TV Pirveli, and Formula TV. However, the names of these stations were altered to include the word “sitsrue,” which means “a lie.”¹¹ On a separate occasion, one of the leaders of the Georgian Dream party, Irakli Kobakhidze, likened Mtavari TV and TV Pirveli to Russian outlets. Panelists assessed these as smear campaigns against critical media aimed at discrediting and denigrating them in the public eyes.

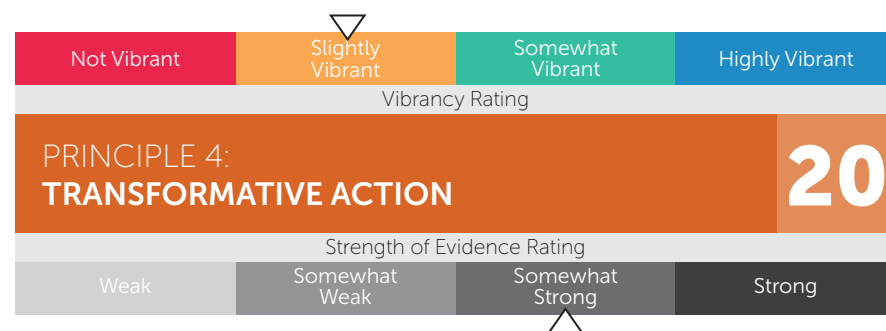
“It is not uncommon for the government to set up targeted online platforms with the aim of artificially intervening in public debate,” said Kintsurashvili.

Community media exist in Georgia and are viewed as progressive and promising by the professional community. There are several community radios in the country that broadcast in the minority populated communities: Radio Nor broadcasting in the Armenian-populated town of Ninotsminda; Radio Pankisi, which broadcasts in the region predominantly populated by Kists; and Radio Marneuli, which operates in the Azerbaijani-populated region of Marneuli. For some time now, the founders of Radio Ivrisi in Iormughanlo have been pursuing authorization from the Communications Commission. More recently, Radio Lile in Svaneti, set up online with OSFG support, sought Communications Commission authorization.

Mamedova said that community media have been instrumental in opening up debate about important issues for local communities and that community radio outlets have “contributed to the development of activist culture locally.” Mtivlishvili—whose organization, Information Centers Network, manages another community media, Radio Pankisi—said that locals often come to the station to share their concerns and usually end up holding a program of their own.

11 [Civil.ge](https://civil.ge/archives/357286). “Tbilisi Mayor Campaigns to Counter ‘Fake News,’” [Civil.ge](https://civil.ge/archives/357286). June 26, 2020. <https://civil.ge/archives/357286>.

In the summer of 2020, protesters organized rallies to try to shut down Pankisi Community Radio and its founder in the village of Duisi. Pankisi Radio representatives alleged that the Georgian Dream and the state security services backed the turmoil over the outlet's critical stance in relation to the government's and state security service's activities in the region. The situation is stable for now.



The score for this principle was 20. Indicators examining individuals' use of information and government's use of quality information were scored the lowest. The Georgian media landscape is diverse when it comes to ownership and different political ideologies across the spectrum; however, there is limited diversity related to political opinions and societal voices within each outlet. Civil society organizations contribute to positive developments among different communities. However, the panelists did not give high marks to the government on the use of quality information to make public policy decisions.

The panelists said that there are a few small quality media organizations that steer clear of political bias, but they do not reach a large number of people or have substantial influence over public opinion.

Georgia's public is television centric. According to NDI/CRRC opinion polls, 84 percent of the respondents cited television as their main source of news about the pandemic in 2020.¹² However, younger people rely heavily on the Internet and Facebook for their news. According to

Transformative Action Indicators

- Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.
- Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.
- Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.
- Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.
- Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

the National Statistics Office of Georgia ([Geostat.ge](https://www.geostat.ge)), 54.9 percent of people aged 15 and older went online for news sites/newspapers/news magazines in 2020, and 90.6 percent used the Internet to access social networks.¹³

Some panelists claim that the demand for partisan content filled with radicalized narratives is high. According to the CRRC 2020 survey, the two partisan media led on the chart for the most trusted sources of information: the pro-government Imedi TV occupied first place (28 percent) and pro-opposition Mtavari TV took second place (14 percent). A smaller number of citizens trusted allegedly pro-

governmental Rustavi 2 TV (10 percent), while only 7 percent of the respondents stated they trusted TV Pirveli. Dzvelishvili noted that it is civil society that uses quality media and different sources of information; "as for the political actors, they lean toward loyal media."

Georgian society is clearly polarized across different political and social lines, creating a challenging climate for robust debate informed by quality news. This is especially evident when sensitive political issues are discussed in social media or in comment sections of web-based media. Kintsurashvili said that activists of political parties mobilize mostly in news comments sections, "reading news of Radio Liberty and Mtavari TV not to balance sources, but to substantiate their narrative."

12 CRCC Georgia. "Public Attitudes in Georgia: Results of June 2020 Survey," CRCC Georgia. https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Georgia%20Poll%20Results_June_2020_Final%20Version_ENG.pdf

13 National Statistics Office of Georgia. "Information and Communication Technologies Usage in Households," National Statistics Office of Georgia. <https://www.geostat.ge/en/modules/categories/106/information-and-communication-technologies-usage-in-households>.

Most people do not rely on quality information to guide their behaviors; many, Dzvelishvili said, do not filter information and share whatever pops up in their newsfeed. Jangirashvili sees a lack of quality discourse in the polarized society, adding that nobody checks the sources of the information they share: “Some praise Bidzina Ivanishvili for building an international university, or Mikheil Saakashvili for earning us the vaccine, and nobody checks the validity of the information.” People also display prejudiced thinking and predispositions toward certain topics, which hold them back from understanding information appropriately—as the pandemic revealed—with the propensity to buy into dangerous myths. Regarding the election outcomes, governmental and opposition trolls and bots manipulated public opinion with slanted information regarding pro-governmental and pro-opposition parties and candidates.

“Watchdog activism often yields positive results as the government is compelled to respond in one way or another,” noted Jinjikhadze.

Panelists assess civil society’s role much more favorably. They praise the significant role NGOs play in building healthy democratic processes in the country by carrying out research, fighting Russian disinformation, providing the public with training programs to raise awareness, and engaging with the government on various matters. Recalling the case of ISFED, the panel noted that NGOs should carry out rigorous research and should be very accurate with the sources they use to protect their image and credibility. ISFED, a powerful watchdog organization, admitted to making a mistake in a parallel vote tabulation for the 2020 parliamentary elections of Georgia, which damaged the organization’s reputation. The panelists singled out several powerful NGOs operating in the country: the Georgian Young Lawyers Association, Transparency International, the IDFI, the GCJE, the ISFED, Georgian Democracy Initiative, MDF, and Democracy Research Institute. They also mentioned home-grown government-sponsored nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs) as being detrimental to the idea of the nongovernmental sector; GONGOs, they say, are aimed at managing domestic politics and creating counternarratives against genuine NGOs.

Mechanisms for the government’s engagement with the civil society and media are in place—usually press briefings, websites, and social

media pages of different state and public organizations—and more or less satisfactory. Yet the government rarely explains its policy decisions and political discourse, and it rarely uses fact-based evidence and information derived from research, according to the panelists.

When assessing whether media information supports good governance and democratic rights, the panelists generally agree that this is sometimes true. In Dzvelishvili’s view, “The ruling party communicates with only loyal-to-government media, which means that it does not

accept criticism from critical media or NGOs; moreover, it tries to marginalize these actors; hence, we have a low level of government accountability.” However, Jinjikhadze noted that “watchdog activism often yields positive results as the government is compelled to respond in one way or another.” It was not enough,

though, to keep misinformation and mal-information—spread not only by government institutions but also by people acting upon their predispositions—from polluting the election-year discourse.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

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The background is a teal-colored topographic map. It features white contour lines of varying thicknesses representing different elevation levels. Scattered across the map are small white symbols: squares, triangles, and dots, many of which are accompanied by numerical values indicating specific elevations or coordinates. The overall texture is intricate and detailed, typical of a technical map.

RUSSIA & WESTERN EURASIA

BELARUS

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 1



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

15

In 2020, two major trends influenced the flow of information in Belarus: the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis and the repressive aftermath of the August presidential elections. Those trends negatively affected the information space in Belarus. State institutions avoided providing factual information about the pandemic, and independent outlets were fined for spreading "fakes" on COVID-19 while pro-state media spread President Alexander Lukashenka's dismissive narratives.

For the first time in decades, hundreds of thousands of Belarusians flocked the streets of Minsk and other major cities, demanding free and fair elections. After these protesters were brutally dispersed in August 2020, there were popular demands for investigation into police violence and release of political prisoners. However, the authorities did not relent. The government claimed that the subsequent Internet blackouts in August 2020 were the result of foreign interference, but human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch held the Government of Belarus responsible for this outage as an attempt to quash information about protests and police brutality. Subsequent online censorship deprived millions of Belarusians of access to vital information.

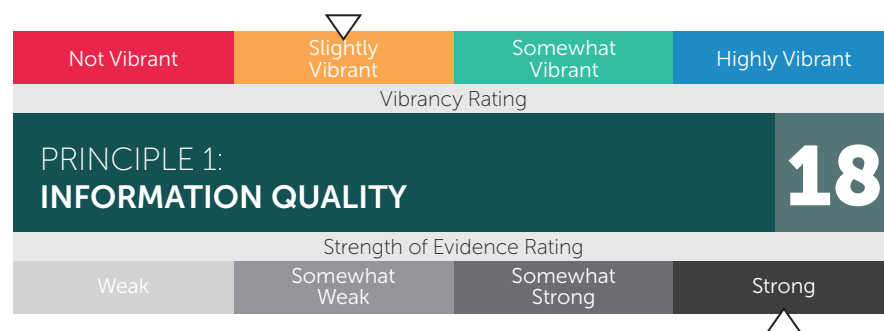
The year of 2020 set a record in the history of modern Belarus regarding repression against journalists and media. The crackdown against civil society that followed the August 2020 presidential election targeted journalists and media from the very first days of the anti-government street protests. The number of cases of repression against individual journalists and media outlets was the highest since tracking began in 1994.

However, according to Nieman Reports, 2020 was also a year of unprecedented growth in trust of independent media. The digital literacy and ICT skills of Belarusians passed the test, with Belarus becoming a world leader in the use of tools to circumvent censorship. According to infopolicy.biz, Telegram, a messenger app that combines features of Twitter and private chats and originated in Russia, became the second most popular messenger app in Belarus, making it possible for many traditional independent

media outlets to overcome web blocks. However, at the same time, it allowed for the spread of hate speech and politicized narratives from both sides of the aisle.

Belarus' country score is one of the lowest in the 2021 VIBE study. It was challenging for panelists to assess the pre-election period, which was relatively unrestricted, as it is overshadowed by the brutal repressions and censorship of the last five months of the year. Panelists scored Principle 1 (Information Quality) principle the highest (18) due to the outstanding work of independent outlets and freelancers who reported on COVID-19, the election campaign, and the post-election protests in a professional manner. The lowest-scoring Principle 2 (Multiple Information Sources) is driven by long-standing barriers to independent broadcasters' ability to receive in-country licenses and adverse economic conditions for print media. Despite these challenges, access to the Internet was relatively free, with only some media outlets blacklisted. However, these conditions drastically changed in August 2020 and did not improve until the end of the year, with authorities labelling an increasing number of media channels (including on social media) "extremist," initiating administrative and criminal cases against independent sources, and massively increasing the list of the websites access to which is blocked.

Principle 3 (Information Consumption and Engagement) and Principle 4 (Transformative Action) received scores of 14 and 15, respectively. Principle 3 was the most difficult to gauge, as the regime in Belarus creates hurdles for independent polling, allowing only registered by the state pollsters to operate. On top of that, due to the change in the ways people receive online information caused by blocking websites, it is difficult for media outlets to analyze audience metrics. Despite all of this, the panelists noted that Belarusians actively use censorship circumvention tools in order to access media content and are more active than before when interacting with newsrooms, especially on topics related to health (COVID-19) and politics. Principle 4 showed the continuing trend of governmental agencies to ignore and avoid answering journalists' or citizens' requests for information.



Panelists scored Indicators 1 (quality information is available) and 4 (content is inclusive and diverse) scored the highest within Principle 1. The relatively unrestricted online space that existed in Belarus prior to August 2020 allowed for quality information to be produced and distributed to the wider population. Despite attempts to block access to independent media, it was still available, and the newsrooms produced quality information on a variety of topics. At the same time, there was widespread availability of pro-Kremlin Russian content on the main television channels, with anti-Western, anti-democracy, pro-Kremlin, and pro-Lukashenka propaganda intensifying after August 2020. This, combined with restrictions in income sources for independent media and a campaign from state media to discredit fact-based media and journalists, contributed to the low scores of Indicators 2 (information is based on facts), 3 (information is not intended to harm), and 5 (content is sufficiently resourced).

Quality information is produced and disseminated first and foremost by nongovernmental media, predominantly online. The government heavily regulates the broadcast industry, not allowing any independent broadcaster to get a license in Belarus, while the print market has shrunk due to both global trends and post-August 2020 repressions against independent publishers.

In the nonstate media, COVID-19 and the presidential election dominated coverage, but other topics were present too, including disability rights, gender equality, climate change, and information manipulation. Still, many of those topics were covered within the context of either COVID-19 or the election.

Due to unprecedented politicization of Belarusian audiences, for some outlets it was challenging to introduce any “common” topics in their agenda after August 2020. As one expert observed, “Even when trying to cover environmental issues, my outlet had to find ways to present them from the point of view of a political struggle.” Although there is not yet a content analysis showing the percentage of political versus everyday news coverage in independent media, experts agreed that overall, for several months following the presidential election, audiences were primarily interested in the protest movement and repressions.

The government continued to obstruct receiving or confirming information from official sources. During the first half of 2020, it restricted any data about COVID-related deaths or incidents, while the official statistics did not appear trustworthy. In the second half of the year, by blocking access to around 20 websites and depriving the leading portal TUT.BY of official mass media registration, it restricted access to information even more. Editors of independent regional outlets were advised to subscribe to state-owned media to receive any quotes.

Constraints in access to official sources for independent media, combined with intensified propaganda campaigns by state outlets, made it difficult to produce and distribute fact-based information. The legislation in Belarus suggests punishment for misinforming the public, but it does not offer equal treatment to nonstate and state media. Article 3-1 of the 2020 version of the Code of Administrative Violations was used against independent regional outlet *Media Polesye*, which was fined in spring 2020 for wrongly reporting the death of a coronavirus patient. In fall 2020, the same outlet was fined for misquoting a teacher of presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya. At the same time, authorities did not follow up numerous misleading publications and broadcasts from state or Russia-based media. In the spring, Belarusian governmental media widely circulated the president’s words about dry saunas and farm work being “the cure” for COVID-19 and other statements dismissive of the pandemic that may have caused thousands of people to risk their lives. In November, state propaganda used an approach borrowed from Russia and employed actors to pretend to be interviewees: the same people claimed to have different names and professions.

Belarusian media regularly identified misinformation spread by the government, especially when it came to coverage of COVID-19 and the elections. However, the government refused to follow up and instead continued business as usual. Some websites in Belarus provide fact-checking and analysis of narratives that are spread by Belarusian and/or Russian propaganda. Those websites (e.g., <http://mediaiq.by> and <http://isans.by>) target experts and specialists as their audience. Belarusian experts on disinformation contribute to the European Union's anti-disinformation efforts as well. There is not a nationwide, popular fact-checking platform, although media and journalists engage in fact-checking in their daily work.

Because the current legislation makes media responsible for any information posted in their comments sections online, many outlets either heavily moderate the comments section or have switched off the comments entirely. In this way, they are preventing the spread of misinformation on their platforms. Media outlets also try to avoid distributing false information themselves. "When the government is looking for an excuse to issue a warning or shut you down, you have to verify everything several times to not give them real grounds for that," explained a female expert. But this is largely true only for independent media. State-owned media spread disinformation on both traditional and social media channels.

The post-election narrative from pro-state media increasingly went on to reach new, harmful levels. In its regular publications, the daily newspaper *Sovetskaya Belorussiya – Belarus' Segodnya*, owned by the Presidential Administration and one of the leading outlets in the country, spread hate speech directed at pro-democratic forces and independent media.

Media often rely on help from users to distinguish true information from misinformation. "Because of the danger, journalists were prevented from covering street protests, and many newsrooms started using user-generated content, which needed to be checked. Big newsrooms started verifying them, and if some untrue information came from users, it was deleted quite quickly. The mechanism relied on other users to verify the claim," one expert said. Hate speech did sometimes appear on the

Telegram channels of large independent media organizations, mostly quoting other sources, but newsrooms generally responded quickly to remove the offending content. Meanwhile, state media continued to feature people like Grigory Azaronak, who puts portraits of opponents under the gallows on a CTV channel that is co-owned by the state. The pro-state Belarusian Union of Journalists has an ethics committee with designated tasks, but they do not evaluate things related to the political crisis. "They mostly provide opinions on the bills and whether members are loyal or not loyal to the government," an expert explained.

A November 2020 analysis by Belarusian State University Professor Inga Voyush of SB.BY's columnist Andrei Mukavozchyk found that in the summer of 2020, 120 of his 200 published articles contained derogatory narratives. "One of the instruments that the author uses is so-called hate speech, which allows the researchers to mark [his] publications as propagandist." Mukavozchyk, prominently featured by one of the most circulated state newspapers in the country, used hate speech against the opposition, representatives of foreign nations, other journalists, scientists, and artists.

Information Quality Indicators

- There is quality information on a variety of topics available.
- The norm for information is that it is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.
- The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.
- The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.
- Content production is sufficiently resourced.

The Belarusian nongovernmental organization (NGO) Journalists for Tolerance monitored 26 outlets from July to November 2020 and found 21 percent of all stories related to LGBTIQ topics contained hate speech. The leading outlets were state-owned SB.BY and the state-leaning *Vecherniy Mogilev*, but also the Russian-owned Belarusian version of *AiF*, which has both a print edition and website. Established independent media were more restrained in their narratives—as one of the experts mentioned, "often in fear of disproportionate repressions."

However, the new type of “media” in the form of Telegram channels/accounts often did not follow the same behavior. When pro-governmental sources provoked them, they answered in kind with hate speech and the dehumanization of “opponents,” several experts noted. This resulted in an incident in October 2020 in which Apple demanded Telegram delete three accounts on its platform that spread the personal data of police officers in Belarus. Telegram has been routinely criticized for not reacting swiftly to hate speech or extremist content during recent crises in both the region and globally. Russian media have played a significant role in the post-election crackdown: representatives of RT.com and other Russian outlets came to Minsk to replace state media workers who went on strike in summer 2020.

The dominance of the pandemic and election campaign coverage, plus the resulting repressions, made the content offerings of many media outlets politicized and narrowly focused. The narratives about minorities and vulnerable groups appeared mostly within the context of health or politics. But the rights of those groups were not central in the campaigns of any of the candidates running and thus were not prominently featured by the media. Several protests by people with disabilities resulted in repressions against the Office of People with Disabilities and the arrest of its leader Siarhei Drazdouski, which was reported as part of the overall coverage of the crackdown on human rights.

In terms of the representation of women in non-state newsrooms, many outlets are traditionally female staffed, including within leadership, but this, according to one of the experts, is the result of lower wages in the independent media sector rather than progress in gender equality. Independent media outlets try to provide a balanced picture, although the regime’s representatives are sometimes portrayed negatively. The female perspective is rarely presented equally: women are more often asked for a comment from their personal point of view but not the professional point of view. For example, the female presidential candidate was asked about her favorite meatball recipe.

“When the government is looking for an excuse to issue a warning or shut you down, you have to verify everything several times to not give them real grounds for that,” said an expert.

National minorities are rarely presented, especially Ukrainians and Poles. Ukrainians are vilified by state propaganda, which follows the Kremlin narrative, and are not given a chance to speak. The Poles were not represented in 2020 and then in the beginning of 2021 became the next victims of political repression, with Andrzej Poczobut, a journalist of Polish origin, jailed.

Access to information in minority languages is limited; there are some Internet-based outlets and publications with small circulations. “If you’re not a member of this minority group, you won’t know about those media,” an expert said. “State TV and radio doesn’t represent any national minorities except for Russians. Religious communities are discriminated against as well; in the fall of 2020, TV broadcasts of Sunday Catholic prayers stopped on ‘technical grounds’ while Orthodox Christian ones continue. Those who are not Catholics or Orthodox don’t have a chance for their sermons to be broadcast,” observed an expert.

In state media, the political opposition is totally underrepresented—they are portrayed only negatively or in a position of weakness.

The insufficient resources for quality content production could be one of the reasons for the limited content offerings. The system of state funding to media in Belarus is highly centralized and politicized. The government has been providing state-owned media with roughly \$60 million in subsidies¹ annually, of which the biggest share goes to state-owned television. Funding of independent media is restricted by economic inequality (price difference for newsprint and distribution, inability to be registered as Belarus-based broadcasters, limiting web advertising by blocking access to websites), as well as one of the strictest laws on foreign aid. The latter is going to be amended in 2021 to include the definition of a “foreign agent.”²

The media’s share in the online advertising market was 32 percent,

1 <https://reform.by/188247-pravitelstvo-potratit-v-2021-godu-na-smi-156-mln-rublej>

2 <https://112.international/politics/belarus-wants-to-adopt-law-on-foreign-agents-59013.html>

a decrease from 36 percent in 2019.³ In contrast to other countries around the world, Belarus did not lockdown during the pandemic in 2020, and its economy did not directly suffer due to COVID. Moreover, despite limitations in the neighboring countries, businesses were able to move their goods across the borders. However, events in Belarus after the election caused many companies to revisit their advertising and investment plans in Belarus. This intensified when the Lukashenko regime started targeting IT companies, along with small businesses that supported the protestors. As a result and in combination with economic sanctions imposed against Belarus by the EU and US, the country's advertising market is less attractive. However, performance advertising has grown to 68 percent of all online advertising, which includes advertising that is targeted through social media. Advertising placement continues to be politicized, with the government informally advising local companies to avoid independent media.

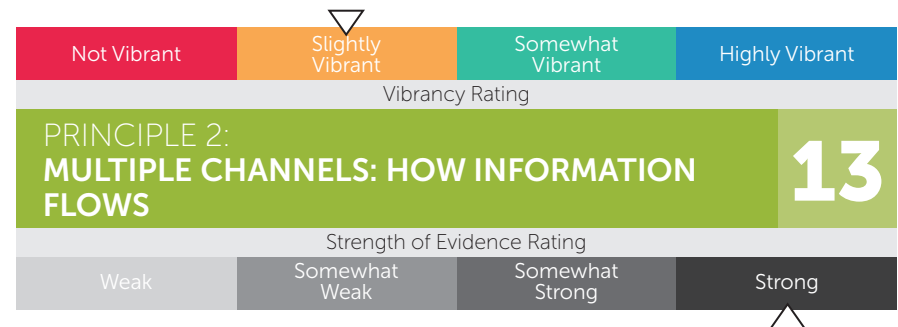
As experts noted, the volatility of the political situation has also influenced advertising contracts from international companies as well, who increasingly choose short-term contracts over long-term ones. Blocking access to more than 20 independent news websites deprives those outlets of click- and audience-related advertising revenues. Independent media outlets have increasingly invested in crowdfunding as a way to overcome revenue shortfalls. *Nasha Niva* runs a reader's club, which is based on a membership model, while *Imenamag.by* was able to collect around \$200,000 through subscriptions and donations for the work of its newsroom.

The EU's adoption of several rounds of sanctions against Belarus has resulted in retaliative measures by the Belarusian government against neighboring countries' embassies and those—including among media and bloggers—whom it considers their “proxies.” On top of that, limitations on leaving the country, presumably to contain coronavirus and imposed in late 2020, have deprived some of the media of access to funds abroad.

Journalists' wages have suffered since the beginning of the post-

³ <https://marketing.by/analitika/itogi-belaruskogo-rynka-internet-reklamy-za-2020-kakie-kanaly-i-klienty-pokazali-rost-a-kakie-padeni/?mobile=N>

election crackdown. Media Solidarity Belarus reports that over the last four months in 2020, it provided support to more than 30 outlets whose incomes dropped. Several regional outlets, including *Brestskaya Gazeta* and *Gazeta Slonimskaya*, had to shut down print editions due to the state's unwillingness to print them and continue to run online only. Minsk-based *Narodnaya Volya* is no longer published due to governmental pressure and now maintains an online version.



Within Principle 2, the average score is a result of a significant gap between the more highly scored indicators that describe the ICT infrastructure and those lower scored indicators that describe a lack of equality in access to and the distribution of information between independent and governmental media or limitations in rights to create, share, and consume information.

The rights of Belarusians to create, share, and consume information as well as their access to channels of information have been severely limited with the Internet shutdowns in August 2020 and the introduction of the most popular Telegram channels on the government's list of “extremists” in October 2020.⁴

Legal protections for journalists formally exist but are rarely practiced. Journalists' rights are protected by the Law on Mass Media that regulates both the work of the outlets and individual journalists. Journalists working for foreign media can do so only if they are accredited, but the accreditations of most Belarusian citizens employed by foreign outlets were withdrawn in October 2020 and not re-issued. In the fall of

⁴ <https://www.article19.org/resources/belarus-nexta-crackdown/>

2020, some independent outlets published the accounts of victims of beatings tortured in the aftermath of the post-election protests, as well as articles about bonuses paid to the perpetrators of the violence. This led to a number of outlets receiving warnings and others having their sites blocked. In December 2020, a court decision resulted in the portal TUT.BY losing its media license, and in November 2020, police arrested journalist Katsiaryna Andreeva and camerawoman Daria Chultsova while they were livestreaming street protests from a private apartment. Their subsequent trial led to two years in jail.

Although governmental information freely flows on a variety of platforms, including social media, non-governmental media are forced to exist in a parallel reality. “In my 20 years of observing press freedom violations, this has been the worst year so far,” said one expert. “This year’s pressure is systemic—it concerns all sectors of the media market. Five times more journalists were detained than in 2017, and there have been at least 62 cases of violence against journalists, and I am sure we did not register them all, as well as criminal cases against journalists. But the year wasn’t just marked by violence or detentions. Dozens of websites, including BAJ, have been blocked; printed media, such as *Narodnaya Volya*, *SN+*, *Belgazeta*, and *KP v Belarusi*, have been denied printing and then distribution.”

“In my 20 years of observing press freedom violations, this has been the worst year so far,” said one expert.

As far as existing infrastructure for information flow, Belarus has a multiplicity of channels to receive and share news. According to Hootsuite’s 2020 Digital Report, 82.9 percent of Belarusians used the Internet, while 41.3 percent were active social media users.⁵ The price of Internet connection is affordable and available in nearly all geographical locations, although the quality of connection varies. An unlimited 3G/LTE monthly package costs around \$10 through A1⁶ and MTS,⁷ the leading mobile providers, and broadband connection from the state company

Beltelecom for private users costs \$7–\$10 monthly.⁸

Government information is widely available via state television and radio (<http://tvr.by>), which are present in the majority of Belarusian households, and state-funded newspapers and their portals, such as SB.BY, zviazda.by, and Respublika.by. Beltelecom’s interactive digital television channel, Zala, is available in 1.8 million households, which accounts for around half of all households in Belarus.⁹ According to the Ministry of Information, there are 214 newspapers and 207 magazines, 137 radio programs/channels, 44 television programs/channels, and 27 websites that are state-owned. The majority of the others, experts note, do not undertake the risk to publish a news agenda that would counteract the government’s position.

Among leading independent news channels there are Belarus-based portals and news sites, such as TUT.BY, Onliner, *Nasha Niva*, *Gazetaby*, and *BelaPAN* news agency, but also exiled or hybrid outlets, such as European Radio for Belarus (Euroradio) or kyky.org. There is also a network of independent regional publishers, United Mass Media, who cooperate on programmatic and business levels and continue to play an important role in the Belarusian periphery. The existence of this diverse independent media market has made it possible to create quality content despite numerous

repressions. The independent outlets are not owned by conglomerates or oligarchs. Some of them belong to the same owner, such as kyky.org and thevillage.me (their owner was incarcerated for his alleged support of protests, while the outlets had to emigrate), or European Radio for Belarus and the weekly *Belorusy i Rynok*. The only dominant player in the media ownership market is the state.

Belarus’ legislation provides for the right to access information for media and citizens, but these rights are increasingly limited. For example, although the law does not require special accreditation from media to

5 <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-belarus>

6 <https://www.a1.by/ru/plans/c/tarify-dlya-smartfonov>

7 https://www.mts.by/services/mobile/tariffs/for_smartphone/bezlimitishche_plus/

8 <https://beltelecom.by/private/internet/high-speed>

9 <https://www.belta.by/society/view/televizionnyj-reklamnyj-aljjans-vse-uchastniki-rynka-dolzhen-imet-ravnyj-dostup-k-issledovaniyam-379400-2020/>

Multiple Channels Indicators

- People have rights to create, share, and consume information.
- People have adequate access to channels of information.
- There are appropriate channels for government information.
- There are diverse channels for information flow.
- Information channels are independent.

attend press conferences or court trials, in the reality online media and registered independent media are often denied access to those events. Moreover, while the Constitution of Belarus currently guarantees access to information about events of public, social or cultural life for all citizens, the Law on Mass Media allows authorities to limit access to certain type of information, including but not limited to state, commercial, private or other legally protected secrets and details on law enforcement

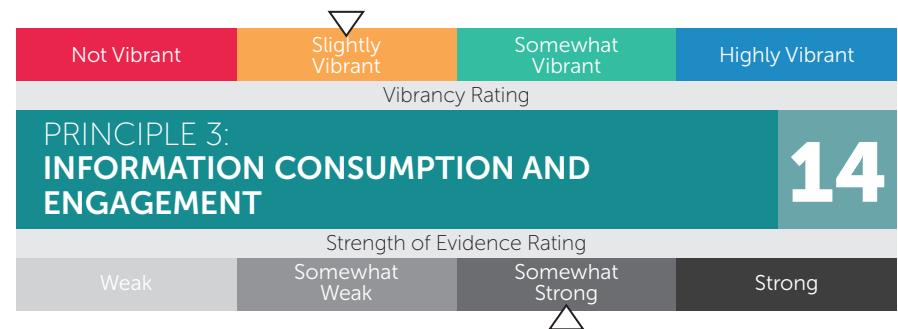
investigations. At the same time, more than 60 governmental institutions have a right to determine that certain information is ‘secret’.¹⁰

The process for spectrum allocation is transparent but not fair. The market entry and tax structure for media remain unfair, compared with other types of companies, and independent media face more disadvantages than state media. Unlike other businesses, media newsrooms cannot be located in residential homes, and individual entrepreneurs are not allowed to publish any media, including online outlets. An editor-in-chief of a media outlet who applies for registration is required to have at least five years of media management experience. A broadcast media editor-in-chief must pass a special exam on broadcast law knowledge, the technical settings of radio and television broadcasting, and advertising law for his or her outlet to receive a dissemination license. Such licenses are not given to independent broadcasters, like European Radio for Belarus, Radio Racja, or the television channel Belsat TV (run from Poland).

Belarus does not have public-service media. State media provide some educational news and programming but are heavily limited in their

editorial freedom. Several dozen workers from state media left their jobs in 2020 to protest the level of censorship.

There has been discussion among the experts about whether Telegram channels that serve both national and local communities can be considered “media.” Most of these channels are run by activists or journalists who do not hide their political affiliations and, consequently, do not prioritize their independence. There are multiple incidents of the right to information’s being disregarded, including the arrests of journalists from Belsat TV and TUT.BY while they were on assignment. According to statistics from the Belarusian Association of Journalists,¹¹ authorities detained journalists 477 times in Belarus throughout 2020.



Within Principle 3, panelists scored highly the indicator related to Belarusians’ ability to safely use the Internet and circumvent censorship. The overall score of this principle would have been higher if there had been consensus among panel experts on what to consider “local community media.” The majority of panelists marked the indicator related to them as not applicable, although some of them considered nascent Telegram chats as future media of this type. Those who had another opinion were considering niche media or new hyperlocal chats and channels as such.

One expert noted, “The main evidence that Belarusian citizens are advanced in media and information literacy is the total downloads of Psiphon, a tool that helps circumvent web censorship. Between August 9 and 11, 2020, when the Internet was nearly fully shut down, Belarusians

¹⁰ <https://baj.by/ru/content/dostup-k-informacii>

¹¹ <https://baj.by/en/analytics/figures-year-repression-media-and-journalists-belarus-2020>

managed to download this application around 2.7 million times, which is impressive for a country of 9 million.” However, when it comes to privacy protection, post-election events demonstrated a severe lack thereof. “It’s not about the disadvantages of legislation but rather about its blatant violation. When the police beat up or torture detainees to learn their passwords to personal devices and social media, they are breaking the law, but they still do it,” one expert said.

Independent media outlets have access to digital protection instruments and tools, and they have passed trainings enabling them to resist hacking attempts, as well as secure their information. National outlets widely use VPN, two-factor authentication, and encryption; they share tips with audiences on how to protect oneself digitally. Regional media, however, have fewer skills in ICT protection. As one expert said, “During a search, on a confiscated computer of one of the regional outlets, there was a lot of sensitive information not only about the outlet in question but about other regional media.”

Media literacy and the ability to protect privacy were regularly tested in the second half of 2020. Government actors used Telegram channels, both official (Pul Pervogo) and unofficial (Zheltie Slivy, Shtab Onoshko) to publish degrading and defamatory content about members of the political opposition and civil society actors, while at the same time local communities on Telegram were often a target for hacker attacks, resulting in arrests of their administrators.¹²

The government does not proactively develop media literacy skills. According to the EU Neighbours report, in 2020, “As the government kept ignoring the outbreak of the Coronavirus and did not impose a nationwide lockdown, there were no positive policy interventions observed in the country to promote digital skills or improve remote learning. The good practices so far include the joint support of the international organizations. For instance, the EU, Red Cross, UNICEF, UNFPA, and the World Bank provided a wide range of digital trainings for teachers,

¹² <https://euroradio.fm/en/can-police-hack-your-telegram>

“Nonstate media rely on audience data and feedback, while the state media are more closed and never acknowledge their mistakes,” said one expert.

pensioners, people living in remote areas, people with disabilities and special needs.” Another sign of the state’s animus toward media literacy was the arrest of six media managers of Press Club, an educational NGO that runs a Media IQ project aimed at helping to identify Russian propaganda narratives and other manipulative content in Belarusian media.¹³

There are no established local or state initiatives to enhance public knowledge about misinformation or fake news. Moreover, freedom of expression is heavily limited by media law and Internet legislation. As one expert put it, “There are no platforms to foster discussion and influence decision-making. Instead, the state makes them up in order to imitate the dialogue about already pre-determined political steps.”

There were several initiatives by the state aimed at demonstrating dialogues between the authorities and the population, such as face-to-face meetings in Minsk with pro-Lukashenko loyalists or public conversations spurred by activist Yury Voskresenskiy’s release from pre-trial detention¹⁴. This “roundtable of democratic forces” was preceded by a visit by President Alexander Lukashenko to the pre-trial detention center, where his main political opponents were held, and having a ‘dialogue’ with them. All of these attempts are

¹³ <https://cpj.org/2021/01/belarus-authorities-detain-at-least-6-in-tax-investigation-of-local-press-club/>

¹⁴ <https://nn.by/?c=ar&i=263221&lang=ru>

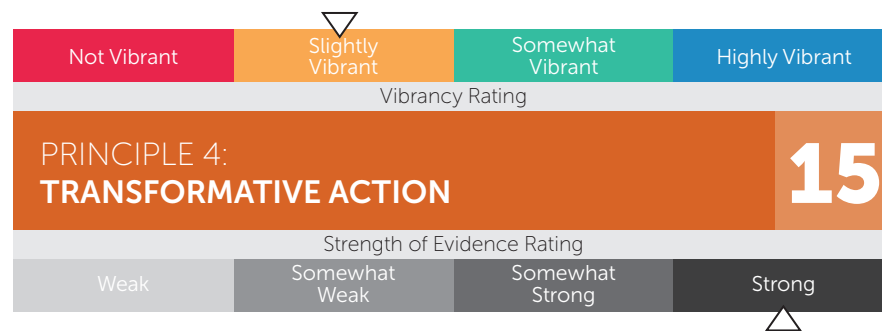
Information Consumption and Engagement Indicators

- People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.
- People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.
- People engage productively with the information that is available to them.
- Media and information producers engage with their audience’s needs.
- Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

top-down, and they do not provide space for inclusive participation of the civil society or nonstate media.

But experts said nonstate media nevertheless attempt to engage with their audiences using a variety of online tools, including comments sections on websites, live chats and live streaming shows, and analyses of audiences' behavior in real time. It is possible to participate in most of those streams ad hoc and with no prior registration. "Nonstate media rely on audience data and feedback, while the state media are more closed and never acknowledge their mistakes," one female expert said. Amendments on the Law on Internet from late 2018 make media outlets responsible for the content of comments on their web pages and ban anonymous comments, which have subsequently restricted audiences' engagement.

The majority of experts questioned the existence of community media in Belarus, though some suggested that such outlets somewhat exist. This might be related to the relatively low spread of the community media model in Belarus. The nascent Telegram channels that have formed around micro-communities have not yet transformed into media outlets, and traditional media mostly cover larger regional or thematic audiences.



The most polarized results for VIBE in Belarus relate to Principle 4. The indicators relating to individuals, civil society, and (mostly independent) media, score 20 or higher. However, indicators relating to state actions, public policy, and democratic rights, score below 10.

Transformative Action Indicators

- Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.
- Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.
- Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.
- Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.
- Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

Until mid-August 2020, there were attempts by pro-state actors to cross ideological lines. For example, the state-controlled Belarusian Union of Journalists had a meeting in the Belarusian parliament with the independent Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) in order to design a joint statement condemning excessive post-election violence. On August 13, 2020, more than 250 state and nonstate journalists jointly signed an open letter requesting an end to the violence. But in the following months, the government took a clear ideological position and included media and journalists in its list of targets. BAJ's managers became the focus of criminal

investigations, while officials searched the organization's office and seized equipment in early 2021. Moreover, in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic did not enhance information-sharing. Interviewed experts mentioned extreme defensiveness by the Belarusian state institutions on the issues related to public health.

Non-partisan media exist among magazines and websites that refuse to cover politics, non-state news-oriented actors such as BelaPAN news agency, or leading websites such as tut.by, nn.by, euroradio.pl, onliner.by and others. At the same time, the government does not consider these websites non-partisan and persecutes them as its ideological enemies, e.g. by withdrawing licenses, imposing fines etc. Sports website tribuna.com was blocked by the authorities as soon as it started covering statements of sportswomen and men who did not support the violence

after 2020 protests¹⁵. “The moment one dares to provide balanced information about the current affairs the authorities consider them taking sides”, a female editor interviewed for the chapter said.

Despite these obstacles, non-governmental media are able to keep in contact with their engaged audiences. The growth of the Telegram platform’s users has brought soaring audience figures to many outlets, and as a result thematic chats have formed on these platforms. Through these chats and special chatbots, people send user-generated content, suggest topics for new shows and articles, and discuss publications. Live streaming on YouTube by svaboda.org, belsat.eu, and euroradio.pl is routinely accompanied by reading out and commenting on inputs from the viewers. Discussions on those platforms are led by people with varied ideological stances and views. “Sometimes it was evident that some of the participants were third party-sponsored trolls, but often there was a meaningful conversation among supporters and opponents of the regime,” a media analyst noted. As a result, trust in independent media significantly grew¹⁶.

Despite an ideological standoff, Belarusians were able to demonstrate their ability to make choices based on quality information. “In spring 2020, when President Alexander Lukashenka called COVID-19 ‘a psychosis,’ many urban dwellers chose to self-isolate themselves despite the official news,” one expert said. Belarusians registering en masse to the Russia-based independent election watchdog GOLOS platform also demonstrated public distrust in official information. Citizens would ultimately send photographs of their voting bulletins to GOLOS in August 2020. The historic protests that gathered hundreds of thousands of people illustrated people’s reliance on quality information.

GOLOS, as well as dozens of other platforms that united Belarusians

“The moment one dares to provide balanced information about the current affairs the authorities consider them taking sides”, said a female editor.

for the sake of civic action, were based on years of expertise from civil society actors, both formal and informal, combined with the creative potential of the well-developed IT sector and a large Belarusian diaspora. When the crowdfunding initiative #BY_help started in 2017, it celebrated \$50,000 in donations as success. In 2021, the same initiative

collected more than \$3 million¹⁷ to support tortured and injured protesters. Similar initiatives, such as BySQL and Media Solidarity Belarus, demonstrated huge fundraising potential as well. The latter, set up in September 2020 to cover the most urgent needs of independent media outlets and journalists, has raised more than

\$300,000 and distributed two-thirds of funds.

The government, however, launched an offensive against producers of quality information and went further to deprive Belarusians of their democratic rights.

Press conferences continued to be limited primarily to state media. When TUT.BY lost media outlet status and the government blocked the websites of independent media, reporters from those outlets faced difficulties in receiving official comments and attending press briefings.

The government does not refer to quality media, nor quote them in presenting its decisions or reacting to criticism. Some independent media even received recommendations to subscribe to the state-owned outlets to get reactions from local government. Government actors often use misinformation when explaining their decisions—for example, referencing the supposed plan by the West and NATO to invade Belarus, criticizing the “extremist” nature of paying the fines for protestors, or calling independent media and pro-democratic forces puppets.

The government does not react to the media’s uncovering of corruption or wrongdoing, although it praises the work of the police in uncovering such cases. When sources reveal human rights violations, the

15 <https://telegraf.by/sport-news/mininform-zablokiroval-tribuna-com-reportery-bez-granic-pomogli-zapustit-zerkalo-kotoroe-dostupno-bez-vpn/>

16 <https://www.dw.com/ru/issledovanie-lish-chetvert-belorusov-doverjajut-prezidentu-strany/a-56514991>

17 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/22/we-raised-2m-in-days-the-donations-helping-protesters-in-belarus>

government then attempts to silence those sources (e.g., by directing them to remove publications about human rights violations, as in the case of Naviny.by and *Nasha Niva*).¹⁸ As such, it is difficult to say such reporting reduces the number of human rights violations. There was no evidence of quality information contributing to free and fair elections and, in fact, quite the opposite occurred. However, it contributed to people's awareness of the widespread election fraud and subsequent violence against peaceful protesters.

The panel was not possible due to security concerns, but experts were interviewed individually.

IREX protects the identity of the panelists who agreed to participate in this study. Amendments to the criminal code include an article titled "Discrediting the Republic of Belarus," which provides for criminal liability for giving international organizations "false information" about the country.

18 <https://euroradio.fm/ru/miniform-otvetil-za-cto-zablokiroval-sayty-nasha-niva-i-navinyby>

MOLDOVA

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 1



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

23

In 2020, the Republic of Moldova was rocked by the COVID-19 pandemic and chronic political instability, with inevitable repercussions for the media. A fragile parliamentary majority, a bitter campaign season, and the authorities' inability to manage the pandemic all fueled the sense of crisis. After the first cases of the coronavirus were registered in Moldova, the new governing coalition of the Socialist Party of the Republic of Moldova (SPRM) and the Democratic Party declared a constitutional state of emergency. The coalition gave broad new powers to the Commission for Emergency Situations (CSE) and other executive agencies to fight the pandemic. The ambiguity of these new emergency powers threatened the right of access to information. In addition, officials' persistent refusal to provide complete and timely information resulted in an inaccessible and opaque government.

On March 18, CSE extended the deadline from 15 to 45 days for government agencies to respond to information requests. A few days later, the Security and Intelligence Service blocked access to more than 50 websites for allegedly "promoting fake news about the evolution of the coronavirus and protection and prevention measures." On March 24, the Broadcasting Council (CA) ordered broadcasters to present only the government's official position in their coverage of the pandemic and prohibited journalists from expressing their opinions on related topics. These moves spurred fierce criticism from the media, civil society, and the country's ombudsman.

In the heated contest between the pro-Russia incumbent president, Igor Dodon, and his pro-Europe challenger, Maia Sandu, politically controlled media became little more than echo chambers, cranking out propaganda and misinformation about the election. The authorities worsened the confusion with their reluctance to provide information of public interest regarding the pandemic, creating a vacuum that was rapidly filled with fake news and rumors. Meanwhile, Russian propaganda continued

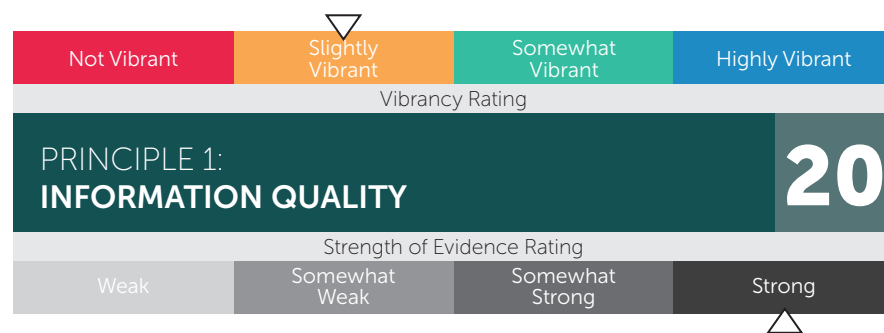
to saturate the country's information space. Although Dodon was defeated in the November voting, his Socialist Party holds a plurality in parliament. These lawmakers and their For Moldova allies quickly passed several controversial laws, including a repeal of provisions curbing television broadcasts from Russia.

In 2020, the VIBE panelists observed that professional and nonprofessional content creators, such as bloggers, social-media users, and influencers, produced information of rather poor quality overall. Moreover, the straitened circumstances of many media organizations have left them vulnerable to takeover or influence by deep-pocketed partisan figures, which in turn has narrowed the views and news in Moldova's media landscape.

The events of 2020 led to unprecedented constraints on the public's access to information. Although Moldovans can access many information sources, not all channels are objective or independent. Moreover, while Moldova has plenty of media spaces where people can share opinions and initiate discussions, the pandemic and the presidential campaign triggered a flood of fake news, misinformation, and mal-information on these platforms.

Generally, Moldova provides a safe reporting environment, and no journalists were imprisoned or killed for doing their jobs in 2020. Some were, however, subject to other abuses, such as penalties for slander, and many journalists have complained of high-ranking public officials threatening them with physical harm or litigation.

Government officials communicated little and poorly with the media and civil society in 2020. For its part, civil society organizations (CSOs) used sound information to inform people about their activities, while the authorities dragged their feet on cases of corruption or human rights violations uncovered by the media. People widely use social media platforms to debate issues, but often without trustworthy or fact-checked information, pointing to a lack of media literacy skills.



The media market in Moldova is diverse and produces varied content on political, economic, and social issues. Inadequate infrastructure, however, limits some people's access to evidence-based, coherent, and ethical content from editorially independent sources. There are good media and journalism training programs, for students and working professionals, resulting in a number of available training opportunities. Nevertheless, some media continue to flout ethics and the law. Misinformation was common currency among politically affiliated media during the campaign season.

Many content producers make halfhearted efforts to reach marginalized audiences and instead sometimes amplify social disparities among vulnerable minority groups. During 2020, public officials frequently made remarks that amounted to hate speech or discrimination. As evidenced by the low scores of the VIBE indicator measuring sufficiency of resources, financial instability continues to plague most media.

Nearly all the panelists agreed that Moldova's infrastructure allows them to produce varied media content, including broadcast and digital formats. The overall body of content includes local, national, regional, and international news. Nevertheless, the panelists shared the opinion that media technologies, services, and facilities are outdated or malfunctioning in some regions. "For a lot of the audience who live far from the capital areas, it's easier to catch foreign radio or TV stations than local or national ones," said Vadim Șterbate, a reporter for the *Observatorul de Nord* newspaper.

As for print, Jurnal TV journalist Vitalie Călugăreanu said the number of press kiosks in Chișinău has fallen drastically, and they have vanished from villages. Consequently, print media outlets have fewer channels of distribution, depressing their circulation figures.

Panelists noted that content producers have many opportunities to train on creating ethical, evidence-based, logical and consistent content. But the political agenda of many media organizations make such training moot. "Political influence in the media has led to the fragmentation of the media market and abandonment of ethical standards," said Olga Gututui, the program director of TV8.

According to Victor Mosneag, the interim editor-in-chief of *Ziarul de Gardă* (*Guardian* newspaper), some media aspire to fair and fact-based journalism. But he said that most politically affiliated outlets cover national or even international events through a distorted political lens, favoring or disfavoring certain parties.

Anastasia Nani, deputy director of the Independent Journalism Center, said her organization's monitoring reports launched during the November 2020 presidential campaign showed that several media organizations controlled by Dodon's SPRM and the Sor political party favored Dodon at the expense of challenger Sandu.¹

In the breakaway Transnistrian region and the autonomous territory of Gagauzia, content producers are financially dependent on the local governments, which influences what type of information is available there.² Officials have threatened to shut down some media that report fully and truthfully. "Local content producers publish only information that is favorable to authorities," said a journalist from Gagauzia. Luiza Doroshenko, executive director of the Media Center in Tiraspol, said that the limited training opportunities in Transnistria factor into the poor

1 *Media monitoring during the electoral period and electoral campaign for the presidential elections of November 1, 2020*, Independent Journalism Center: [Report no. 1](#) (September 14-28, 2020); [Report no. 2](#) (September 29-October 6, 2020); [Report no. 3](#) (October 7-14, 2020); [Report no. 4](#) (October 15-22, 2020); [Report no. 5](#) (October 23-31, 2020); [Report no. 6](#) (November 2-14, 2020).

2 A 1994 law decreed that Gagauzia (Gagauz-Yeri) would be "an autonomous territorial unit with a special status which, being a form of self-determination of the Gagauzians, is a component part of the Republic of Moldova," https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=86684&lang=ro.

quality of news and information produced in the region.

Political interference in the media continues to fuel the spread of disinformation, as was plainly evident during the presidential election campaign. “False and misleading information created by certain content producers, often those affiliated with SPRM, was widely shared, including by high-ranking officials, such as President Igor Dodon and Moldovan members of parliament,” Mosneag said.³ Shortly before election day, Socialist lawmaker Bogdan Tirdea released a book full of false and defamatory statements about several domestic nongovernmental organizations. Mosneag said that the Socialist-affiliated press widely distributed the book.⁴

Independent media outlets and the few reliable fact-checking resources, such as StopFals.md and Mediacritica.md, were key to fighting misinformation during the election, but they were no match for the fake news and misinformation that reached a mass audience, said Dumitru Ciorici, the development manager for Interact Media. “Russian propaganda continued to saturate the country’s information space and kept a hold on a segment of the national media audience,” said Eugeniu Ribca, a media legislation expert and the executive director of the Mold-Street website, which covers business and corruption issues. He said tensions in the Transnistrian region and Moldova’s presidential elections were the topics most subject to rumor and misinformation in 2020. Nani mentioned that a report by the Independent Journalism Center had chronicled some media’s use of disinformation and techniques of manipulation.⁵

Panelists generally agreed that in 2020, misinformation and fake news focused also on the pandemic, including treatment methods and the

3 Zaharia, Viorela. “FALSE: No human rights NGO representatives have been in prisons in recent years,” StopFals.md. June 25, 2020. <https://stopfals.md/ro/article/fals-in-ultimii-ani-nici-un-reprezentant-al-ong-urilor-in-domeniul-drepturilor-omului-nu-a-fost-in-penitenciare-180360>.

4 Jacot, Mariana. “Fakes and manipulations in the ‘scientific research’ of Bogdan Tirdea,” StopFals.md. October 30, 2020. <https://stopfals.md/ro/article/video-falsuri-si-manipulari-in-cercetarea-stiintifica-a-lui-bogdan-tirdea-180437>.

5 “Elements of Propaganda, Information Manipulation, and Violation of Journalism Ethics in the Local Media Space,” Independent Journalism Center, (May 1-July 31, 2020). <http://media-azi.md/en/monitoring-report-elements-propaganda-disinformation-and-violation-journalism-ethics-local-media-0>.

Information Quality Indicators

- There is quality information on a variety of topics available.
- The norm for information is that it is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.
- The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.
- The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.
- Content production is sufficiently resourced.

vaccine. Some public officials felt free to share their misinformed opinions on the topic.⁶ Nina said major culprits were “politically affiliated media outlets and those who practice superficial journalism.” Ribca said officials exacerbated the problem by not regularly providing prompt and complete information of public interest.

At the onset of the pandemic, the Moldovan government declared war on so-called fake news, but in fact it established “the state’s direct control over the flow of information to the public,” said Freedom House’s coordinator

for Moldova, Tatiana Puiu.⁷ “Despite the government’s declared resolve to fight fake news, Moldovan authorities did not provide an official definition for fake news or disinformation that would be subject to state penalties. Consequently, state officials can decide on their own if a piece of news is or isn’t malicious disinformation, and that’s risky.”

Some media outlets and platforms self-regulate, aiming to moderate the content in a way that reduces mal-information or hate speech. Most information that professionals produce does not incite hatred, but Nani said the proliferation of online media “creates a lot of opportunities for

6 “Igor Dodon, about coronavirus: ‘It’s as if you had a problem with your nose, a cold passed through you, you passed the coronavirus, and you didn’t even know about it,’” ProTV. March 20, 2020. <https://protv.md/coronavirus/igor-dodon-despre-coronavirus-parca-ai-avut-olecutaca-probleme-cu-nasul-olecutaca-ti-o-trecut-raceala-prin-tine-si-tu-ai-trecut-coronavirusul-nici-nu-ai-stiut-de-lucrul-acesta-video---2522643.html>.

7 Balan, Veaceslav and Vladislav Stegni, “COVID-19 pandemic: Lessons for media freedom in the Republic of Moldova,” Media Forward. June 2020. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Balan%20and%20Stegniy_FINAL-RO_0.pdf.

spreading different forms of intolerance.” Puiu referenced a 2020 report⁸ by the Promo-LEX NGO that counted 448 incidents of hate speech during last year’s election campaign — more than double those registered during the 2019 elections.

Most panelists noted the unprecedented increase in hate and discriminatory speech coming from public officials. According to Jurnal TV’s Călugăreanu, former public health director Nicolae Furtuna said that COVID-19 took the lives of those who were a burden to themselves and to those around them. Mosneag observed that former President Dodon was one of the most prominent public officials spewing hate in 2020. “The ex-president’s comments inciting hatred got wide coverage by media affiliated with the Socialist Party and were publicly condemned, including by the national ombudsman.”⁹

Panelists agreed that information in Moldova is available in the languages that people need. However, the narrow range of sources available for linguistic minorities limits their options for evidence-based, coherent, and ethical information. “Pro-Russian media outlets, usually SPRM-affiliated, remain the main source of information for the Russian-speaking community. Consequently, this community consumes manipulative and misleading information,” Mosneag said.

Panelists generally agreed that the national media do not properly cover the experiences and viewpoints of people of various ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds. Nevertheless, Șterbate said that these groups

“Political influence in the media has led to the fragmentation of the media market and abandonment of ethical standards,” said Olga Gututui.

have alternative online platforms to express their opinions, whether as individuals or members of organizations. News reports only superficially cover minority issues, and as a result, many Moldovans know little of minorities’ experiences and viewpoints.

Information is not accessible to people with hearing impairments, panelists observed. Gututui said that some national broadcasters fail to provide at least one newscast subtitled or interpreted in sign language, as required by law. He also acknowledged a national shortage of certified deaf interpreters and said that many broadcasters cannot afford the high fees for the available few.

Panelists noted an obvious gender imbalance in the country’s media landscape. While Gututui said the profession of journalism “has become increasingly feminized,” Ribca noted that most media owners and managers are still men. According to Nani, several reports on media monitoring found that TV news programming cited mostly men and ignored women’s viewpoints.

In the Transnistrian region and Gagauzia, media content is not inclusive and minority groups are covered poorly. Doroshenko said that media publish information and news mostly in the Russian language, even though Transnistria’s official languages are Russian, Moldovan/Romanian, and Ukrainian. The journalist from Gagauzia said content producers there mostly use Russian as the primary language, although the main public broadcaster does provide information in Gagauz and Moldovan.

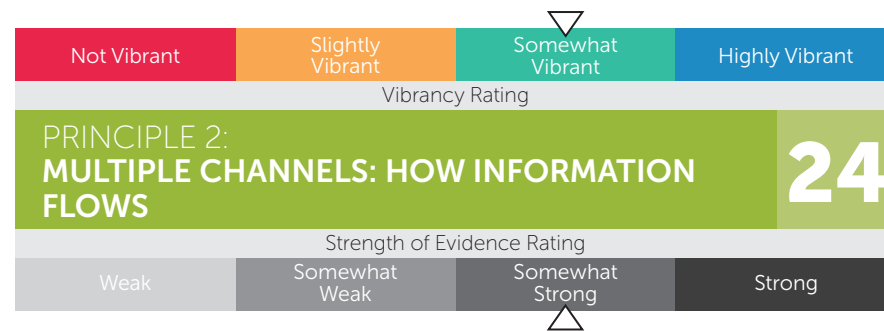
Economic sustainability continues to be a major challenge for the media. Political control over Moldova’s modest advertising market constrains its development and leaves independent media continuing to struggle financially. “Financial sustainability is a precondition for media independence from the undue influence of others, be they governments, senior politicians, or local authorities,” Puiu said. “For example, the press group controlled by SPRM and, implicitly, President Igor Dodon,

8 “Hate speech and incitement to discrimination in the public space and in the media of the Republic of Moldova during the electoral campaign for the presidential elections of 1/15 November 2020,” Promo-LEX. https://promolex.md/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Sumar-Raport-DIU_ENG.pdf.

9 Odobescu, Irina. “The ombudsman condemns Igor Dodon’s hate speech: A country’s president who wants to be the president of everyone must unite, not divide.” Anticorruption, May 11, 2020. <https://anticoruptie.md/ro/stiri/avocatul-poporului-condamna-discursul-de-ura-al-lui-igor-dodon-un-presedinte-de-tara-care-se-doreste-a-fi-al-tuturor-trebuie-sa-uneasca-nu-sa-dezbine>.

continued to promote the interests of the Socialists, often disregarding ethical standards of journalism,” she said, citing a study on media financing in Moldova.¹⁰

Panelists noted that content producers have no options for apolitical public funding streams to help them resist economic and financial pressure. Most independent media rely on the support of international donors, but these development funds cannot ensure long-term sustainability. “That is why many media outlets, including *Ziarul de Garda*, *Moldova.org*, and *Rise Moldova*, have tried to diversify their funding sources through Patreon subscription services and crowdfunding initiatives,” Mosneag said. According to Rîbca, “During the electoral period, political advertising was one of the most efficient ways for content producers to reduce their financial deficits.” However, Gututui noted that media outlets operating as NGOs have been deprived of this alternative funding stream because of a law prohibiting them from providing services to political candidates. That law was overturned in October 2020.¹¹



Moldova’s laws guarantee freedom of the press, freedom of expression, and the right to information, but sometimes they function more in theory than in practice. No journalists were imprisoned or killed for doing their jobs in 2020, but some were the victims of harsh penalties for

the minor crime of slander. The law on freedom of expression ensures confidentiality of sources, although several Socialist Party legislators attempted to remove this essential guarantee in 2020. The right of access to information was infringed to an unprecedented degree in 2020. Although the law contains sanctions for violations or for harassing journalists, the sanctions are levied so rarely that many journalists do not bother to file complaints. Authorities are reluctant to enforce the law against media ownership concentration, thus undermining broadcaster independence.

In this principle, panelists gave their lowest marks to questions of the independence of information, and their highest to the adequate access to channels of information.

Moldova’s constitution and a 2010 law set out the guarantee of, and limits to, freedom of speech. This framework is mostly in line with international standards, but its application is spotty. Panelists said that despite sound legislation, enforcement is lax and public officials continue to threaten and assault journalists or to intimidate them through litigation.¹²

In 2020, national media NGOs (including watchdog groups, professional associations, and free speech advocates) frequently voiced concern about violations of journalists’ rights and freedoms, as in [the case of a journalist from Ceadir-Liunga](#) who was sanctioned for slander after reporting on poor working conditions in a factory. In addition, members of the State Protection and Guard Service [repeatedly harassed and](#)

10 Bunduchi, Ion, Valentin Dorogan, Corneliu Rusnac, and Sanda Sandu. “Media financing in the Republic of Moldova,” Soros Foundation Moldova and the Electronic Press Association of Moldova. 2020. http://www.soros.md/files/publications/documents/Studiu_FINANTAREA%20MASS-MEDIEI%20IN%20RM.pdf.

11 The [Law on Nonprofit Organizations](#) went into force on July 27, 2020.

12 ‘You are a toxic media institution’ A journalist from Bălți, verbally attacked by a deputy of Renato Usatii,” Nordnews. January 21, 2020. <https://nordnews.md/video-sunteti-o-institutie-media-toxica-o-jurnalista-din-balti-atacata-verbal-de-un-adjunct-de-al-lui-renato-usatii/>; “Chicu counselor’s response to ZdG’s interview request: ‘But he has to consult with you when he goes somewhere?’ ” *Ziarul de Garda*. March 3, 2020. <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-sociale/audio-raspunsul-consilierului-lui-chicu-la-solicitarea-de-interviu-a-zdg-dar-el-trebuie-sa-se-consulte-cu-tine-cand-merge-undeva/>. “Media NGOs condemn the abusive and unlawful approaches to journalists by the State Protection and Guard Service,” Media AZI. November 13, 2020. <http://media-azi.md/en/stiri/media-ngos-condemn-abusive-and-unlawful-approaches-journalists-state-protection-and-guard/>; “Media NGOs Condemn the Abusive Actions of the “Media NGOs Condemn the Illegal Actions of the Military Peacekeepers against Journalists,” Media AZI. July 23, 2020. <http://media-azi.md/en/stiri/media-ngos-condemn-illegal-actions-military-peacekeepers-against-journalists-0;> “

Multiple Channels Indicators

- People have rights to create, share, and consume information.
- People have adequate access to channels of information.
- There are appropriate channels for government information.
- There are diverse channels for information flow.
- Information channels are independent.

obstructed journalists trying to do their jobs.

Public officials were also abusive. For example, Anatolie Labunet, a member of parliament, used obscenities when responding to a reporter's question, while the deputy speaker of parliament, Vlad Batrincea, hurled unfounded accusations and insults at the press.

No journalists were imprisoned or killed for doing their jobs in 2020. But Victor Mosneag, of *Ziarul de Garda*, brought up the case

of a journalist who was intimidated and fined after reporting on illegal activity by a company in Gagauzia. Puiu commented that “the abusive sanctioning of journalists for the misdemeanor of slander ... creates a dangerous precedent that undermines the freedom of press.”

Nani said journalists rarely file complaints, because authorities seldom enforce laws against intentionally obstructing media activity or intimidating critical journalists. In fact, the panelists named several times when officials sought to chip away at the press's rights and freedoms. Rîbca noted that Socialist Party legislators tried unsuccessfully to remove from the broadcast media law a provision for protecting source confidentiality.¹³ Gututui recounted the decision by CCA head Dragoș Vicol requiring broadcasters to deliver only the official government position while covering the pandemic during the state of emergency. Journalists were also prohibited from expressing their opinions while reporting on the subject. Civil society groups and media workers widely criticized Vicol's edict, which was canceled eventually, Nani said.

In the Transnistrian region and Gagauzia territory, citizens have the right to create, share, and consume information, but some independent journalists practice self-censorship for fear of persecution. “Only a few private media dare to publish information on forbidden topics,” Doroshenko said. The journalist from Gagauzia said the right to free speech is often violated in the territory. “Because of the judiciary's dependence on the authorities, some media don't bother trying to defend their rights in court,” she said.

Moldovans' access to information channels has held steady over the years and is not likely to change for the foreseeable future. Panelists scored the VIBE indicator measuring access to information most highly due to the state continually developing information and communication technology that meets the needs of most consumers.

Panelists agreed that public access to the internet is widespread across the country, and that internet service providers do not discriminate based on user, content, or source or destination addresses. Nani remarked that internet speed in Moldova is higher than in some EU countries. Citing the National Agency for Regulation in Electronic Communications and Information Technology, Puiu said about 1.6 million people went online through 4G technology in the third quarter of 2020 — a 2.8 percent increase from the end of 2019. Approximately 44,000 people contracted M2M (machine-to-machine) services, up 1.3 percent from 2019, she said.¹⁴

Gututui said that urban areas have better access to information than rural ones. Șterbate explained that villagers, who tend to be poorer, get their news from television instead of the internet because of the cost of internet service. Rîbca and Călugăreanu noted that, because of financial constraints, some people cannot afford access to diverse information channels.

Panelists agreed that the public's right to access information had been limited in 2020, amid the pandemic, presidential elections, and chronic political volatility. “Since the beginning of the crisis, the authorities have

13 Răileanu, Diana. “Media NGOs: Socialist amendments endanger journalism,” Radio Europa Libera. December 9, 2020. <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/30992409.html>.

14 The National Regulatory Agency for Electronic Communications and Information Technology (ANRCETI) is the central public authority that regulates activity in electronic communications, information technology and postal communication.

communicated unilaterally and restricted journalists' opportunity to inform people on issues of major importance," Ciorici said.

Nani recounted an effort to counter the state-of-emergency press restrictions by the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Social Protection. The ministry relented only after the Independent Journalism Center, joined by approximately two dozen media organizations, demanded online press conferences.¹⁵

Panelists noted CSE's decision to [triple the length](#) of wait time, from 15 days to 45 days, for journalists requesting state agencies to provide information. Puiu said that CSE offered no rationale for the change, and instead simply invoked the provision for public order contained in the Law on State of Emergency, Siege, and War of 2004.

The panelists shared the general perception that journalists' right to information is systematically denied. Mosneag said that in 2020, officials continued to be selective about what information they gave to journalists, while Șterbate said that many agencies had refused to provide information, using the spurious rationale of protecting private data. The head of the Press Council of Moldova, Viorica Zaharia, said some ministries' press services are hostile to journalists. "For the first time doing this job, in 2020, I had to complain to the police and ask them to fine the Ministry of Education for not providing information," she said.

Since 2019, two somewhat contradictory laws have governed the process of requesting and releasing public information. As a result, national case law contains contradictory judgements regarding violations of the right of access to information. For example, Puiu said, the Supreme Court of Justice declared the Law on Access to Information obsolete and

“Since the beginning of the [COVID-19] crisis, the authorities have communicated unilaterally and restricted journalists' opportunity to inform people on issues of major importance,” said Ciorici.

inapplicable.¹⁶ The court's findings alarmed civil society and confused legal experts.¹⁷ “Fortunately, on October 2020, the court remedied the critical situation generated by its own findings and issued another decision reversing the solution,” specified Ribca.

Panelists noted that Moldovan legislation allows people to freely establish media. Press law allows foreign individuals and legal entities to be only co-founders of periodicals and press agencies, and to hold a maximum of 49 percent of a company's required capital to register with state agencies. “However, this provision generates confusion, as the current legislation does not [provide such legal form of organization] as news agencies and periodicals,” Puiu said.

Existing regulations meant to prevent concentrated or opaque media ownership are applied unevenly, if at all. The Competition Council, legally empowered to conduct annual assessments of Moldova's media market to prevent the possibility of dominance by media conglomerates, does not honor this obligation. Meanwhile, the Broadcasting Council asserts that it does not have legal authority to verify the accuracy of media ownership disclosures. Furthermore, panelists said that CCA is not politically neutral. “The controversial decisions issued by [CCA] and the sanctions selectively applied by the authority showed its lack of transparency and independence,” Șterbate said. Taken together, these factors serve to complicate efforts to regulate fairly Moldova's media market.

Panelists scored the VIBE indicator on the independence of information channels quite low. Panelists agreed that politicians continue to dictate editorial policy by working through politically linked media owners.

15 “Petition of the Journalists' Crisis Cell: ‘We ask that the media be given access to information of public interest!’” Media AZI. May 3, 2020. <http://media-azi.md/en/stiri/petition-journalists%E2%80%99crisis-cell-%E2%80%98we-ask-media-be-given-access-information-public-interest%E2%80%9999>.

16 “SCJ: The Law on Access to Information Is Inapplicable. What Consequences Could the Magistrates' Decision Have?” Media AZI. June 26, 2020. <http://media-azi.md/en/stiri/scj-law-access-information-inapplicable-what-consequences-could-magistrates%E2%80%99decision-have>.

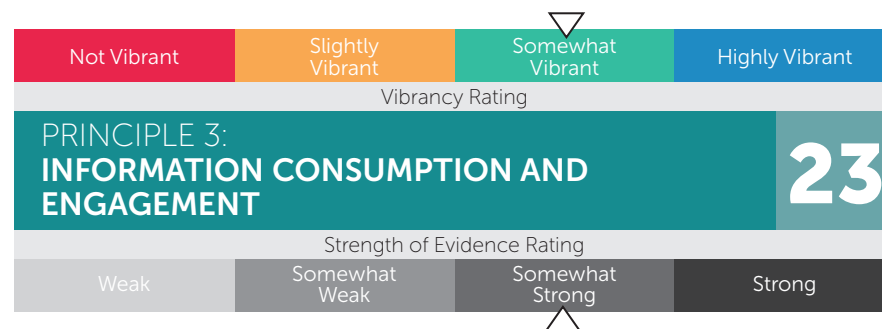
17 “Media NGOs Express Their Concern over the Impact of the SCJ Findings on Right of Access to Information,” Media AZI. June 30, 2020. <http://media-azi.md/en/stiri/media-ngos-express-their-concern-over-impact-scj-findings-right-access-information>.

Additionally, the public broadcasters benefit from a special status and receive public money, and their editorial content often favors the central government. During the time it was a leading political force, the Democratic Party controlled the editorial policy of the national public broadcaster Moldova 1. In 2019, a new government was formed, and the Socialists took the helm.¹⁸

The Independent Journalism Center’s media monitoring reports in 2020 showed that media linked to political parties favored directly and indirectly the politicians and parties that give financial support. “Consequently, the public had access to almost identical, and often manipulative and propagandistic, editorial content” across various outlets, Nani said.

Most panelists agreed that Moldova needs laws to require transparency in online media ownership. Gututui observed that some online platforms seem to be anonymous. Zaharia said that many online content producers do not even disclose their contact details, making it impossible for someone who is the subject of inaccuracies or smears to reply or to request that the information be taken down.

Most media in Transnistria and Gagauzia are not independent and are influenced by owners and sponsors. Doroshenko said authorities in Transnistria exercise control via the media regulators, while the journalist from Gagauzia said that the region’s public media are clearly subjected to political interference in management and editorial content.



Officials sometimes use Moldova’s law protecting personal data as an excuse to deny requests for information. The general population, including journalists and civil society activists, exercise their rights to speak and to get information. Community media are underdeveloped and struggle with unstable finances. Moldova has plenty of platforms where people can share their opinions and initiate discussions, but those outlets churn out excessive fake news, misinformation, or mal-information during the pandemic and election season. Under Principle 3, panelists gave their lowest scores to the indicator measuring media literacy.

Moldova’s laws ensure adequate data protection and digital security, but Gututui said that authorities most frequently cited those protections as pretense for refusing to release public information. Further, Călugăreanu stated that the court’s policy of anonymizing information in records has made it difficult for journalists to investigate and verify facts. Nani noted that the National Center for Personal Data Protection does not balance the right to information against the right to privacy, and courts have repeatedly overturned the agency’s decisions sanctioning journalists.

Media outlets have access to digital security training and tools, and Moldovans can easily access technology that helps protect privacy. Also, most panelists agreed that digital tools are available to prevent distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks. Still, not all media outlets have protected themselves from cyberattacks. Mosneag gave an example: After *Ziarul de Garda* reported on the president’s lavish vacations, its website went glitchy, and staff there suspected a DDoS attack.

18 “Promo-LEX: The debate organized by Moldova 1 before the second round of elections ‘contradicts good practices,’ TRM comments,” Media AZI. November 13, 2020. <http://media-azi.md/en/stiri/promo-lex-debate-organized-moldova-1-second-round-elections-%E2%80%9Ccontradicts-good-practices%E2%80%9D-trm>.

According to Gututui, Moldovans lack basic digital security and data literacy skills, and Șterbate said that the public seems uninterested in learning them. Ribca added that consumers show little interest in learning about the algorithms that drive targeted ads on social media or about other ways that personal information is used to target the platforms' users.

The journalist from Gagauzia expressed that journalists there have basic digital skills. Doroshenko said that Transnistrian media controlled by the authorities are digitally secure, while independent media do not have the money to shore up their defenses against DDoS attacks.

Moldovans are not very media-literate, as the presidential campaign and pandemic showed. Puiu said that consumers with low critical-thinking skills shared a lot of incorrect and manipulative information on current events. Mosneag noted that a survey had found that Moldovans were powerfully swayed by false news about the pandemic.¹⁹

Panelists observed that the government is reluctant to promote media literacy among adults, while civil society groups are always trying to build programs on critical thinking and media education. Nani said that the Independent Journalism Center continues to promote optional media-education training for students in primary, secondary, and high school. She further stated the organization offered online training last year for teachers outside Chișinău and for those teaching in Russian-language schools. Gututui held the view that such programs should be available to adults as well as students.

In Transnistria and Gagauzia, the authorities do not promote media literacy. Doroshenko said the schools' curricula do not include media education or information-literacy education, and no organizations are offering programs on media literacy. However, some Gagauzian users

that are active on social media are also media literate, the journalist from that territory said.

The general population, including journalists and civil society activists, exercise their freedom of speech and their right to information without fear of reprisal. Moldova has multiple platforms where people can share opinions and start discussions. Panelists agreed that debates take place mostly on popular social networks. "There are varied call-in shows, YouTube channels, and public discussions organized by NGOs, but Facebook remains the main platform for debates," Nani said.

Puiu referenced a 2019 report that found that the most-used social media in Moldova are Facebook, Odnoklasniki.ru, Instagram, and Mail.ru, in order of preference.²⁰ Russian services "Mail.ru and Odnoklassniki.ru are seen [by the public] as tools to spread false news and propaganda in the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and Russia," Puiu said.

The campaign season saw a boom in politically connected social media users posting messages designed to incite hatred of some candidates. Ribca said media

consumers rarely report malicious information or protest hate speech, although this content abounded on various media platforms, especially social networks.

People in Transnistria and Gagauzia do not engage much with information they access, since they avoid discussing forbidden or sensitive issues. Doroshenko said that in Transnistria, people might complain to web platforms about hate speech, but they do not send those complaints to ombudsmen or public bodies.

Panelists shared the opinion that most media seek to use research for understanding the needs and interests of their potential audience. But Nani noted that such research is expensive and, without the backing of foreign donors, beyond the means of the country's independent media.

“Ribca said media consumers rarely report malicious information or protest hate speech, although this content abounded on various media platforms, especially social networks.”

19 "(SURVEY) Moldovans severely affected by false pandemic news," Cotidianul.md. May 21, 2020. <https://cotidianul.md/2020/05/21/sondaj-moldovenii-afectati-puternic-de-stirile-false-legate-de-pandemie/>.

20 Gramatic Social Media Report. January 2019. <https://gramatic.md/socialmediareport/>.

Many nationwide content providers have fair and open ways for audiences to give feedback, such as contact information or comments sections. Media and content producers work to build trust with their audiences. For example, Mosneag noted, *Ziarul de Garda* publishes an annual report of its activity and organizes audience meetings (including online meet-ups in 2020). But Zaharia said multiple outlets still operate opaquely and post their content anonymously.

In 2020, journalists and NGOs formed efficient partnerships to share information. But Șterbate lamented that government agencies did not join in, even in the face of a pandemic.

Doroshenko said media in Transnistria generally measure their audience, but “there is no evidence that they use this research to reshape content to meet audience needs and interests.”

The journalist from Gagauzia said there is no evidence that its journalists, content producers, civil society groups, or government agencies partner to cover specific issues.

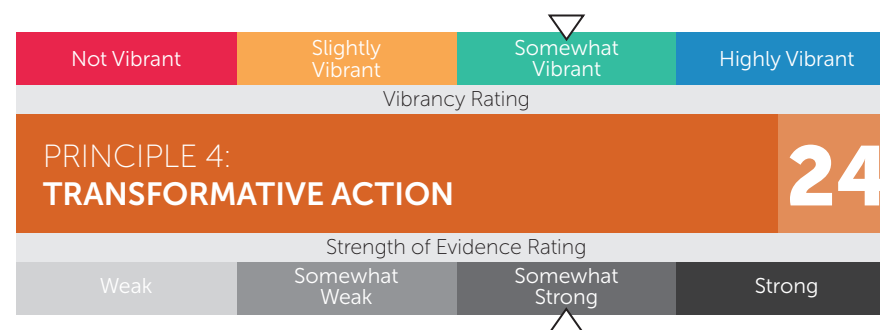
Information Consumption and Engagement Indicators

- People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.
- People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.
- People engage productively with the information that is available to them.
- Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs.
- Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

Panelists had different notions of community media. Some referred to local or regional media outlets as community media, while others said community media do not exist in Moldova. “The law defines community media providers as nongovernmental organizations created, managed, and funded by the community,” Gututui said. “We do not have community media providers, but local ones, which similarly operate within a community but are differently structured.”

The panelists concluded that the few local media in Moldova

struggle to survive. “Some of the independent media focused on covering the needs of communities in the regions are on the edge; some try to get grants to survive in the media market without a political affiliation,” Nani said. In Transnistria and Gagauzia, community media are underdeveloped, and the journalist from Gagauzia said that social networks there play the role of community media.



Although the public largely consumes information created by media that share their ideological leanings, some critical thinkers seek out information that challenges their positions. The national media market includes independent content producers, but the audience for quality information channels is dwarfed by the consumers of politically affiliated media. People widely use social media platforms to exchange opinions on specific issues, but debates are not always based on reliable or verified information. Panelists said they see no strong evidence that people are swayed by sound and accurate information, but misinformation does seem to shape people's views of political topics, social issues, and political candidates. In 2020, the government sporadically engaged with civil society and media through short briefings but avoided press conferences. The authorities have also been slow to act on cases of corruption or human rights violations revealed by media.

In this principle, the panelists evaluated the indicator on civil society the highest, while the indicator assessing the impact of information on the democratic process received the lowest score.

Most of the panelists agreed that the national market has independent and professional content producers that distribute reliable information,

Transformative Action Indicators

- Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.
- Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.
- Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.
- Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.
- Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

reaching about half of media consumers. Zaharia named *Ziarul de Garda*, PRO TV, Radio Chișinău, TVR Moldova, and Radio Europa Libera as media institutions that have proven their impartiality. “Although the audience of the independent content producers is extensive, it can’t compete with that of the politically affiliated media,” Rîbca said.

Generally, the public consumes information from media that are in line with their ideological leanings, although some people seek out opposing views, Nani said. Puiu cited a survey from last year in which 18 percent of participants said they consume news only from independent sources, while 38 percent said

they follow the news but are not sure which sources are independent.²¹ “Media consumers, especially those living in urban areas, read diverse sources of information,” Mosneag said. “People throughout the country may engage in discussions through social platforms, but debates are not always based on trustworthy and fact-checked information.”

Several panelists said that the results of the 2020 presidential elections showed that voters had based their views on quality information rather than misinformation. However, some panelists said they see no evidence that sound information shapes people’s views on political issues or candidates.

Likewise, the panelists noted that with regard to COVID-19, people

repeatedly turned to bad information while paying little heed to fact-based health and safety recommendations. “During the pandemic, the authorities failed to provide complete and consistent information and created a vacuum that various actors, both foreign and domestic, rushed to fill with false information,” Puiu said. “Russian media have been actively involved in spreading anti-Western and pro-Russian information, including conspiracy theories about the use of the virus in U.S.-funded secret laboratories and alarmist statements that the EU has lost the fight against the pandemic.”

The VIBE indicator on the use of information by civil society received the highest score from the panelists. They agreed that most CSOs produce and share quality information when explaining their objectives and when interacting with their mission beneficiaries. No local CSOs disseminated misinformation or mal-information in 2020.

Nani said that independent media often use NGOs’ research, studies, and reports as reliable sources. In fact, some large CSOs have worked to stop the spread of fake news and propaganda, the panelists agreed. Zaharia mentioned efforts by the Association of Independent Press, the Independent Journalism Center, and the Youth Media Center to help people identify and avoid false information. “National and international CSOs react every time human rights are violated, urging the authorities to react,” Mosneag said.

Although CSOs are eager to participate in key decisions, such as policymaking and legislative change, politicians are reluctant to include them in discussions. Generally, the authorities avoid cooperating with CSOs that condemn the government’s infringements of democratic norms.

In Transnistria and Gagauzia, civil society groups provide reliable information, but they have little opportunity for cooperation with the media or public officials. The journalist from Gagauzia said journalists and CSOs have collaborated on projects covering important social issues, such as migration and domestic violence. Doroshenko said that the few cases of civil society groups engaging in the legislative process in Transnistria had limited results.

²¹ Magenta Consulting, “Population perception of the media and media skills in the Republic of Moldova,” November 2020. <http://media-azi.md/en/national-study-population-perception-media-and-media-skills-republic-moldova>.

Panelists said Moldovan government officials occasionally engaged with civil society and media through short briefings and avoided press conferences in 2020. Nani said that authorities would not take the initiative to inform the public during the pandemic, and the Health Ministry began holding weekly press conferences only after media NGOs made repeated requests.²² Mosneag noted that politicians hide behind official briefings and often refuse to give interviews to media in order to duck inconvenient questions. Mosneag said that although *Ziarul de Garda* is one of Moldova's most-read newspapers, the then-prime minister, Ion Chicu, "refused to give us an interview in 2020, relaying through an adviser that he interacts only with media that have an impact."²³

Șterbate said that politicians do not always draw on facts and evidence in their discourse, especially during campaigns. "Sometimes statistics are twisted in order to accumulate political capital, to denigrate opponents, or to explain some populist decision," Gututui added.

Panelists agreed that politicians frequently generated misinformation that was extensively shared online. For example, Nani noted that while president, Dodon launched a webcast program that was widely distributed on social networks and "that he used to spread hate speech and misinformation." Puiu also named populist politician Renato Usatii, who held frequent live streams on social networks that spread information from anonymous sources. Rîbca said politicians do not operate with facts when making decisions.

The panelists scored the VIBE indicator on information supporting good

22 Stratan, Maxim. "The Ministry of Health will organize online press conferences, during which journalists will have the opportunity to ask questions," NewsMaker. April 30, 2020. <https://newsmaker.md/ro/ministerul-sanatatii-va-organiza-conferinta-de-presa-online-in-cadrul-carora-jurnalistii-vor-avea-possibilitatea-de-a-adresa-intrebari/>.

23 "Chicu counselor's response to ZdG's interview request: 'But he has to consult with you when he goes somewhere?'" *Ziarul de Garda*. March 3, 2020. <https://www.zdg.md/stiri/stiri-sociale/audio-raspunsul-consilierului-lui-chicu-la-solicitarea-de-interviu-a-zdg-dar-el-trebuie-sa-se-consulte-cu-tine-cand-merge-unde-va/>.

governance and democratic rights the lowest for this principle. They agreed that officials do not respond properly when media uncover corruption or human rights violations. "Often the authorities react only to the cases of corruption that promote their political interests and ignore situations involving people affiliated with the government," Mosneag said. For example, he recounted a *Ziarul de Garda* exposé revealing that the leader of the largest party faction in parliament, Corneliu Furculita of the Socialists, lives in a house that is not reflected in his declaration of assets and interests. In response, the National Integrity Authority (ANI) and the Prosecutor-General's Office [found a lack of reasonable suspicion of violating the law](#), Mosneag said.²⁴ Nani pointed out, however, that the [ANI formally recognized](#) *Ziarul de Garda* and three other outlets for investigations that led to more oversight.

Puiu said that criminal proceedings resulting from media investigations frequently end up closed, without explanation. Still, public pressure from CSOs and Moldova's international development partners remains highly effective for pushing authorities to investigate and punish wrongdoers.

Panelists agreed that no one produces data on whether the quality of information contributes to free and fair elections in Moldova. But Mosneag said that media investigations of Dodon's shady campaign practices might have contributed to his loss. Mosneag noted specifically the articles revealing that Dodon [spread fake news](#) about his rival, Sandu, and had used a government printing house to [produce his election leaflets](#).

The panelists said they have no evidence that quality information prevents or reduces human-rights violations or cases of corruption.

24 [The National Integrity Authority \(ANI\)](#) is an autonomous administrative specialized in verifying wealth, as well as the legal regime of conflicts of interests and incompatibilities.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

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RUSSIA

Vibrant Information Barometer

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USAID
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Preface

To ensure reliability and comparability of VIBE scores, IREX conducts multiple data quality control checks and investigates any potential inconsistencies in scores. In most cases, score changes can be clearly tied to actual changes in a country's media or information systems, or their operating environment, over the preceding year(s); in some cases, changes may be tied to revisions in IREX's assessment methodology. Both factors are extremely relevant in VIBE 2021, as the COVID-19 pandemic occurred in the assessment year (2020), the same window over which the fully redesigned VIBE assessment tool replaced the original MSI methodology.

However, sometimes IREX encounters score changes that cannot be mapped to real change in a given country or to revised methodologies. Despite comprehensive efforts to ensure a clear VIBE questionnaire and scoring methodology, in some cases, panelists' scores are not fully calibrated to the VIBE methodology or do not align with other peer countries' scoring.

Based on internal analysis and input from the VIBE Russia chapter moderator/author, IREX believes Russia's preliminary scores in VIBE 2021 were systematically inflated due to a misunderstanding among the Russian panel on the VIBE scoring scale--specifically that a VIBE score of 20 would be comparable to a MSI score of 1.5. IREX believes that the panelists did not intend to suggest or imply "improvement" in Russia's media or information systems from the MSI studies. However, mathematically, a MSI score of 1.5 would be comparable to a VIBE score of 15, not 20.

As such, for the purposes of the 2021 VIBE publication IREX is modifying Russia's VIBE scores downward by 5 points for an overall score of 15 to better align with the intent of the VIBE scoring scale, the evidence provided in the narrative chapter, the lack of improvement over time in Russia, and the scores of other countries with similar information systems and environments (see chart below; adjusted indicator level scores can be found in the [VIBE Explorer dashboard](#).) The scores are modified uniformly at the indicator average level to avoid relitigating or

casting judgment on panelist scores on a case-by-case basis, but rather to focus on aligning top level scores.

Russia VIBE Scores (Original and Modified)

	Overall	Principle 1	Principle 2	Principle 3	Principle 4
Original	20	21	21	18	20
Modified by IREX	15	17	16	14	15

Due to Russia's operating environment, IREX does not publicly release names of panelists in Russia; however, the original, anonymized indicator-level panel scores are available upon request (info.vibe@irex.org).

In order to mitigate the need to modify scores in future years, IREX will discuss with USAID appropriate revisions to the ways in which VIBE methodology and scoring benchmarks can be normed across all country panels for future studies.

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

15

The COVID-19 crisis hit Russia's people and economy hard. The mortality rate soared by 18 percent, while the economy shrank by 3 percent, the biggest contraction in 11 years. A record 88 percent of people said 2020 had been worse than the year before.

The national vote of constitutional amendments on June 25 – July 1, 2020, legitimized changes in the constitution initiated by Vladimir Putin and adopted by the Russian parliament. One of the amendments allows Vladimir Putin whose two consecutive presidential terms are ending in 2024 to run for two more presidential terms and stay in power till 2036. The new constitution also establishes that Russian legislation prevails over international laws and empowers the president to appoint heads of law enforcement agencies. Another block of amendments has established that minimum wage cannot be lower than the subsistence minimum, that there should be a regular indexation of pensions, and that a marriage is a union of one man and one woman.

Restrictions imposed to control COVID-19 gave the authorities an excuse to limit public oversight over the constitutional vote—which proposed changes to term limits for the president, expanded parliamentary powers over forming the new government, and solidified the primacy of Russian law over international law, among other things. These same COVID-19 restrictions were leveraged by the government to make oversight of the regional and local elections held in September difficult. Officials, along with state and state-affiliated media, largely ignored numerous reports of violations during the constitutional vote and September elections, and they were covered only by independent media outlets, NGOs and on social media.

According to a Levada-Centre study, state TV channels that convey the government's point of view remain people's main source of information: 65 percent watch TV news almost every day. Yet Internet use is becoming more widespread: About 77 percent of Russian households have Internet access, and 78.1 percent

of Russians use the Internet at least once a month. Thirty-eight percent of Russians use news websites, and 39 percent use social media as information sources. People who prefer traditional media approach information differently than those who get news online: only 47 percent consult several sources of information, compared with 70 percent of online information consumers.

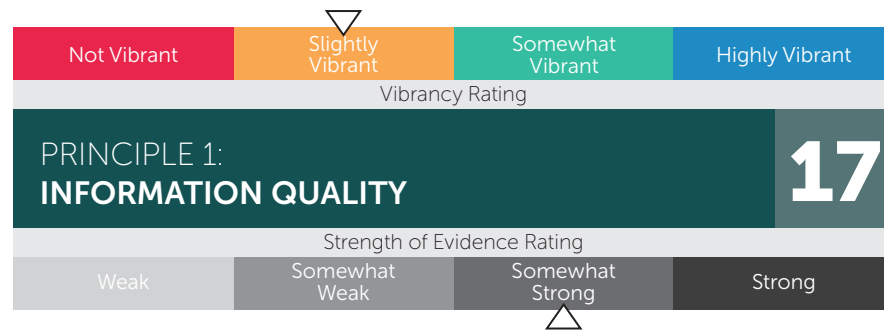
Most traditional media are directly and indirectly controlled, through subsidies and advertising contracts, by the government. Authorities continue trying to control Internet content, and they have a growing list of reasons for blocking sites. However, as long as YouTube and Facebook are still available, independent content producers are able to disseminate quality information and generate advertising revenue.

“Authorities pour billions of dollars into traditional media. Information content is censored via telecommunication providers,” one panelist said. “At the same time, there’s YouTube, where a Navalny can post information for free and even make some money. The authorities have tied up and dried out traditional media, but all kinds of information is available on YouTube.”

“YouTube supports free speech in Russia,” another panelist commented.

Still, because Russians produce and consume relatively little quality information and news, it has little impact on the country's people, quality of governance, or respect for democratic freedoms.

Overall, Russia's media and information system falls within the slightly vibrant classification of VIBE. Panelists scored indicators examining information's impact on good governance and democratic norms, rights to create, share and consume information, and independence of media channels among the lowest. The indicator on adequate access to channels of information received the highest score from the panelists for this study.



The heavy hand of the state in the professional media, combined with the growing number of amateur content producers, creates a fertile environment for producing content that is not ethical, evidence-based, or coherent. While the body of available content is diverse and inclusive, a consumer needs to use multiple sources of information to get a comprehensive picture of the world.

Existing infrastructure allows for the production of varied content, especially digital. Thanks to the proliferation of social media platforms, which 51 percent of the population use daily, millions of Russians have become content producers.¹ In October 2020, for example, 64 million Russian social media users created 1.2 billion posts, according to a study by Brand Analytics, which monitors the use of social and mass media in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States.²

Journalists and nonprofessional content producers have plenty of training opportunities. About 150 academic institutions offer journalism education, in addition to various on-the-job training.³ The Alliance of Independent Regional Publishers (hereafter referred to as AIRP), ANRI-Media, and chapters of the Russian Union of Journalists offer educational programs, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)

such as the Agency for Social Information and Teplitsa Socialnykh Tekhnokogiy (Greenhouse for Social Technologies) hold trainings on content production for NGO staffs and civic activists. Other educational projects, such as the Free Publicity School, GeekBrains, and SkillBox train social media users in content production.

At the same time, training in creating ethical, evidence-based, and coherent content does not always translate into the production of quality information. “We teach students ethics, to use several information sources, and to take an objective approach to journalism, but the result is often just the opposite. A person develops and launches a program or a podcast and just aims to get noticed. Neither young nor not-so-young people differentiate between quality journalism and general communication,” one panelist said, adding that it is easier to get hype “with content that violates moral and ethical norms, including journalistic ones.”

While content producers often act ethically and strive to represent truth, many times they do not, with few professional consequences. There are professional industry unions, such as the Russian Union of Journalists or local unions of journalists. Additionally, there is a journalism-related NGO called Collegium on Press Complaints, an ethical enforcement commission. However, none of these bodies have a significant impact on Russia’s media sector. However, one panelist observed, “There’s no professional journalism community, and as a result, journalists face no professional ramifications.”

The overall body of content covers local, national, regional, and international news and a variety of topics, including political and social issues. But often, news content is not editorially independent and is heavily colored by media ownership. Given that most Russian media are owned by federal, regional, and local authorities--or by state-affiliated companies--most journalists do not hold government actors accountable with honest coverage of their words and actions. Independent media outlets that perform the watchdog function are few. The most prominent are Ekho Moskv (Echo of Moscow) and the Meduza website in Riga, Latvia.

1 Волков, Денис, Степан Гончаровы. Российский Медиалендскейп 2020, Левада-Центр. <https://www.levada.ru/cp/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Medialandshaft-2020-fin.pdf>.

2 Brand Analytics, *социальные сети в России*. осень 2020. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1L51qJJYysVOHig2WuUtkC61ZvxXPA0ts/view>.

3 Козлов А.В. “О современном состоянии основных элементов медиа-инфраструктуры,” *Социально-гуманитарные знания*. No. 4, 2020, pp. 87–95. <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/k-voprosu-o-sovremennom-sostoyanii-osnovnyh-elementov-infrastruktury-massmedia/viewer>.

Professional content producers and government actors claim that fact-based, well-sourced, and objective information is the norm, but the use of facts does not necessarily translate into objective reporting.

Information Quality Indicators

- There is quality information on a variety of topics available.
- The norm for information is that it is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.
- The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.
- The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.
- Content production is sufficiently resourced.

“I’m pretty sure fact-checking is important to all of us, but it’s another matter how the facts are used and interpreted by your editor or producer,” one panelist remarked. “It’s quite common to use only some of the facts, which distorts the picture. And then facts are drowned in emotions, disturbing music, and presentation. I did a story for Vesti 24 on biological labs. When it aired, I didn’t recognize it—all the information about the development of biological weapons in the Russian Federation had been cut.”

Some amateur content producers also create and disseminate false or misleading information, at least in part to get a bigger audience.

Then there are the times when the government disseminates false or misleading information, such as with COVID-19 statistics in 2020. In May, for example, Meduza journalists reported that official rules for registering COVID-19-related deaths differentiated between deaths *from* COVID-19 and deaths *with* COVID-19, and official COVID-19 mortality numbers included only the first category, leading to a significant undercount of COVID-19-related deaths.⁴

More common than disseminating false or misleading information is the practice of manipulating what gets aired, posted, or printed. “If we

judge objectively, everybody sticks to the facts but then manipulates them. And there’s the issue of the information agenda. You can choose just not to report on protests rather than reporting false information. Manipulating the agenda is one of the principal ways of manipulating information,” one panelist commented.

One notable example was the national, state-owned TV channels’ decisions to ignore protests in Khabarovsk after the region’s popular governor was arrested in July 2020 and charged with involvement in murders that took place about 15 years earlier. Another was coverage of the poisoning of opposition politician Alexei Navalny, who state media consistently referred to as a blogger (Navalny is active on social media). They made no mention of his political activities, including having established a party-like network of supporters across Russia.

The growing divide between the pro-government and liberal parts of the media and society translates into a steady stream of intolerance and hate speech. “Journalism wars are quite common in Russian media, both pro-government and liberal. There’s a clear distinction between us and them,” one panelist said. She pointed to Russia-1 anchor Vladimir Solovyov as “a leader in hate speech,” but said the journalists and editors of Meduza, on the other hand, also sometimes attack those with conservative views. Spreading mal-information or using hate speech seldom leads to professional consequences.

Overall, the body of generated content is diverse and inclusive. Thanks to easy access to the Internet and social media, even small social groups can share their experiences and concerns. But to get a diverse and inclusive picture of the world, a consumer needs to use multiple sources of information, which is not feasible for many people.

Available data shows disparities in the gender composition of Russian content producers. For example, according to a 2019 study commissioned by the AIRP and the Fojo Media Institute, 75 percent of Russian media managers are male. There are also significant differences in staff gender composition among national, regional, and local media. According to the same study, women make up 10 percent of editors in the national media, 40 percent in the regional media, and 53 percent

⁴ Яппарова, Лилия, Дарья Саркисян, Андрей Перцев. “Просто запрещают умирать от коронавируса Как в России борются с эпидемией COVID-19, манипулируя статистикой. Расследование,” Медузы. Май 14, 2020. <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/05/14/prosto-zapreshchayut-umirat-ot-koronavirusa>.

in the local media. There are also differences in gender composition between state media, where most reporters are women, and private media, whose reporting staffs are more gender balanced.⁵

On social media, there are also some gender disparities among content producers. According to the Brand Analytics study, males make up about 60 percent of Russian contributors on Twitter and YouTube, while on VKontakte, TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram, most Russian contributors (54.6 percent to 77.4 percent) are female.⁶

Russian traditional media started losing advertising and other revenues well before 2020, as advertising revenue began moving online. For example, the Association of Russian Communication Agencies (ARCA) estimates that in 2019, TV media lost 6 percent of their advertising revenue, radio 6 percent, and print media 16 percent. Only Internet advertising increased—by 20 percent.⁷ Things only got worse amid the lockdowns and business restrictions of 2020. According to ARCA, from January through September, TV media lost an additional 7 percent of advertising revenue, radio 33 percent, and print media 47 percent, while the volume of Internet advertising did not change.⁸

Regional and local media markets were hit worse than the national ones. The AIRP conducted several surveys on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on regional media outlets.⁹ In June, the third AIRP survey got responses from 124 media outlets based in 51 regions. Virtually all reported a loss

“There’s no professional journalism community, and as a result, journalists face no professional ramifications,” said one panelist.

of advertising revenue, including 68 percent that reported losing 50 to 80 percent of advertising revenue. Seventy-three percent of media outlets reported a loss of newsstand revenue. As a result, 40 percent of media outlets had to reduce staff salaries, and 14 percent had to cut staff.¹⁰

“Media is one of the poorest markets in Russia. Top managers don’t value the work of journalists and just exploit them. Staff journalists work for 16 hours a day like on a conveyor belt,” one panelist said.

At the end of May 2020, the Russian government officially recognized that the media industry had been hit by the COVID-19 crisis and established support measures, including tax breaks for six months, release from office rent payments, interest-free loans to cover salaries and other operation costs, and low-interest loans for other purposes. But according to the AIRP survey, many media outlets could not get this support because they did not meet the criteria.

Professional content producers, especially independent ones, are actively looking for alternative funding streams. For example, Meduza was one of the Russian pioneers of the use of native advertising. TV Dozhd uses paid subscriptions and collects donations through its social media accounts. VTimes, the 7x7 online magazine, and TV-2 (an independent news agency in Tomsk) use crowdfunding. Some media also organize conferences and ticketed events for audience members.

In some cases, government subsidies or advertising contracts are distributed transparently, but they still distort the market. While the operations of state and municipal media are subsidized by the authorities, they compete for advertising with private media. For example, in 2020, Russian national media, including Russia Today, All-Russian State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, and Russian Public Television, received RUB 101.2 billion (\$1.35 billion) of state

5 Ажгихина, Надежда, “Стеклоплатформы» и гендерные стереотипы в российских СМИ,” журналист. Марта 13, 2017. <https://jrnlist.ru/steklyannyy-potolok-i-gendernye-stereotipy-v-rossijskih-smi/>.

6 Brand Analytics, Social Media in Russia. Fall 2020. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1L51qJJYsVOHig2WaUtKC61ZvxXPA0ts/view>.

7 АССОЦИАЦИЯ КОММУНИКАЦИОННЫХ АГЕНТСТВ РОССИИ, Объем рекламы в средствах ее распространения в 2019 году. https://www.akarussia.ru/knowledge/market_size/id9112.

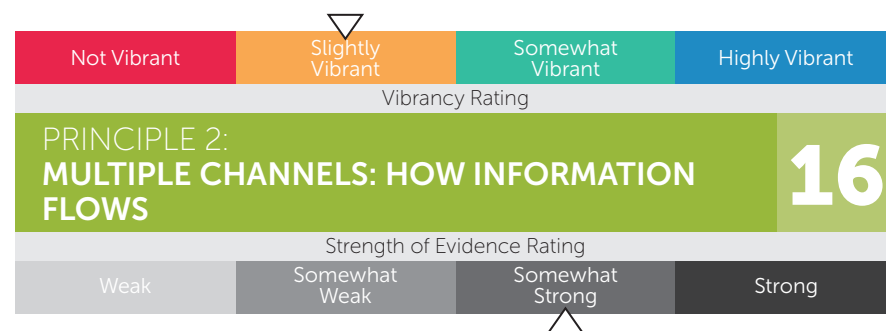
8 АССОЦИАЦИЯ КОММУНИКАЦИОННЫХ АГЕНТСТВ РОССИИ, Объем рекламы в средствах ее распространения в январе-сентябре 2020 года. https://www.akarussia.ru/knowledge/market_size/id9399.

9 Альянс независимых региональных издателей, Пандемия в России: как чувствуют себя СМИ? <https://anri.org.ru/2020/05/25/pandemija-v-rossii-kak-vyzhivajut-smi/>.

10 Альянс независимых региональных издателей, Итоги опроса “Оценка мер поддержки СМИ” <https://anri.org.ru/2020/07/07/zatjanuli-pojasa-izdateli-ocenili-mery-podderzhki-smi/>.

subsidies.¹¹ Moscow City Hall allocated RUB 13.9 billion (\$184.8 million) as media subsidies to support the *Vechernya Moskva* newspaper, TVC, and Moscow Media holding company, as well as contracts for favorable coverage of Moscow authorities.¹² Officials in the Moscow region spent RUB 3.9 billion (\$51.8 million) for similar purposes and in Saint Petersburg RUB 3 billion (\$39.9 million).¹³

“To a certain extent, state subsidies are distributed transparently. For example, grant competitions run by the Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communication are rather transparent. But allocation of funds to major state media like Russia Today is done automatically based on the line in the state budget and is not publicly reviewed,” one panelist said.



Broad Internet penetration and limited restrictions on the production of online content allow for a diverse and vibrant independent information sphere in Russia—despite the government’s ongoing efforts to tighten control over Internet infrastructure, online content, and the privacy of communications under the pretext of protecting the common good and repelling hostile foreign influence. Or, as one panelist put it, “YouTube ensures freedom of speech in Russia.”

The Russian constitution guarantees free speech. The media law supports media freedom and editorial independence, prohibits

censorship, and protects the confidentiality of sources. Yet a growing number of laws officially meant to control misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech allow authorities to pressure independent media, journalists, bloggers, and regular citizens who express their views on social media.

“The main problem is the selective use of laws. Over the past decade, lawmakers established a vast body of restrictions that can be used for arbitrary prosecutions,” one panelist said. “And you can’t predict who will be prosecuted and for what because the antiterrorism laws, the ban on using obscene language in media, the prohibition on offending the feelings of religious people, etc., can be applied in the most benign case.”

The case of Svetlana Prokopieva, a journalist from the city of Pskov, is a good example of arbitrary use of laws against the media. In November 2018, Prokopieva discussed on her radio show the reasons behind a 17-year-old boy blowing himself up in the office of the Arkhangelsk city office of the Russian Federal Security Service. In her analysis, she theorized that he chose this horrible way of protest, because he saw only state repression and did not see any alternative. Later, the full text of the show was published on a website of a Pskov information agency. Reportedly, the text was found by a Roscomnadzor computer system that searches for legal violations, and it was submitted to law enforcement authorities as a suspected case of justification of terrorism which is a criminal offence in Russia.

Both the radio station and the news site received a warning from Roscomnadzor and were fined. Moreover, the Investigative Committee opened a criminal case against Prokopieva for justification of terrorism. In July 2020, Svetlana was found guilty, although several independent expert examinations did not confirm that her material justified terrorism. The prosecutor’s office asked for the maximum possible punishment under this criminal clause: six years in prison. However, the court levied a RUB 500,000 (\$6,800) fine against Prokopieva. Prokopieva’s prosecution was closely followed by independent media and caused indignation among independent journalists.

Some other journalists took the criminal prosecution of Prokopieva as

11 Соболев, Сергей, Елизавета Ефимович, и Иван Ткачёв. “Власти отказались от снижения господдержки СМИ на фоне пандемии,” РБК. сентябрь 17, 2020. https://www.rbc.ru/technology_and_media/17/09/2020/5f61f7899a7947687f22edc1.

12 Баева, Дарья. “Сколько российские регионы потратили на свой пиар в 2020 году,” МБХ. Декабрь 15, 2020. <https://mbk-news.appspot.com/suzhet/skolko-na-piar/>.

13 Баева

a warning that they should be careful and exercise self-censorship. An article about Prokopieva's sentence on Meduza.io provided the following comment made by a local journalist in Pskov who was following her case: "Now I'm very careful with using words of people I write about. In the past, I used to publish all they said but obscene words, but now I carefully review what they said. This is especially difficult when I report on the so call extremists and so call justifiers of terrorism in Pskov region"¹⁴.

Multiple Channels Indicators

- People have rights to create, share, and consume information.
- People have adequate access to channels of information.
- There are appropriate channels for government information.
- There are diverse channels for information flow.
- Information channels are independent.

Another important case in 2020 was the prosecution of Yulia Tsvetkova, a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender rights activist and artist from Russia's Far East. In late 2019, Tsvetkova was arrested and charged with distributing pornography for posting drawings of vaginas on social media. While the court case is still pending, if convicted she faces a prison term of two to six years. In addition, Tsvetkova was charged and fined three times for violating a law that prohibits the distribution of "gay propaganda" to minors.

Tsvetkova's prosecution caused a broad public outcry, including protests in her support and coverage in the Wonderzine, Village, Meduza, and Blueprint online media outlets.

In March 2019, Russia banned the dissemination of fake news or information that shows disrespect for society or the government, on pain of fines ranging from RUB 30,000 (\$400) to 1.5 million (\$20,000). In March 2020, the Agora human rights group found that authorities had opened 13 cases for alleged dissemination of fake news over the previous

12 months, but in eight of them, charges were eventually dropped. However, since March 2020 and the beginning of the pandemic, things have been very different: The law has been used to open 157 cases, 46 of which were prosecuted, often against those who disseminated information on COVID-19 that differed from the government's statements and assertions. Agora said many cases were brought against journalists and social and political activists.¹⁵

At the end of 2019, Russia also adopted a law that expanded the definition of foreign-agent media to include individuals. Now individuals who produce and disseminate information via media recognized as foreign agents can be declared foreign-agent media themselves. In late 2020, five people became the first to get this designation: civic activist Daria Apakhonchich; Sergey Markelov, a reporter for 7x7; Denis Kamalyagin, chief editor of the *Pskovskaya Guberniya* (Pskov Governorate) newspaper; Lyudmila Savitskaya, a journalist for Sever. Realii (Northern Realities), which is a regional reporting project of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; and Lev Ponomarev, executive director of the Za Prava Cheloveka (For Human Rights) organization, which he has since disbanded. Za Prava Cheloveka and Svobodnoe Slovo (Free Word Association), which publishes *Pskovskaya Guberniya*, were also designated as foreign agent NGOs.

While authorities maintain that the designation is purely technical, several panelists said many Russians see it as the mark of a traitor.

Fines and site blocking give Russian authorities effective tools to curtail media freedom, one panelist said. Many media outlets' fear of ruinous fines feeds a culture of self-censorship. "Why do journalists not cross red lines? Because any editor-in-chief constantly reminds them that it's a matter of survival," a panelist said.

There are cases of harassment and criminal prosecution of journalists and bloggers. In 2020, the Glasnost Defense Foundation registered 49 cases of criminal prosecution of journalists and bloggers, 113 cases of

14 Форма оправдательного приговора. <https://meduza.io/feature/2020/07/06/forma-opravdatelnogo-prigovora>

15 Алехина, Маргарита и Евгения Кузнецова. "Правозащитники нашли 200 случаев преследования за фейки о COVID-19," РБК. июнь 15, 2020. https://www.rbc.ru/society/15/06/2020/5ee2424b9a794758f62d3628?from=from_main.

journalists being detained by police while covering public events, 46 violent attacks against journalists, and 27 cases of threats to journalists and bloggers.¹⁶

Overall, Indicator 6—people have rights to create, share, and consume information—received one of the lowest scores among VIBE indicators.

Conversely, Indicator 7—people have adequate access to channels of information—scored the highest. Nearly all Russians, 98.4 percent, have access to free digital television.¹⁷ The rate of Internet penetration, at 76.9 percent of households, is high as well, and 73.6 percent of households have broadband Internet access, according to Rosstat.¹⁸ In 2020, 95.6 million people (78.1 percent of the population) used the Internet on a monthly basis, and 86.6 million people (70.8 percent) went online via mobile devices.¹⁹

At the same time, Russian authorities have established a body of laws and regulations tightening control over Internet infrastructure, online content, and the privacy of communications. For example, the “sovereign Internet” law adopted in 2019 requires Internet service providers to install equipment that allows authorities to circumvent providers and automatically block content that the government has banned and to reroute Internet traffic. Regulations adopted in 2019 require VPNs and search engine operators to promptly block access to the officially banned websites.²⁰

Still, “if a person has a thousand rubles per month to spend on Internet

and mobile and knows how to circumvent site blockages, the person can find any information,” one panelist said.

One effect of the Russian government’s nearly 20-year effort to integrate information technology into government operations is that a lot of government information is available online. “People in the cities use the results of the government’s digitalization efforts to act as watchdogs. You can always use various registries. These days, you can find almost any information,” one panelist said, noting that that is the *modus operandi* of Alexei Navalny’s Anti-Corruption Foundation.

Russian law guarantees citizens access to national and local government information, except for state secrets. Mechanisms that should ensure access to this information include its publication in the mass media, online, and at information stands in government buildings. Citizens also have the right to get information in the offices of state agencies, attend meetings of public officials, and submit oral and written requests for information that should be fulfilled within 30 days. (Information requests from the media should be fulfilled within seven days.)

Yet the law is often poorly implemented: Authorities ignore information requests, especially from independent media, give useless answers, or deny journalists and bloggers access to official meetings and press conferences. In 2020, for example, the Glasnost Defense Foundation registered 384 cases when journalists were denied access to information.²¹ One panelist also expressed concern about the growing amount of undisclosed or restricted data on registries that are supposed to be public.

Government entities have spokespeople and information offices, which often fully control media access to public officials. Many panelists said government spokespeople do not always tell the truth, and one called the level of their dishonesty “catastrophic.” “Even if they lie only in a few cases, they still think that lying is acceptable,” one panelist said.

“Why do journalists not cross red lines? Because any editor-in-chief constantly reminds them that it’s a matter of survival,” said a panelist.

16 Фонд Защиты Гласности, Конфликты, зафиксированные ФЗГ в течение 2020 года. Декабрь 31, 2020. <http://www.gdf.ru/graph/item/1/1724>.

17 РТС, ТЕЛЕЗРИТЕЛЯМ ВНЕ ЗОНЫ ОХВАТА ЦИФРОВОГО ЭФИРНОГО ТЕЛЕВЕЩАНИЯ. <https://moscow.rtrs.ru/tv/offside/>.

18 Костылева, Татьяна. “Росстат опубликовал данные по проникновению ШПД в регионах России,” D-Russia.ru. апреля 2, 2020. <https://d-russia.ru/rosstat-opublikoval-dannye-po-proniknoveniju-shpd-v-regionah-rossii>.

19 Mediascope. Аудитория интернета в России в 2020 году. январь 12, 2021. <https://mediascope.net/news/1250827/>.

20 Human Rights Watch. Russia: Growing Internet Isolation, Control, Censorship. June 18, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/06/18/russia-growing-internet-isolation-control-censorship#>.

21 Фонд Защиты Гласности.

“A key situation like the poisoning of Navalny shows that government spokespeople don’t always tell the truth. There are serious doubts that government information about the COVID-19 situation is truthful. Information provided by one agency contradicts information from another,” another panelist said.

People can freely establish media. Online media can operate without registering with the state. At the same time, the traditional media market is highly monopolized, and one panelist estimated that the state owns 70 to 75 percent of media. Those numbers jibe with estimates by the Federal Antimonopoly Service that the share of the state-owned and state-affiliated enterprises in the Russian economy exceeds 60 to 70 percent.²²

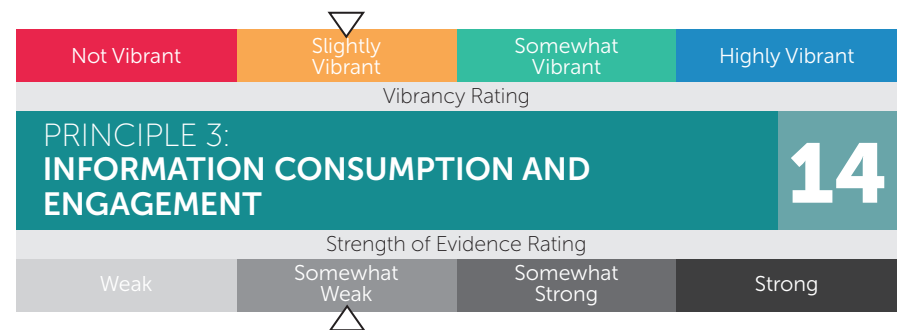
Since 2015, in what the government calls a national security measure, foreigners cannot hold more than 20 percent of any media property.²³

State-funded Russian Public Television gives more coverage to Russian civil society and news from Russian regions than major national TV channels. It also offers educational programming, such as *My School Online*, launched in 2020 at the request of the Education Ministry to help 9th- and 11th-grade students prepare for state exams.²⁴

In addition, Russia has a vibrant community of online educators. Projects such as Arzamas.academy and the public lecture hall²⁵ of the Higher School of Economics, as well as many individual scientists offer educational videos, podcasts, and public lectures. In 2020, several members of Parliament introduced a bill, which has since passed, to impose control over these programs. Described by its sponsors as a check on anti-Russian propaganda, the measure requires schools

and academic institutions to get permission from state authorities to invite outside speakers, including on natural science topics, and to get permission from federal authorities before signing agreements with foreign education partners. Scientists and educators in Russia argued that the law would violate academic freedom and free speech rights, as well as hamper scientific literacy efforts.

Information channels have limited independence, and the score for the corresponding VIBE indicator is one of the lowest. Owners and funding sources, including government subsidies and advertising, often color an outlet’s editorial stance. “Owners are the main source of influence in most cases. When ownership changes, the media changes its editorial policy. In addition, professional journalism requires money—to cover business trip expenses, to check information. And every journalist clearly understands that his or her salary depends on advertising contracts,” one panelist commented.



Russia has legal protections for data privacy and digital security. The constitution guarantees privacy for one’s personal life and personal and family secrets, and protection of one’s honor and reputation. It also bans collection, storage, use, and distribution of information on someone’s private life without their consent. Russia is a signatory to a Council of Europe convention on the protection of personal data and since 2007 has had its own data privacy law. In 2014, a new law came into effect requiring that any personal data that companies hold on Russian citizens be stored on servers inside Russia.

The main enforcement agency for data privacy and digital security

22 ФАС. ДОКЛАД о состоянии конкуренции в Российской Федерации за 2018 год. сентябрь 27, 2019. <https://fas.gov.ru/documents/685806>.

23 Смирнов, Сергей и Анастасия Корня. “Ограничения доли иностранцев в СМИ признаны частично неконституционными,” ведомости. январь 17, 2019. <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2019/01/17/791689-ogranicheniya-smi>.

24 Общественное телевидение России, Совет по Общественному телевидению подвел итоги работы ОТР. декабрь 23, 2020. https://otr-online.ru/o-telekanale/press_relizy/sovet-po-obshchestvennomu-televideniyu-podvel-itogi-raboty-otr-91.html.

25 <https://www.hse.ru/lectorian>

regulations and laws is the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology, and Mass Media (Roskomnadzor). Panelists said these rules usually do not impinge on personal freedoms and do not prevent the release of public information, but some information platforms have been blocked for not complying with them. In 2016, for example, Roskomnadzor lodged a complaint against social network LinkedIn for storing Russians' personal data on servers outside the country and for allegedly violating other data protection laws. A court ordered the site blocked, and in 2020, it remained inaccessible.

Media outlets and other professional content producers have access to digital security training and tools, including digital tools to help media outlets prevent a distributed denial of service (DDoS) or other attacks. According to statistics from the Higher School of Economics, 97.1 percent of companies in the Russian telecommunications industry regularly update antivirus software, 82.5 percent use equipment to prevent unauthorized access to their servers, and 63.5 percent use software that detects hacker attacks.²⁶

Individuals have access to technology that helps protect their privacy and security. According to Rosstat, in 2018, 81.6 percent of Russian Internet users used antivirus software, and 18.1 percent used anti-spam filters.²⁷

There is evidence that the population has basic digital and data literacy skills, although media literacy is usually not taught in public schools or universities. In a 2015 study by the Zircon research group, 61 percent of respondents said they knew that websites and social media platforms collect their personal data, and 72 percent agreed that they could not fully maintain their anonymity online. Sixty-one percent were aware that their online activity could negatively affect their life and reputation.²⁸

In the same study, 51 percent of respondents could differentiate between facts and opinions, and 56 percent reported that they compare information from different sources. Overall, the study concluded that only 30 percent of Russian citizens are highly media literate.

Information Consumption and Engagement Indicators

- People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.
- People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.
- People engage productively with the information that is available to them.
- Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs.
- Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

Some organizations are trying to change that. In 2018, the Goethe-Institut and the independent arts and culture website [Colta.ru](https://colta.ru) launched The Earth Is Flat—How to Read Media?²⁹, which has held workshops with more than 900 Russian teenagers, trained about 300 teachers, and involved about 1,800 people in online conferences.³⁰

Still, one panelist said, most Russians do not take advantage of programs on media literacy.

Nor do they seek out the most trustworthy sources of news and information. In various polls, 65 percent to 74 percent of Russians say television is their main source of national and international news.³¹ Sixty-five percent watch

TV news almost every day.³² That matters because major TV channels are state-owned, and they broadcast only the government's point of view. Thirty-eight percent of Russians get news from news sites and 39

26 Абдрахманова, Г. И. и другие. *Индикаторы цифровой экономики: 2020*. Высшая школа экономики. <https://www.hse.ru/primarydata/ice2020>.

27 Абдрахманова.

28 Войнилов, Ю. Л., Д. В. Мальцева, и Л. В. Шубина. "Медиаграмотность в России: картография проблемных зон," *Коммуникации. Медиа. Дизайн*, Том 1, No. 2, 2016. <https://publications.hse.ru/mirror/pubs/share/direct/225292015.pdf>.

29 <https://howtoreadmedia.ru/en/>

30 Проект "The Earth Is Flat—Как читать медиа?" подводит итоги. октябрь 26, 2020. <https://howtoreadmedia.ru/ru/events/proekt-the-earth-is-flat-kak-chitat-media-podvodit-itogi/>.

31 ФОМ. "Источники информации: телевидение." Января 30, 2020. <https://fom.ru/SMI-i-internet/14337>; Волков, Денис, Степан Гончаровы. *Российский Медиалендскейп 2020*. Левада-Центр. <https://www.levada.ru/2020/05/20/rossijskij-medialandshaft-2020-2/>.

32 ФОМ.

percent from social media.³³

Studies show significant differences in media consumption between younger and older Russians. According to Mediascope, a research and ad-monitoring company, in 2020, 90 percent of people ages 12 to 44 used the Internet, compared with 49.7 percent of people 55 and older. Nearly all those ages 12 to 24 used the Internet.³⁴

Thanks to these habits, “young Russians are less exposed to state TV propaganda,” according to a report on civic activism among Russian youth by the Levada Center research institute. “They are heavily influenced by YouTube, which over the past years has become the most popular internet platform, enabling political and civic activists as well as journalists to get access to millions of young Russians all over the country, and bypassing the TV channels controlled by the state.”³⁵

Platforms for public debate, including town halls and talk shows, fall short. “There are plenty of talk shows, but they’re not inclusive, and they cover a limited number of topics,” a panelist remarked. “And journalists who facilitate them don’t intend to present the full range of opinions. They clearly have a task to protect one specific point of view, most likely the government one.”

Another panelist framed it this way: “In Russia, there are no adequate platforms for public debate. There are echo chambers where opposition-minded audiences flock to opposition media,” while most people watch state TV channels or “read news on Yandex that was forced by the government to present only ‘correct’ sources. These are not platforms for public dialogue. As a result, there’s no dialogue.”

“In Russia, there are no adequate platforms for public debate. There are echo chambers where opposition-minded audiences flock to opposition media,” said one panelist.

Most media and content producers measure the size of their audiences, but the use of qualitative research is less common. “Media outlets are interested only in advertising revenue, so they only use quantitative research. But qualitative studies are rare because media aren’t really interested in learning about the audience’s needs,” a panelist said.

Many media allow for various forms of feedback, including moderated online comment sections and social media groups. Fewer, however, organize community events, are transparent about who their authors are or how they report or publish corrections.

Several bodies facilitate the exchange of information among journalists, media managers, civil society organizations, and government institutions. For example, media representatives sit on the expert council of the State Duma Committee on Informational Policy, Technologies,

and Communications. Media managers also serve on the public councils of the national and regional offices of Roskomnadzor. The president annually meets with chief editors of major media outlets, and regional governors conduct similar meetings with heads of regional media. Despite COVID-19-related restrictions, 2020 saw some public meetings and roundtables on media issues. In December, for example, the Duma’s

informational politics, technologies, and communications committee held a roundtable on legal protections for journalists.

Media associations and civil society organizations also directly engage with the government. In 2020, the AIRP wrote an open letter to the prime minister requesting support to the media sector, which was badly hit by the pandemic. A similar request came from the All-Russian People’s Front civic movement, a pro-government alliance of NGOs, which at the end of the year launched the Media.onf.ru platform for discussing issues of importance to professional and amateur content producers. Yet panelists said these efforts have not led to any positive outcomes for Russia’s media industry.

33 Волков

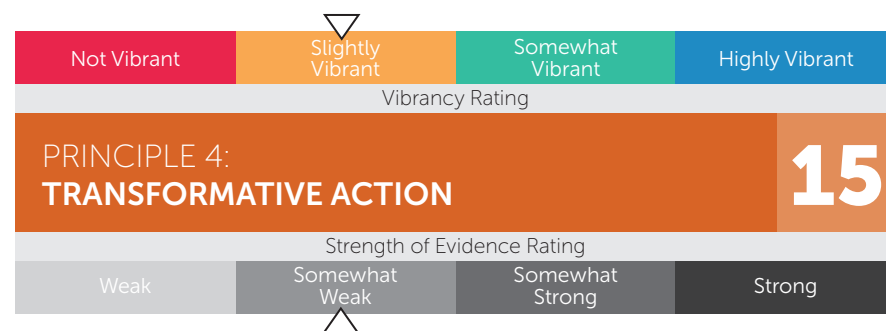
34 Mediascope. *Аудитория интернета в России в 2020 году*. январь 12, 2021. <https://mediascope.net/news/1250827/>.

35 Волков, Денис, Степан Гончаров, и Мария Снеговая. *Гражданский активизм российской молодежи*, Левада-Центр. октябрь 1, 2020. <https://www.levada.ru/2020/10/01/grazhdanskij-aktivizm-rossijskoj-molodezhi/>.

Russia does not have community media, but a growing culture of city and neighborhood online forums, community groups on social media, and group chats on messaging apps support engagement among community members. In a Levada 2020 study, 28 percent of respondents were familiar with messenger-based neighbor groups and 6 percent participated in them. The most common topics are improvements to apartment buildings and surroundings, as well as interaction with building management.³⁶

There are also small local media that serve the interests of their communities. For example, the Taganka-mat Telegram channel covers life in that district of Moscow and supports local businesses. VTochku, run by two journalists and operated as a group on VKontakte and Facebook, serves the city of Vologda in northern Russia.

“In Russia, there are quite a few local initiatives, small sites, community chats, microsites for residential districts, etc. They’re often a more effective tool for disseminating information than municipal and city media controlled by the authorities. The problem is that these media are private initiatives of active individuals, and they operate thanks to the dedication of these activists. Once these activists leave, the media often cease to exist,” one panelist explained.



Quality, nonpartisan information, and news sources are in short supply in Russia, and they, therefore, have limited impact on people or the state

36 Волков, Денис, Степан Гончаровы. *Российский Медиалендскейп 2020*, Левада-Центр. <https://www.levada.ru/cp/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Medialandshaft-2020-fin.pdf>.

of governance or democratic rights. Panelists mentioned the Ekho Moskvyy (Echo of Moscow) radio station, Meduza, *Kommersant*, Business FM, and 7x7 as quality sources of news and information. The AIRP, whose members must adhere to principles of fair reporting, has about 60 members.

The audience for trustworthy and fair information and news is likewise limited. “A huge share of the population (over half) is not a part of the common news space,” Lev Gudkov, director of the Levada Center, wrote in an opinion piece for VTimes in January 2021. In a survey conducted by the Levada Center in December 2020 about the year just past, he wrote, “More than a third of Russians (36 percent) could not name a single memorable event and another 16 percent mentioned only events in their personal lives.”³⁷

Ekho Moskvyy draws 2.8 million listeners each month, and the audience for its website and social media accounts tops 13 million (about 11 percent of Russia’s adult population).³⁸ The audience of Meduza in Russia is about 10 million (about 8 percent of Russian adults).³⁹

According to the Public Opinion Foundation data, most Russians—63 percent—turn to television for news and information, and 42 percent say it is their most trusted information source. The most popular TV channels are state-run Channel One (47 percent of people report watching it), Russia-1 (45 percent), all-news Russia-24 (16 percent), and Gazprom’s NTV (28 percent). They are also the most trusted: 35 percent of people trust Channel One and 35 percent Russia-1.⁴⁰

A significant percentage of people also get news from news sites (45 percent) and social media (23 percent). Twenty-three percent use news sites and 13 percent use social media as their main sources of news.⁴¹ Over half of people (58 percent) report that they use and compare

37 гудков, Лев. “Мнение. Итоги года в общественном мнении России: события и люди,” VTimes. январь 4, 2020. <https://www.vtimes.io/2021/01/04/itogi-goda-v-obschestvennom-mnenii-rossii-sobitiya-i-lyudi-a2363>.

38 <https://echo.msk.ru/about/audience/>.

39 Медуза. продано! (медиакип 2020). <https://meduza.io/static/ads/mediakit-2020.pdf>.

40 фом. Источники информации: ТВ. февраль 6, 2021. <https://fom.ru/SML-i-internet/14536>.

41 фом.

information from several sources, while 34 percent use just one or two sources.⁴²

Media consumption habits vary significantly by age group and education. Those with higher education are less likely to watch TV or use it as a source of information and more likely to use and trust news sites and social media. Among those ages 18 to 30, only 29 percent watch television, while 72 percent consult news sites and 44 percent use social media as a source of information. That compares with 60 percent of those 60 or older who watch television, 22 percent who use news sites, and only 7 percent who use social media. Younger people are also more likely to use several sources of information.

And there is a clear divide between people who prefer traditional media and those who get their news online: In the first group, only 47 percent use several sources of information, compared with 70 percent in the online group.⁴³

Differences in media consumption also coincide with ideological differences. According to the Levada Center, Russians age 25 or younger are more likely to give priority to human rights than to state interests, while older Russians take the opposite view.⁴⁴

People exchange information and views with others they disagree with through digital platforms such as social media and the comment sections of online media, but these discussions are seldom constructive or grounded in fact.

As people have limited access to quality information, it has little role in shaping their views on political or social issues. For example, thanks

“Parties to the discussion don’t use facts at all—everything is based on opinions. Nobody even tries to discuss empirical evidence. We can’t even agree on facts,” said a panelist.

to the pandemic, Russians were exposed to much more health and safety information than usual in 2020, but the year-end survey by the Levada Center suggests that their attitudes toward vaccination with the Russian vaccine Sputnik-V depends largely on their preferred sources of information and even their political orientation. Those age 40 and older for whom TV was the primary source of information were more likely to

be ready to get vaccinated than average. People of all ages who got news online were more reluctant to be vaccinated.⁴⁵

Many Russian NGOs produce news and information themselves, and several organizations, such as the Agency for Social Information and Teplitsa Socialnykh Tekhnology, train NGOs and civic activists in how to produce content. Others promote

transparency and the development of quality information products; the Russian Donor’s Forum runs a competition of NGOs’ annual reports.

A survey by the Russian Donor’s Forum found that amid COVID-19 restrictions in 2020, many NGOs moved their communications online. In addition, the focus of their content shifted from news about their activities to presentations of their accomplishments, reportedly in response to the audience demand.⁴⁶

Responsible NGOs do not disseminate misinformation or mal-information, and some NGO initiatives work to limit the spread of and damage from misinformation or mal-information. For example, the Joining Forces for Intelligent Charity project⁴⁷ works against the use of misinformation to attract donations.

Yet one of the panelists said many Russian NGOs are “decorative

42 фом.

43 фом.

44 Волков, Денис, Степан Гончаров, и Мария Снеговая. *Гражданский активизм российской молодежи*, Левада-Центр. октябрь 1, 2020. <https://www.levada.ru/2020/10/01/grazhdanskij-aktivizm-rossijskoj-molodezhi/>.

45 Левада-Центр. *КОРОНАВИРУС: СТРАХИ И ВАКЦИНА*. декабрь 28, 2020. <https://www.levada.ru/2020/12/28/koronavirus-strahi-i-vaktsina/>.

46 Форум Доноров. *Результаты пятого мониторинга в рамках проекта «Барометр Форума Доноров»*. сентябрь 9, 2020. <https://www.donorsforum.ru/reports/rezultaty-pyatogo-monitoringa-v-ramkakh-proekta-barometr-foruma-donorov/>.

47 «Все вместе за разумную помощь». <https://wse-wmeste.ru/projects/vse-vmeste-za-razumnuyu-pomoshh/>.

institutions established by authorities to imitate civil society” and that these NGOs do not work to reduce the spread of misinformation or mal-information.

There is growing interest in NGO work from media. Independent media like Ekho Moskvyy Business FM, *Novaya Gazette*, RBC, Rosbalt, Fontanka.ru, and 7x7 regularly cover NGO activities and quote NGO professionals as experts.

Transformative Action Indicators

- Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.
- Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.
- Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.
- Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.
- Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

“NGOs are becoming media themselves,” one panelist said. “On the other hand, many media turn to NGOs in search of heroes for news stories. From searching for lost children to protecting human rights, many important stories develop in the NGO sector.... I’m worried a bit that NGOs are trying to be media themselves because the journalism they do is activist journalism. NGOs are about promoting some point of view.”

NGOs are involved in some key decisions, especially in the social sector. Many monitor proposed legislation through the regulation.gov.ru portal and submit their comments. Russia’s Public Chamber, part of whose role is to be a government

watchdog and safeguard citizens’ rights, organizes public hearings and collects feedback from NGOs on proposed legislation and regulations. NGOs also engage with government executives through roundtables, public councils established by state agencies, and other forums.

Government actors use a range of ways to engage with civil society

and media, including press conferences, roundtables, expert meetings, and public forums. But facts and evidence still have a limited effect on political discourse. “It’s common to refer to facts. One can manipulate facts, but there should be some evidence as the basis for discussion,” one panelist said.

“Parties to the discussion don’t use facts at all—everything is based on opinions. Nobody even tries to discuss empirical evidence. We can’t even agree on facts,” another panelist lamented.

That is partly because evidence that should be available simply is not. A study by the federal accounts watchdog found that it could not assess the effectiveness of 87 percent of government programs with a price tag above RUB 10 trillion (\$132.9 billion) that were plugged into budgets for 2019 to 2024 because of a lack of data and consensus on how to measure their impact.⁴⁸

There is little evidence that information supports good governance and democratic rights. For example, independent media, bloggers, and civic activists reported widely on irregularities in the 2020 vote on constitutional amendments, including the one allowing Putin to stay in power for two additional terms (until 2036). Yet no corrective measures have been taken. Similarly, the same people reported on violations during September’s elections of governors, mayors, and regional and city councils—and, again, authorities maintained that there were no serious violations and that the elections were fair and transparent. Authorities also used COVID-19 restrictions to limit public oversight during both the vote on constitutional amendments and September’s elections. In the case of the vote on constitutional amendments, COVID-19 was used as an excuse to extend the voting period to seven days – to limit the number of people present at a voting site at any given time. This allegedly facilitated manipulation of voting results.

“Elections are a sensitive topic for our government, so information is hardly going to influence the results. Votes aren’t counted fairly—the results are predetermined by higher authorities. The authorities don’t

48 Цыганков, Максим. “Мнение. Доходы и бедность—игра вслепую,” VTimes. январь 18, 2021. <https://www.vtimes.io/2021/01/18/dohodi-i-bednost-igra-vslepuyu-a2538>.

admit to violations, and the government isn't interested in running fair and open elections. No information, no efforts of journalists are going to change this," one panelist commented. The corresponding indicator received the lowest score among all VIBE indicators.

There is little evidence that information prevents or lowers incidence of corruption, as well as civil liberty and human rights violations. State and state-affiliated media channels cover only corruption cases that were launched by state law enforcement agencies. Investigative reports on corruption published by independent media are ignored. Civil liberty and human rights violations that take place in Russia are covered only by independent media, while state and state affiliated media focus on violations that take place abroad.

Due to laws restricting NGO activity and contacts with US-based NGOs, the participants in the Russia study will remain anonymous. This chapter was developed by a Russian journalist after a series of structured interviews with colleagues in the media and information sector.

UKRAINE

Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 1



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

22

In 2020, political tug-of-wars and turnovers dashed hopes for a more prosperous path of sustainable growth and reform. In autumn, the Constitutional Court derailed much of the past years' anti-corruption progress and hinted at the potential to reverse other key reforms. The most pressing policy matter remains the need to reform the corrupt judiciary system.

Externally, the most serious pressures were COVID-19 and Russian aggression on multiple fronts. Along with armed conflict in the Donbas region and the illegal annexation of Crimea, Russian information wars and cyberattacks continued. Pro-Russian politicians, represented in the parliament primarily by the Opposition Platform – For Life (OPFL) party, controlled a number of media outlets and social-media influencers, stirring up constant pro-Kremlin propaganda in Ukraine. Efforts to fight these coordinated campaigns have so far been in vain.

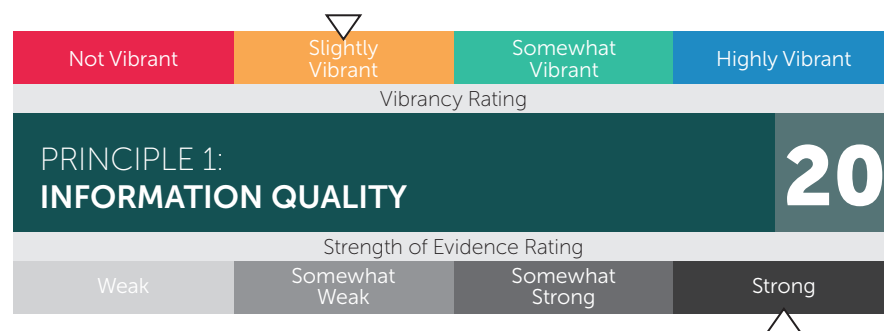
Rampant mal-information, combined with poor prospects for media as businesses as long as oligarch-owned television dominates the narrow market, kept Ukraine VIBE panelists from giving high marks to Principle 1 (information quality).

Ukraine's strengths in press freedoms, media infrastructure, and access to public information led to higher scores for Principle 2 (multiple channels), but editorial interference by mainstream media owners remained a major weakness. Other trouble spots included impunity for crimes against journalists, poor Internet access in rural areas, a lack of Ukrainian media in the border districts (Poland, Russia, and Moldova), the substantial concentration of mainstream

media with a handful of oligarchs, non-transparent media financing, politicized broadcast licensing, and regular underfunding of the public service broadcaster (media brand Suspilne or UA:PBC).

Although scores for Principle 3 (information consumption and engagement) improved slightly, weak media literacy and digital security skills among the population, inadequate platforms for evidence-based debates, and absence of community media have hindered progress.

Panelists had doubts over the consistency and reliability of government communications in 2020, and lowered scores on Principle 4 (transformative action). Reputable civil society organizations (CSOs) helped by generating and sharing reliable information, but most Ukrainians did not base their decisions or actions on high-quality information — instead tending to stick to information bubbles.



Panelists scored the Principle 1 indicators slightly above average (20), giving the lowest scores to the indicators for mal-information and media business prospects.

Ukraine's infrastructure allows for production of abundant, varied, and quality content in all types of media, and technology has grown more affordable. The media market is oversaturated with legitimate content as well as imposters angling for a share of the limited advertising revenues. The diversity of mainstream media owners provides a measure of pluralism, but the oligarchs that run the largest and most popular television channels are bent on shoring up their political and economic interests. The Russian Federation spreads its narratives through fake news, manipulation, and hate speech, either directly or through proxies.

The most-consumed media do not distort the facts intentionally, but partisan media clearly attempt to influence and manipulate attitudes with narrow context and interpretations. Amateur and unprofessional media, unconcerned with fact-checking, also produce a flood of harmful, poor-quality information — and face no serious ramifications.

Ukrainian media do not actively exclude marginalized groups (age, ethnicity, gender, LGBTQ, etc.), but inclusivity and attention to their concerns is low.

The annual USAID-funded Internews Media Consumption Survey (MCS)¹ showed that television ranked as the second major source of news (down

to 52 percent from 66 percent in 2019) for the second year running. While most Ukrainians pull their news from several types of media, the number of those relying on one source — most frequently social media — increased this year. The number of those who prefer radio and print media continues to decline significantly.

Among social networks, Facebook, with 47 percent, has topped the list for several years in a row. A rising number of Ukrainians (30 percent) actively use YouTube, and a little more than 20% turn to Telegram, primarily for news briefs.

Public trust in the national television channels dipped to 41 percent, down from 49 percent in 2019. National and regional online media share the distinction of being the most trusted information source, at 48 percent each.

Despite a pluralistic media environment, Ukraine's largest television groups and other media remain under strong oligarch influences and are divided along political lines. Among the top television groups, Viktor Pinchuk's StarLightMedia takes the largest share and includes the leading ICTV, Novyi, and STB channels. The second-most popular group is Ihor Kolomoyskyi's 1+1 Media. His group is composed of six channels, including one of the audience leaders, the 1+1 channel. Rinat Akhmetov's Media Group Ukraina, with its leading Ukraina channel, takes third place. In fourth position is Inter Media Group, reputedly with pro-Russian leanings, owned by Dmytro Firtash and Serhiy Levochkin. News channels Pryamyi and 5 kanal are connected to ex-President Petro Poroshenko. Since 2019, Viktor Medvedchuk, through Taras Kozak, has consolidated his control over three news channels (112, NewsOne, and ZIK).

Ukraine has a total of 46 universities that teach journalism, but the quality falls far short of meeting industry needs. "There is no adequate infrastructure to train content producers," said Volodymyr Torbich, editor-in-chief of Chetverta Vlada, an investigative reporting agency in Rivne.

University journalism schools remain outdated and theory-centric; their faculty lack practical journalism experience themselves. The Ukrainian Catholic University's journalism school, named the best along with

1 "2020 Media Consumption Survey," USAID-Internews. August 2020. <https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-Media-Consumption-Survey-FULL-FIN-Eng-1.pdf>

the Kyiv Mohyla Academy's program, shifted towards more religious education in mid-2020, according to Torbich — and faculty members who had upheld the program since 2011 have left.

Aside from newsroom on-the-job training, journalists develop practical skills only through donor-funded workshops, which were mostly online in 2020. The panelists named numerous media support organizations and foreign donors that provide forums, training programs, internships, and journalism contests. Zoya Kazanzhy, a blogger and adviser for E'COMM communication agency, added that motivated professionals have an array of opportunities to help master journalism beyond universities.

Only a fraction of media outlets conduct themselves ethically and accountably, said Alyona Romanyuk, the Regional Press Development Institute's *Behind the News* editor. The rest of Ukraine's outlets are susceptible to sensationalism, use manipulative headlines, and prize speed over accuracy. Viktor Bobyrenko, an analyst at Policy Analysis Bureau NGO in Sumy, agreed. He acknowledged that the public broadcaster, some of its regional affiliates, and a few strong online and specialized media comply with professional standards. But he said that most other outlets place *jeansa* (paid content disguised as legitimate news) and serve owner or government interests.

In 2020, Detector Media (DM) analyzed prime-time newscasts of six television channels (Inter, 1+1, 112 Ukraina, 5 kanal, public service UA:Pershyi, ICTV, Ukraina, STB).² DM found that 43 percent fail to separate fact from opinion; 28 percent violate the standard of fullness; 11 percent fail to provide balanced perspectives; 12 percent fail to source their material; and 5.7 percent of news stories are commissioned.

According to the DM survey, the public broadcaster Suspilne earns the highest marks for complying with television broadcast standards. The Institute of Mass Information (IMI) compiled a "whitelist" of high-

quality national online media³ based on its monitoring of compliance with professional journalism standards. The websites for Liga, Dzerkalo Tyzhdnnya, Hromadske, Suspilne, Radio Liberty, Bukvy, Ukrinform, and Ukrayinska Pravda (UP) made the list. Their inclusion indicates they are free of *jeansa*, hate speech, sexism, fake news and mal-information. These media are also highly transparent about their ownership, and Hromadske, Suspilne, Liga, UP, and Radio Liberty have detailed editorial policies.

Maryana Zakusylo, DM's editor-in-chief, noted that the [Commission of Journalism Ethics](#) (CJE), the [Independent Media Council](#) (IMC), and DM's MediaCheck initiative regularly document ethical violations. However, media mostly ignore CJE's and IMC's censure resolutions. The National Union of Journalists of Ukraine (NUJU) continues to defend clearly propagandist pro-Russian media with the slogan "don't divide the journalists into sorts," referring to both types of journalists and their degrees of professionalism.

For television and radio stations, if ethical lapses intersect with legal violations, the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Council (NTRBC) can issue a warning or a fine. But even NTRBC often fails to enforce its fines in courts. Gennadiy Sergeyev, director of Chernivtsi City Television and Radio Company, expressed outrage that producers of anti-Ukraine content bear no responsibility for the threat they pose to national security. Only the Security Service of Ukraine and the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine have any power to curb them, by following their funding sources.

Media that ignore professional standards may risk their reputation, but audiences often stand by them, said Nadiya Romanenko, chief of the machine text analysis department at Texty, a data journalism agency. Romanyuk held the view that mostly journalists of quality media or those aligned with influential figures that face public reproach or cyber bullying; those working in social media or "dustbin" outlets can seemingly publish any trash without consequences. Lera Lauda, co-

2 "Chickens are counted after the election. What was talked about and who was publicized by TV news in November 2020," Detector Media. December 11, 2020. <https://detector.media/shchodenni-telenovini/article/183249/2020-12-11-kurchat-pislya-vyboriv-rakhuyut-pro-shcho-govoryly-y-kogo-piaryly-telenovyny-v-lystopadi-2020-roku/>

3 "White list: Eight media that have become the highest quality," Institute of Mass Media. February 24, 2021. <https://imi.org.ua/news/bilyj-spysok-visim-media-shho-staly-najyakisnishymy-i37769>

founder of Abo Local Media Development Agency, noted that numerous media-monitoring efforts remain within the sphere of experts. Members of the media community, let alone average citizens, pay little attention.

During elections, political forces commission *jeansa* and black PR in most regional media and social media, as well as bot farms, Torbich said. These media experience no real punishment for spreading false information, aside from lawsuits and ethical complaints – which also do not bring serious consequences.

Information Quality Indicators

- There is quality information on a variety of topics available.
- The norm for information is that it is based on facts. Misinformation is minimal.
- The norm for information is that it is not intended to harm. Mal-information and hate speech are minimal.
- The body of content overall is inclusive and diverse.
- Content production is sufficiently resourced.

According to Serhii Sydorenko, editor of *Evropeiska Pravda*, thematic diversity is limited, although political and social reporting is widespread. Zakusylo agreed that the market poorly supports specialized publications, adding, “Thanks to the coronavirus, Belarus protests, and the US elections, international news moved into the epicenter of coverage by Ukrainian media.”

Local elections in October 2020 stirred national media to increase local-news coverage. Yet local media did not prioritize campaign coverage, failing to delve into

the new electoral code or provide analysis of candidates, Zakusylo said. She described local publications as lacking context, fullness, and background.

VoxUkraine analyzed the topic structure of 400,000 news stories within three months in 46 online media.⁴ The analysis identified the most-covered topics as emergencies and crimes (15 percent); politics (11-16

percent); and economics (8-10 percent); trailed by coronavirus, the world and foreign policy, showbiz and culture, society, sports, war and military, lifestyle, science, and technologies.

Depending on owner current interests, oligarch-owned media dominating the market may sit at one extreme or the other: loyal and complimentary to the government, or overly critical and biased against it. In Sydorenko’s view, media and opinion leaders do hold the government to account and all criticize government misdeeds. According to Romanenko, anticorruption investigative reporters are primarily the journalists that fulfill this role, but their impact is still low. Even high-profile cases do not spur the dismissal of officials. Romanuyk added that another set of media simply copy governmental press releases and arrange “warm baths” for interviews with public figures. Sergeyev noted that local officials always find — or pay — friendly media outlets to cast them in a positive light.

Investigative agencies (RFE/RL’s Skhemy, Bihus.Info, Slidstvo.Info) and numerous fact-checkers force politicians to be more accurate in their statements and income declarations, said Maksym Zaporozhchenko, ICT, media education, and system administration lab methodologist at the Mykolayiv Regional Institute for Post-Graduate Pedagogic Education.

However, the challenge of unreliable information sharpened amid the pandemic and 2020 local elections. COVID-19 especially exposed weaknesses in fact verification and the spread of conspiracy theories, Romanenko observed. In 2020, MCS revealed that more than 80 percent of respondents had heard false coronavirus narratives⁵ (e.g., that coronavirus is a bioweapon made in a Chinese or a US laboratory, invented by the media, or caused by the launch of 5G Internet technology). Approximately one-third of respondents believed such stories; more than one-third said that they had shared this disinformation with others.

In April 2020, pro-Russian media reanimated the old Russian campaign against US programs to counteract biological threats in the former CIS

4 “What do Ukrainian online media write about the most?” Vox Ukraine. December 14, 2020. <https://voxukraine.org/uk/temi-misyatsya-pro-shho-najbilsh-pishut-ukrayinski-onlajn-zmi/>

5 “2020 Media Consumption Survey,” USAID-Internews. August 2020. <https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-Media-Consumption-Survey-FULL-FIN-Eng-1.pdf>

countries. It started with an OPFL party statement about “15 military biological labs in Ukraine” that experiment with biological weapons of mass destruction under a secret Pentagon program. ZIK and 112.ua published the statement, Telegram accounts picked it up, and Strana.ua turned it into a full-blown conspiracy theory. Pro-Russian elements and Kolomoyskyi’s UNIAN spun it into a hysterical campaign with frightening headlines, hinting that the coronavirus originated from these labs and biological trials were conducted on Ukrainians. It culminated in a mainstream 1+1 channel program. The channel later removed the video, but as Zakusylo noted, NTRBC did not react to this case, and a 1+1 journalist was later elected to Kyiv’s regional council.

According to DM election coverage monitoring⁶, most pro-Russian propaganda is very localized and can be traced largely to OPFL. It is concentrated in national TV channels 112 Ukraina, ZIK, NewsOne, as well as online Strana, Vesti, Inter channel with Podrobnosti website, and MigNews. At the regional level, the picture is not homogenous, but the Kremlin’s influence over editorial policy is an exception in the eight south and east regions that were monitored. Local media mostly republish information from key propaganda sources rather than create their own stories. Additionally, there are pro-Russian nests in some regions. Russian influence in some regions spurred some local politicians to consider whether they need to use Russian messages to mobilize their electorate. The role of social networks and Telegram channels differs, but propaganda is not ubiquitous. Otar Dovzhenko, DM’s head of the Center for Monitoring and Analytics, said it is necessary to stop treating these sources as media, and to fight them at the source — those investing millions of dollars in them, not the local channels earning kopeks by retransmitting the propaganda.

A considerable share of content is more subtly manipulative, Romanuyk said. “Dustbin” websites, e.g., Politeka or Znaj.ua, intentionally publish false or deceptive information and distort polls, she said, but many content producers lack the time or skills for verification.

⁶ “If you cut off the light of the three channels - the propaganda would be reduced many times over,” - Otar Dovzhenko,” Detector Media. November 27, 2020. <https://detector.media/infospace/article/182898/2020-11-27-yakby-vyrubyty-svitlo-trom-kanalam-propagandy-pomenshalo-by-v-razy-otar-dovzhenko/>

Zakusylo noted that blogs are often the source of fake and manipulative news and hate speech. For instance, video blogger, provocateur, and Russian propagandist Anatoliy Shariy craftily packages small doses of half-truth and lies to manipulate public opinion, and his popularity and trust in his messages only grows. He is the face of Shariy’s party, which entered a few local councils in south and east of Ukraine in 2020 and came close to gaining parliamentary seats (2.23 percent of national votes) in 2019.

Fake news getting picked up and reposted in media with much larger reach — gaining legitimacy — is another widespread and concerning practice pointed out by Pavlo Belousov, manager of Internews Ukraine. Romanyuk noted that the developing Ukrainian-language segment of YouTube offers more quality, verified content.

Some panelists said that they do not see government as the primary source of misinformation, but noticed a dramatic increase in officials sharing erroneous, unreliable information and outdated data in 2020 — especially related to the pandemic. Svitlana Kisilyova, a communications consultant, said the government publishes mostly reliable information, but media often interpret complicated or incomplete information incorrectly, or base clickbait news on facts taken out of context.

Bobyrenko, however, insisted that government sources intentionally spread disinformation and distortions. Sydorenko agreed, saying that government disinformation was probably the key development of the year for Principle 1. He said that other phenomena existed earlier, and official sources face no professional ramifications for government misinformation.

Five fake news reports on emergencies that never happened were published to discredit NATO, and numerous local media outlets immediately reposted them without verification. In addition, the SSU revealed numerous Russian-fueled bot farms in 2020 in various regions of Ukraine and ruled to block four Telegram channels they suspect were managed by Russian special services.

Strong fact-checking agency websites, which debunk Russian and local disinformation, include [StopFake](#); [VoxCheck](#); Slovo i Dilo; [BezBrehni](#);

[Po Toi Bik Novyn](#) (Behind the News); [Texty](#), which provides a browser extension to help readers identify unreliable websites; and [fake.net](#), the register of fake-news websites. A number of initiatives and media companies launched efforts to debunk fake and manipulative news related to COVID-19. One example is the website [Po Toi Bik Pandemii](#) (Behind the Pandemic). However, these sites do not reach audiences at the same wide level as television. The only positive example of television remains the Suspilne talk show *Zvorotnyi Vidlik*, featuring a VoxCheck analyst that verifies statements by the guest speakers.

Social media moderation mechanisms are mostly adjusted to filter hate speech and obscene lexicon, but moderators have no tools against manipulative statements, Zaporozhchenko noted. In March 2020, StopFake and VoxCheck became the local partners of a Facebook counter-disinformation program. Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have all introduced some measures to flag, remove, and/or replace disinformation — often related to COVID-19. These fledgling efforts, however, are insufficient to address the enormous volume of social media content, Zakusylo commented.

The Russian Federation spreads discord, through a pool of influence agents in Ukraine and proxies among Ukrainian politicians, Romanenko said. They criticize friendly relations with the EU, NATO, and the US as well as laws on the state language, education, language quotas in media, the independence of Ukrainian church and Ukraine itself, and more. Zaporozhchenko said that this trolling is part of a strategic, long-term campaign to discredit Ukrainian values and institutions.

DM summed up the Russian campaign well in a November 2020 article on DM's election monitoring: The coordinated and centralized pro-Russian disinformation system produces attractive and diverse content, using a huge arsenal of manipulative tools targeting pain points of Ukrainian society: a lack of confidence in future, fear of coronavirus, fatigue of war, dissatisfaction with living standards, interethnic tensions, language and

religious issues.⁷

Sydorenko said that hate speech from the government is not the rule, though it happens at the highest levels, including the president. Consequences for politicians are limited; their reputation never seems to falter with their supporters.

According to Bobyrenko, President Zelensky shares videos that contain false, manipulative information. Oksana Velychko, director of the NGO Together Against Corruption, recalled how in April 2020 Ivano-Frankivsk's mayor allowed xenophobic statements about Roma that stayed in the city park and violated quarantine restrictions. He apologized for his “emotional” words, and won reelection. However, citizens on social media and media-outlet websites do promptly discuss and condemn false statements by politicians, Kisilyova noted. She cited outrageous statements from MPs degrading children raised in socially insecure families and pensioners as examples.

For their part, pro-Russian news channels disseminate hate speech, propaganda, and fake news through their guests, Zakusylo said. The panelists expressed the view that the NTRBC is failing in its obligation to punish broadcast media for these ethical breaches.

Sydorenko also highlighted an increase in Ukrainian-language sources. Except for Western Ukraine, Russian-language media are considered more commercially viable in the market. However, the recent language law requires the duplication of information in Ukrainian — which is too costly for some outlets. The newspaper *Novoe Vremya*, for instance, plans to switch to just Ukrainian in mid-2021 as a result.

Torbich noted that two major genders are represented quite equally in

Despite a pluralistic media environment, Ukraine's largest television groups and other media remain under strong oligarch influences and are divided along political lines.

⁷ “Sauron and Saruman of pro-Russian propaganda. Results of monitoring of disinformation narratives during the 2020 local elections,” Detector Media. November 27, 2020. https://detector.media/propahanda_vplyvy/article/182872/2020-11-27-sauron-i-saruman-prorosiyskoi-propagandy-pidsumky-monitoryngu-dezinformatsiynykh-naratyviv-pid-chas-mistsevykh-vyboriv-2020/

hyperlocal media — but other genders are not covered in local media, which remain very traditional.

According to IMI,⁸ on the eve of elections, women made up 27 percent of experts commenting in 20 popular national online media, five print publications, and 11 national television channels. Local elections took place under the new electoral code with gender quotas – at least two people of each gender for every five candidates. As a result, the number of women in many city councils doubled, reaching 30-35 percent in some areas.

By the Council of Europe's measure,⁹ women received only 12 percent of media mentions, while men received 57 percent of media attention in regional media's local elections coverage. Gender equality in politics ranked among the three least-discussed topics, along with national minorities and Crimea.

Mainstream media provide sporadic coverage of ethnic groups, Zakusylo said, while LGBTQ issues are marginalized, and an Orthodox Christian outlook prevails. Men dominate political talk shows, and sexist statements go unchallenged. To highlight this problem, a number of CSOs launched an "anti-award," calling out sexism in the media.¹⁰ Romanenko noted that entertainment content often furthers gender stereotypes and sexism and objectifies female popstars and bloggers. News programs, for example, will report on a female politician's hairstyle instead of her actions.

People of certain ethnic and religious backgrounds, such as the Crimean Tatars and dwellers of the Zakarpattia region close to Hungary, receive

little media representation, Kisilyova noted. Other marginalized groups, such as Roma, usually are mentioned with a negative connotation.

Media outlets do not exclude social groups, and marginalized groups can run platforms, although with smaller viewership. Olga Bolshakova, a lawyer and Advocacy and Lobbying Center chief of the National Association of Media (NAM, previously the Independent Association of Broadcasters), noted that marginalized citizens feel distanced from mass-media audiences. Belousov noticed that more voices from marginalized communities have come online, due to growing Internet penetration as well as the shift to online activities during the pandemic.

Media cover internally displaced persons (IDPs) sporadically, Velychko said. She added that the media generally ignore, or cover manipulatively, the lives of people living in occupied Donbas and Crimea. This reporting boosts the Russian narrative that Ukraine does not have citizens living there, and those who do live in occupied territories have betrayed Ukraine's interests. Only RFE/RL's Donbas.Realii and Krym.Realii, along with Novosti Donbasa at Hromadske, cover these topics well.

Men hold most leadership positions at media outlets, although women make up the bulk of the media's workforce — which Torbich argued can be explained by low salaries for media workers. Panelists noted more gender diversity among the bloggers.

Media businesses are generally subsidized by owners. Large media holdings have enough resources to cover operations; the rest scramble constantly for funds to cover critical needs, Lauda said. Online media have no resources for analysis and investigations. In 2020, several online publications closed, including Insider, Telegraph, Design, and Telekritika. Ukrainian weekly magazine *Tyzhden* had to cut some staff, and NV radio reduced its talk shows and analytical content in favor of music. The independent outlet Zaborona resumed in April, after a one-year suspension. The online magazine Vector suspended activities for seven months before it found a new investor.

Zakusylo noted that among the largest television groups, only StarLightMedia became profitable in 2019, but it still had to cut content production expenses. Four main television groups completed coding

8 "The Number of Women Experts in the Media Increased by 3% During the Election Campaign – A Study," Institute of Mass Media. October 23, 2020. <https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/kozhen-chetvertij-material-v-ukrayinskyh-media-komentuye-ekspertka-pres-reliz-i35821>

9 "Findings and conclusions of the media monitoring of local elections 2020," Council of Europe. November 27, 2020. https://www.coe.int/en/web/kyiv/news-event/news/-/asset_publisher/m9nDZlgeFMpW/content/findings-and-conclusions-of-the-media-monitoring-of-local-elections-2020

10 "This egg": Arahamiya, Vereshchuk, ZIK and others received an anti-award for sexism," Media Sapiens/Detector Media. December 8, 2020. <https://ms.detector.media/profstandarti/post/26142/2020-12-08-tse-yaitse-arakhamiya-vereshchuk-zik-ta-inshi-otrimali-antipremiyu-za-seksizm/>

their satellite signals and started charging fees for them in January 2020.

The scarcity of funds remains one of the biggest issues for non-partisan media, and their cost-cutting measures hurt their ability to produce quality content, said Sydorenko. Bolshakova noted that television and radio must cover 30-50 percent of costs to transmit their content. However, media traditionally earn well during the local elections, Torbich noted.

COVID-19 lockdowns further reduced media revenues in 2020, driving many outlets to launch readers' clubs, paywalls, donations, and crowdfunding events, Romanyuk said. Kisilyova noted that media must be creative with new formats for advertising and special projects. Independent media survive on account of foreign donor grants, added Sergeyev.

Valeriy Garmash, CEO of Slovyansk city site 6262.com.ua in the Donetsk region, noted that some media gained an advantage due to COVID-19. Many businesses that adapted to new conditions increased their online communication with potential customers. Although advertising revenues fell in the first months of COVID-19 restrictions, they managed to recover a little. Garmash said that he does not see great potential in media paywalls or memberships in the next few years, as the population is not ready to pay for content that they can obtain for free.

Since its establishment in 2017, Suspilne has never received more than 60 percent of the full funding provided by the law (no less than 0.2 percent of the previous year's state budget spending). For 2020, the parliament initially allocated the full amount — above UAH 2 billion (\$72,608,300). That was gradually whittled down in the final approved budget, during cuts forced by the pandemic, and because of debt obligations. Ultimately, Suspilne ended up with only 57 percent of its planned state funding.¹¹

The private Crimean Tatar channel ATR, which had to relocate from Crimea in 2015 due to Russia, has been obtaining state funding since

2016, as support for indigenous people of Ukraine. However, ATR was also underfunded in 2019 and experienced delays with receiving state funds in 2020. In early 2021, ATR was in danger of suspending operations, because it could not receive state funding immediately. Also in the initial months of 2021, the government chose to introduce a competition for funds for broadcasting in Ukraine's temporarily occupied territories in order to support a few entities.

Bobyrenko explained the process of funding disbursement. Budget allocations for so-called "coverage of authorities' activities" must go through ProZorro, the electronic public procurement system, but local governments commonly allocate a few million UAH (a little over \$100,000) for certain programs, disbursed outside of standard tender procedures. They channel the money to friendly media, or to all media of the region, often leading to the governor enjoying positive coverage.

Bolshakova confirmed unfair competition between private and municipal broadcasters in certain regions, as the latter receive funding from local budgets. Such state subsidies can amount to 70 percent of an outlet's budget. According to the panelists, private-media members claim that the subsidies distort the market and endanger their future. In some regions, Kherson for instance, councils distribute budget money to private media but always to those loyal to local authorities.

Torbich said that Rivne councils commissioned advertising and information coverage from various media, but the process was not transparent through open bids or public reports on spending these funds. He added that the overall funding was not that much, considering the market.

Lauda described the two scenarios of "The City," a hyperlocal media network of about 50 online media outlets. In many regions, these media try to attract local government ads with the prospects of decent coverage, modern formats, and large audiences, but officials prefer to support the dying newspapers with poor circulation. In very small communities and towns, the advertising market is extremely limited, and the local budget so slim that no funds are allocated for media coverage. In such areas, media have little hope of surviving without government support.

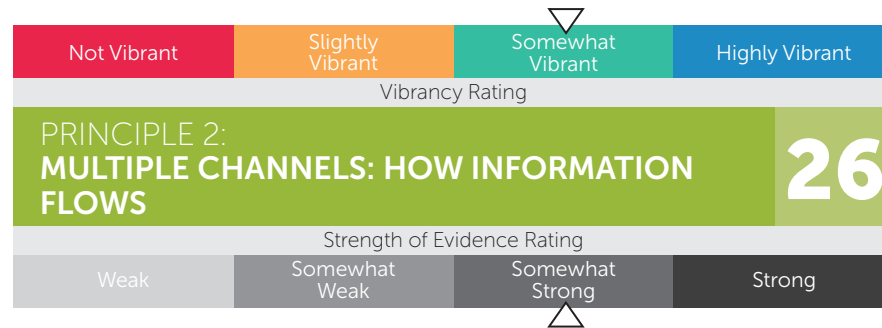
11 "Will Parliament provide funding for the Public?," Detector Media. October 20, 2020. https://stv.detector.media/kontent/movlennya/chi_nadast_parlament_garantii_finansuvannya_suspilnogo/

Political advertising tends to be placed in politically aligned media, although Bolshakova could only think of a few cases when mayors forced companies to limit advertising to friendly media.

Zakusylo mentioned that the largest television groups have agreements and unions to sell advertising. In 2020, StarLightMedia, Media Group Ukraina, and Inter teamed up to oppose 1+1 Media. The practice has spurred complaints from anti-trust groups that they constitute a monopoly and cause anti-competitive practices in advertising.

Journalists earn the lowest salaries within the communications sector — from UAH 7,300 (\$265) for entry-level to UAH 19,700 (\$715) for senior practitioners.¹² Lauda said regional journalists earn perhaps UAH 6000-7000 (\$218-\$254), which are not livable wages. One of the editors — said that he does three months of seasonal work in Finland to support his family. During elections, many journalists pick up extra income working for election headquarters.

Low pay, Romanyuk noted, drives many journalists to place paid stories, choose to work in media that violate standards, or move to advertising, public relations, or copywriting. With rare exceptions, the media business is not able to retain professional cadres.



Many indicators and sub-indicators in Principle 2 scored higher than average — in particular Indicator 7 (channels of information) and Indicator 8 (channels of government information). Meanwhile, panelists

gave Indicator 10 (independence of information channels) a score of 18. The rest of the indicators were on the lower end of the scale due to the influence of negative pressures including: self-censorship driven by the political affiliations of owners; attacks and other forms of pressure on journalists and the impunity of perpetrators; inadequate ICT infrastructure in some geographic areas and for people with disabilities; considerable concentration of the television market by several oligarchs; and the politicized process of NTRBC licensing and membership.

Ukrainian legislation protecting free speech and free media has been in line with European norms for many years, but poor application and enforcement limit its effectiveness. Torbich said that the unreformed court system is the weakest link; still, in most cases court protection works for journalists and media. IMI monitoring shows that journalists do not suffer severe violations of their rights. More threatening to journalists, Torbich explained, are private businesses exposed in media publications that enlist the courts or threaten lawsuits in retaliation. Legal pressure, in turn, drives self-censorship.

In November 2020, a group of human-rights defenders and media CSOs published an open statement of concern¹³ about the quality, proportionality, lawfulness, and fairness of court rulings in lawsuits against journalists, media, and Internet users. The authors said that the courts overuse defamation legislation and ignore the practice of the European Court for Human Rights — which have chilling effects on the freedom of speech.

In Bobyrenko's view, the government undermines freedom of speech by discrediting media — for example, using the slogan “we do not need mediators.” Velychko, however, traced self-censorship primarily to the financial dependence of media outlets, which often promote the interests of a certain politician or a business. In Lauda's opinion, local journalists exercise self-censorship to absurd levels. She gave the example of a young journalist declining to cover issues at a maternity hospital, in case she has a baby and ends up delivering it at the place she critiqued.

¹² “How much do communicators earn in Ukraine?,” Happy Monday. 2020. <https://happy monday.ua/specproject/skilky-zaroblyayut-komunikatsijnyky-v-ukrayini-doslidzhennya-vid-happy-monday>

¹³ “A number of court decisions threaten freedom of speech - human rights activists,” ZMINA Human Rights Center, November 19, 2020. <https://zmina.ua/statements/nyzka-sudovyh-rishen-nesut-zagrozu-svobodi-slova-pravozahysnyky/>

In 2020, IMI monitoring¹⁴ counted 229 press-freedom violations in Ukraine, excluding occupied areas, compared to 243 cases in 2019. Three-quarters (about 170) of the cases involved physical aggression against journalists, including 20 beatings. IMI documented 125 instances of journalists prevented from carrying out their professional activities, 22 cases of denied access to public information, 19 threats, 19 cases of legal pressure, 11 cyber-attacks, and 13 other cases (property damage, censorship, etc.). Journalist rights were most often violated by private individuals (102), local authorities (55), law enforcement officers (24), the judiciary (17), and the Office of the President (7). IMI tied many of 2020's violations to anger over lockdown restrictions misdirected at journalists.

Few journalists report attacks, reflecting their lack of faith that police will investigate. Only 8-10 percent of criminal cases are submitted to the court per year. In 2020, out of 249 criminal cases registered, only 16 were submitted to the courts, 88 are in progress, and the rest are closed. Still fewer cases (just four in 2020, for example) lead to sentences.

Romanenko expressed the view that, while the situation is not critical, some free speech violations raise concerns. Sydorenko named moral pressure, shaming, and hate speech towards journalists as some of the most serious abuses.

Journalist Lyubov Velychko, for example, experienced extreme bullying following several of her reports in 2020.¹⁵ Her investigations included the panic sparked in Novi Sandzhary when passengers from China were placed in COVID-19 quarantine isolation, the influence of Russian-managed Telegram-channels on Ukraine's parliament, and illegal online casinos. Velychko experienced verbal and written attacks to discredit her, and threats of lawsuits and death on social media and by SMS. She complained to police, who refused to open a case at first. After a court

ordered police to open a case, they failed to launch an investigation. Courts are now deliberating over a casino owner's lawsuit against Velychko and Mind.ua, claiming UAH 1 million (\$36,140) in moral damages.

Zakusylo recalled that social-media bullying pushed *Zaborona* founder Katerina Sergatskova to leave Ukraine, although the story that caused it violated professional standards. The story accused reputable fact-checking group StopFake has links with far-right extremists.

On August 8, Mykhailo Tkach, an investigative reporter with Skhemy, found a hole in the ceiling of his apartment. He said he believed it was preparation for the planting of a bug. Earlier, he had received warnings that his investigative activities had irritated top officials. On August 17, unknown attackers set fire to a car owned by Borys Mazur, a Skhemy film crew driver, in a Kyiv suburb.

Ukrainian state law protects journalists' sources. While panelists reported struggles on this point in prior years, they shared no new cases in 2020. Libel law is a civil code issue.

According to the Internet Association of Ukraine/Factum Group research,¹⁶ Internet penetration is 71 percent (almost 23 million people) while 21 million access to the Internet at home. Higher Internet penetration correlates with the larger cities, younger ages, and higher levels of education and income. Ukraine's ICT infrastructure generally meets the information needs of consumers, but more options are

Multiple Channels Indicators

- People have rights to create, share, and consume information.
- People have adequate access to channels of information.
- There are appropriate channels for government information.
- There are diverse channels for information flow.
- Information channels are independent.

14 "In 2020, IMI recorded 229 cases of violations of freedom of speech in Ukraine," Institute Mass Information. December 28, 2020. <https://imi.org.ua/en/monitorings/in-2020-imi-recorded-229-cases-of-violations-of-freedom-of-speech-in-ukraine-i36909>

15 "Lyubov Velychko receives threats after an investigation into the business of the wife of a National Police official," Detector Media. October 28, 2020. <https://detector.media/community/article/181963/2020-10-28-lyubov-velychko-otrymuie-pogrozy-pislya-rozsliduvannya-pro-biznes-druzhyhny-chynovnyka-natspolitsii/>

16 "Internet Penetration in Ukraine," Internet Association of Ukraine/Factum Group. 2019. https://inau.ua/sites/default/files/file/1910/dani_ustanovchych_doslidzhen_iii_kvartal_2019_roku.pdf

available in the cities than in rural areas and small towns. As for affordability, Ukraine is thought to have one of the world's cheapest fixed Internet fees.

According to the Ministry of Digital Transformation, however, more than 5.75 million Ukrainians lack access to quality Internet. There is no broadband internet in 40 percent of schools, 92 percent of libraries, and 37 percent of hospitals, which are primarily located in villages and small towns. Torbich mentioned that poor mobile Internet access is an issue for a village 28 kilometers outside Rivne, forcing journalists to travel close to the city to participate in online Zoom events.

A GlobalLogic open data survey conducted in 2020 indicated that the number of Ukrainian Internet users increased by 2 million to 30 million people, i.e. 67 percent of the country's population. Social media users increased by 7 million – to 26 million Ukrainians. Instagram and Facebook are used by 14 and 16 million people, respectively. TikTok reached 16 percent of Ukrainian users, while YouTube covers 96 percent.

With regard to consumers with disabilities, Zakusylo noted that only Suspilne, 1+1, and Pryamyi channels include sign language or subtitles for certain programs. Despite the law on the state language, a considerable number of websites do not provide a Ukrainian version. The online sector has almost no websites adapted for people with poor sight, but some assistive applications and browser solutions are available.

No groups are precluded from access due to legal or social norms, although geography can be an issue. Kisilyova added that Hungarian speaking citizens living in the Zakarpattia region's Berehiv district only have access to Hungarian-produced news about Ukraine. Sergeyev noted that following the switch from analog to satellite television, viewers in the Ukraine border regions mostly access television stations of

neighboring countries — in particular, widely available Russian channels.

Consumers can receive Russian television via satellite. However, since 2017, the Ukraine government has blocked free access to Russian television channels and social networks, along with hundreds of online media sources from Russia and occupied Crimea and Donbas. Advanced

Internet users can still access these outlets through tools such as virtual private networks (VPNs).

The wired radio system is in ruins, Zakusylo noted, while FM and ultra-short waves do not cover the whole country. Analog television is switched off, with the exception of the Joint Forces Operation zone. The private monopoly Zeonbud controls digital broadcasting — and many question its claim of covering 95 percent of the population.

In May 2020, Ukraine became the tenth country to ratify the Tromsø Convention —

the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents. Ukraine's 2011 law on access to information, developed in line with this convention, adheres to even higher standards. Citizens can submit information requests, appeal denials in courts, and attend local government sessions.

Internet users can access numerous open-data information sets. According to the panelists, the key improvement needed is to establish independent, plenary powers and an effective body overseeing access to information.

Usage of a governmental open-data portal continues to grow, drawing 1.1 million visitors in 2020, up from 738,000 in 2019.¹⁷ Still, citizens and journalists that request access to public information from the government often experience roadblocks. Replies often arrive after

“To obtain a contract for covering activities of state authorities, local media may exercise self-censorship or set an informal agreement with the local government. They can also avoid covering the authorities as journalists, and just place government press releases for money, noted Zakusylo.”

17 “Open Data Portal.” Government of Ukraine. <https://data.gov.ua/stats2/common>

deadlines, contain inaccuracies, are vague, or refer to the “secrecy of investigation.”

Journalists can find it difficult to obtain prompt commentary from press offices. Torbich said he appreciates press offices launched by judges and their spokespeople. His agency sends numerous information requests, with only 10 percent requiring additional enforcement, and he has never encountered intentionally misleading officials. But he described as very frustrating the information request process at the regional office of the State Bureau of Investigations, customs and tax services in Rivne, the Ministry of Health, and other national governmental bodies.

IMI found more restrictions on access to public information under the pretext of lockdown. Local council sessions barred journalists and failed to arrange online broadcasts. IMI noticed selectivity in inviting mass media during the president’s working trips to the regions. Several Kherson-based online media, whose journalists were refused accreditation, published blank pages with no text. In October, the parliament committee of free speech decided to suspend accreditation to journalists of 22 media, including Slidstvo.Info, due to their lack of parliamentary coverage. A media outcry forced the committee to cancel the resolution.

The panelists acknowledged that applicants might not know the specifics of filing proper requests for government information. The general public might lack interest or consider applying too laborious, but citizens do not shy away out of fear. CSOs regularly exercise their right for public information.

Ukraine has donor programs that support media lawyers in properly requesting information and with their appeal denials. Courts mostly rule in favor of journalists or citizens in cases on public information. Romanyuk mentioned that 79,000 people filed requests through the [Dostup Do Pravdy](#) (Access to Truth) website.

Overall, though, governmental communications with the public declined in 2020, Kisilyova emphasized. Officials slid down to mechanically publishing general news on websites, lacking planned strategic communications. Reform of government communications is incomplete,

and turnover of press office teams is heavy. Velychko added that generally authorities communicate truthfully, but the information does not correspond to requests—undermining understanding of policies by the people and eroding their interest and trust.

Pro bono for the Ministry of Health, a private communications agency launched COVID-19 information channels in Viber and Telegram formats. The channels gained millions of subscribers and were shortlisted by the European Excellence Awards as one of the most successful campaigns. The same company maintains “School Info” channels for the Ministry of Education.

The panelists noted that while surveyors have no data on trust in spokespeople, trust in governmental bodies is low. Sydorenko noticed a serious decline in access to governmental policy and decision-making, as these procedures became chaotic and non-systematic.

Current provisions to restrict ownership concentration of television and radio broadcasting do not work in practice, said Bolshakova. One reason is that the Antimonopoly Committee of Ukraine cannot measure the size of the television market, preventing the committee from determining market shares of television media companies. Ukrainian law has no such provisions for other types of media.

According to a 2020 DM survey,¹⁸ only 38 percent of respondents care about media ownership. While the law requires disclosure of final beneficiaries of television and radio companies, Zakusylo said that legal mechanisms are needed to punish people who submit false ownership information to NTRBC. Zakusylo recalled only one example: the Ukrainian Media Holding, which was denied frequencies due to opaque ownership. A parliamentary investigative commission found proof of non-transparent concentration of Taras Kozak’s channels, but the parliament has not supported its findings. In addition, acquisitions of 112 Ukraina, NewsOne, and ZIK did not apply for permission from

18 “How Ukrainians’ preferences and interests in the media have changed after the 2019 elections and the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic,” Detector Media. September 29, 2020. <https://detector.media/infospace/article/181066/2020-09-29-yak-zminylys-upodobannya-ta-interesy-ukraintsev-do-zasobiv-masovoi-informatsii-pislya-vyboriv-2019-r-ta-pochatku-pandemii-covid-19/>

the Antimonopoly Committee. Zakusylo called for provisions allowing NTRBC to investigate ownership, plus amendments to the current laws on funding transparency. Romanenko gave very low scores to ownership and financial transparency for impossibility to control funding. She said that the only positive aspect is that inquirers can find entity titles in the state register and beneficiaries for some media.

Ukrainian law does not regulate online media or their ownership. Belousov noted that according to IMI monitoring,¹⁹ most popular national online media have poor transparency of ownership and newsroom contacts. Only 40 percent demonstrate transparency, although the trend is on the rise – averaging 10 percent up from 2019. Lots of websites with considerable audiences remain anonymous, not even naming chief editors, Romanuyk added. Torbich noted that a lack of regulation fosters development of “dustbin media.”

Internet providers are generally not monopolized, with some regions of the country being exceptions. Certain providers block media at their discretion — for instance, the provider Lanet blocks ZIK and NewsOne websites over an old business conflict.

Print media’s distribution infrastructure has been in decline. This trend has resulted in reduced subscription agents and retail networks for selling their publications, especially in cities with fewer than 50,000 residents.

Broadcast signal transmission is monopolized. Zeonbud, with opaque ownership, is a private digital television broadcasting monopoly. Concern RRT, the state monopoly for analog broadcasting, provides Zeonbud’s transmitter facilities. Ukraine has smaller private telecommunications operators, but they do not ensure sufficient competition with Zeonbud or Concern RRT.

NTRBC’s issuance of broadcasting licenses is not apolitical, but it consists of counterbalancing forces. Bobyrenko commented that the same media cartels represented on the council divide the frequencies

between themselves. According to Bolshakova, though formally NTRBC operates quite transparently, convening its sessions online and publishing its decisions, criteria to award licenses remain unclear. In 2020, NTRBC canceled all the frequency competitions under the pretext of COVID-19 restrictions.

People can freely establish media, especially online and low-cost traditional outlets. Bolshakova stressed that free establishment of media that use frequencies is impossible. Velychko noted that expensive maintenance of large broadcast media makes the format affordable to oligarchs only.

Public service media cannot adequately fulfill their mission due to chronic state budget underfunding. The public broadcaster continues to provide quality news and balanced information, and thus far, all attempts at editorial interference have failed. The government holds UA:PBC’s funding hostage, waiting for a political allegiance that has not happened. Panelists recalled that President Zelensky gave interviews to journalists at four television channels but ignored Suspilne. Romanenko commented that he might have supported Suspilne, otherwise it looks like ruling politicians use friendly private media when needed, and just tolerate public media.

In Rivne, the public broadcaster is one of the few that do not publish *jeansa*, Torbich confirmed. However, he added that Suspilne’s content quality, reach, and staffing in the regions needs to be improved. The audience of the public broadcaster is very small, and due to the lack of funds and staff, they do not run investigative programs or even critical analytical programs. Still, among regional television, Suspilne affiliates are the most independent and comply with professional standards.

The panelists were unanimous about the lack of media independence, which they tie to the broad problems with financial security throughout Ukraine’s formal media sector. Pressure and interference of owners into editorial policy is one of the major issues for Ukrainian media, said Zakusylo. Sydorenko confirmed that most owners and investors, with incredibly rare exceptions, influence media content, while advertising pressure is not that decisive.

19 “40% of Ukrainian online media demonstrate the transparency of their data – IMI research,” Institute of Mass Media. August 20, 2020. <https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/40-ukrayinskyh-onlajn-media-demonstruyut-prozorist-svoyih-danyh-doslidzhennya-imi-i34621>

Torbich observed a clear shift in editorial policy of two Rivne television channels, Rivne-1 and Rytym (rebranded to ITV), which were bought respectively by two politicians on the eve of local elections, in favor of these political forces. He also mentioned instances when advertising departments asked journalists to avoid criticizing their political clients.

To obtain a contract for covering activities of state authorities, local media may exercise self-censorship or set an informal agreement with the local government. They can also avoid covering the authorities as journalists, and just place government press releases for money, noted Zakusylo.

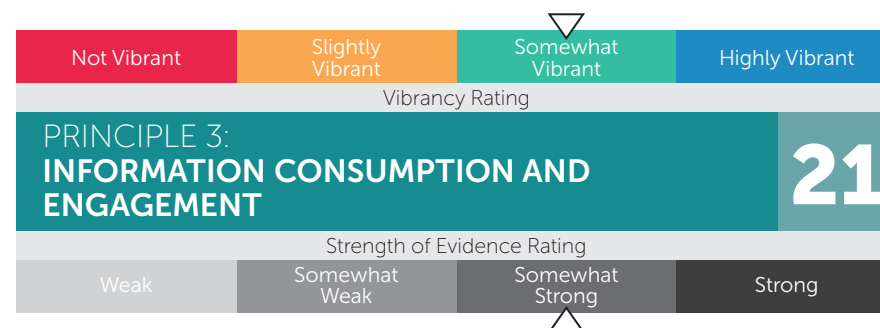
According to Bolshakova, state funding of the municipal broadcasters substantially influences editorial policy, while private advertising contracts have no effect. Bobyrenko said that if a mayor pays local media, then he dictates the content, meaning that, for example, a newspaper would submit stories to be “proofread” by the mayor/ local authority. Bobyrenko said that he is sure that the parliamentary television channel RADA obtains instructions on priorities of certain committees or briefings.

Few media separate business and content production. Zakusylo said that at many online outlets, editorial staff write advertising content (partner and sponsor materials, native advertising), which compromises the integrity of business and journalism practices alike.

The parliament appoints four members of NTRBC, and the president names the other half – not according to any specific criteria. Zakusylo gave the example of Tetyana Rudenko, the PR director of Kvartal 95 studio, who was appointed on behalf of the president. NTRBC tends to be pro-presidential. In 2020, it was especially critical of Poroshenko’s pool channels, Pryamyi and Espresso, and turned a blind eye to 1+1 violations.

Bolshakova noted that one of the serious barriers for private media — access to frequencies — has eased for the public broadcaster, as NTRBC is officially prioritizing its development. Municipal broadcasters do not experience any barriers to carriage on cable networks. They may obtain privileged leases of premises or property.

Ukraine state and municipal press underwent a de-statization process in 2016–2018, which left 38 state print publications. Newspapers *Holos Ukrainy* (*Voice of Ukraine*) and *Uryadovyi Kurier* (*Government Courier*) have exclusive rights to access Ukraine’s laws and to publish notices first. The remainder of the state press are heralds of various authorities.



Though media have access to necessary tools and training, only more developed media care about their digital security. Many citizens lack basic digital skills, let alone use digital security tools. Media literacy among Ukraine’s population (Indicator 12) received 15, the lowest Principle 3 indicator score, as the infrastructure for media literacy education is just developing. Media engage with their audience needs and research them to the extent they can afford, but content producers, civil society, and the government do not interact sufficiently. Community media are rarities in Ukraine, according to the panelists.

Ukraine’s laws protect data privacy and digital security, and criminal code articles cover cyber fraud. However, the laws have no clear mechanisms to control or monitor violations and lag behind the development of malware technology, including attacks and hacking, Belousov said. He pointed to coordinated cyberattacks on several Ukrainian police and local authority websites in September 2020, during the Ukrainian-American military exercises.

Security provisions are not used to violate personal freedoms. However, authorities attempted to introduce laws obliging Internet providers to install special equipment analyzing traffic and users’ activities. At other times, authorities try to avoid providing public information under the

guise of personal data protection, Sydorenko added.

According to Belousov, media and citizens have access to training and tools, including free online courses and specialized services. Free tools against distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks, such as deflect.ca, CloudFlare, and Project Shield from Google are accessible. Currently, the key issue in digital security is that neither media nor other users give it a thought until they are attacked, Belousov noted.

Romanenko said that, thanks to the open-source community, everyone in the world can access proper technologies; legally and freely install decent web servers; and build their websites on free, tested, and safe frameworks. Internet sources and specialized organizations, such as the Ukrainian NGO Digital Security Lab, share knowledge. Various platforms encourage users to install two-factor identification and safe passwords. Ukrainian NGOs have access to free or discounted software, yet pirated software use continues.

Government agencies and private companies alike care little about personal data safety, and the public generally expresses limited awareness or concern, so leaks are possible. According to the panelists, the IT expert community is not confident in the safety of DIIA, the state's smartphone application, which allows citizens to upload various state-issued personal documents and obtain administrative services.

Torbich reported on continuous DDoS-attacks on the investigative news website Chetverta Vlada during local elections. He said that he believes the attacks were commissioned in retaliation for the site's published investigation on a mayoral candidate. Liga.net also reported DDoS-attacks in October 2020, he added.

According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine,²⁰ in 2019 53 percent of Ukrainians did not have basic digital skills, and 15 percent of respondents over the age of 60 have no digital skills. The ministry has an ambitious plan, with support from the Swiss-funded E-Governance for Accountability and

Participation (EGAP) program, to teach digital literacy to six million Ukrainians over three years.

Governmental efforts in media literacy are still fragmented, though, the panelists said. The government launched a digital educational portal²¹ offering educational videos to develop basic digital skills, media literacy, artificial intelligence, anti-corruption, and more. They were promoted on some television channels, and Belousov said that although the portal is new, approximately one percent of citizens (405,000) have already used its services.

The Ministry of Culture and Information Policy announced a new state project on media literacy starting in 2021. Zaporozhchenko said that the Ministry of Education and Science provides a number of projects, some jointly with international partners, but he pointed out they focus on certain categories such as education, culture, youth, and business and leave out socially vulnerable groups — along with those who are wary of all state-run initiatives.

In Torbich's view, low media literacy will be one of the main challenges facing Ukrainian society in the next 20 years. Combined with a lack of critical thinking, media illiteracy is the reason people are easily manipulated, drawn to populists and other disseminators of disinformation — both in political and private life — and fall victim to fraud, he said. Most people cannot distinguish journalism from black PR and other deceptions.

Ukraine has benefited from a number of donor-funded and NGO media literacy projects since 2010, including some available as online courses. Among them are Kachka-Dezinformachka, a program of the Hanns Seidel Foundation; Very Verified, a joint project of IREX and Educational Era; and Internet-Wisdom (run by Platfor.ma). Libraries, educational institutions, and some media also offer various free online tests, games, fact-checking initiatives, and projects for adults, but they do not reach most of the population.

Behind the News receives dozens of requests daily to check information,

20 "Digital Literacy of the Ukrainian Population," Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine, 2019. https://osvita.diia.gov.ua/uploads/0/585-cifrova_gramotnist_naselenna_ukraini_2019_compressed.pdf

21 <https://osvita.diia.gov.ua/>

Romanyuk said, but Bobyrenko commented that fact-checking websites do not attract many users. Bolshakova explained that many Ukrainians have paternalistic views on the state and are not motivated to check information themselves.

IREX's Learn to Discern initiative on media literacy, taking place from 2018 through 2022, involves 656 secondary schools, 25 post-graduate institutions for teachers, and 21 higher-education institutions. A total of 206 educational facilities have participated in the national experiment on comprehensive introduction of media education, which began 2017 and ends in 2022.

Approximately one-third of the respondents started paying more attention to the source of news and the representation of different viewpoints — even showing a more critical approach to their “favorite” media in 2020, the MCS showed.²² General awareness of the existence of planted stories continues to increase (77 percent), but only 61 percent of Ukrainians feel confident in their ability to identify such content. Seventy-seven percent of respondents say they are aware that disinformation exists, but a majority—58 percent—do not feel it is an urgent problem. By self-evaluation, 62 percent are able to distinguish questionable content from truth; however, when these self-evaluations were tested, only three percent (down from 11 percent in 2019) correctly identified all three news pieces. Just under half (48%) managed to identify at least one news story correctly, while one-third (29 percent) declined to answer.

According to a 2020 DM survey,²³ about 65 percent of respondents doubt the truthfulness of news in media and social networks often or

“Social networks and comments on news, especially political content, are hotbeds for hate speech and manipulation, rather than healthy debates, with no mechanisms to fight it, added Sydorenko.”

sometimes; 24 percent have doubts rarely or never. Only eight percent look for additional information on the media owner or author, and 2.9 percent turn to fact-checking organizations.

Journalists and civil society activists exercise their rights of freedom of speech and access to information, but not as much as they could, in Sydorenko's view. Public debates are possible and sometimes present varied perspectives, but television talk shows are not independent. Social networks and comments on news, especially political content, are hotbeds for hate speech and manipulation, rather than healthy debates, with no mechanisms to fight it, Sydorenko added. Zaporozhchenko agreed that, with the exception of public broadcasting, talk shows are biased or only pretend to present other arguments fairly.

Torbich remarked that talk shows are rarer in regional television than in national; Rivne city has none. The public broadcaster regularly has radio call-in shows. Internet users debate in regional Facebook groups, but irresponsible statements and disinformation flow freely there. At the regional level, mayors do not typically debate the local opposition, Bobyrenko added.

According to Velychko, open meetings with deputies or public hearings took place during election campaigns. Due to COVID-19 restrictions of public gatherings, some people with limited online access had fewer opportunities to exercise free speech.

People are not used to making the effort to flag hate speech, she said.

Quality research is affordable only for wealthy media — the largest television and radio holdings. Donors fund market research for the UA:PBC, Zakusylo reported. Many quantitative audience surveys are available. A television panel is held regularly under the auspices of the Television Industry Committee (TIC), a trade association of key oligarch-owned channels and media agencies. The Radio Committee manages radio measurement, and the online media sector has various panels.

NAM launched local television audience research for 11 regional centers

22 “2020 Media Consumption Survey,” USAID-Internews. August 2020. <https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-Media-Consumption-Survey-FULL-FIN-Eng-1.pdf>

23 “Trends and Changes in the Choices of Media and Consumption of Information of the Ukrainians After 2019 Elections and COVID-19 Outbreak,” Detector Media. October 2, 2020. <https://detector.media/infospace/article/181211/2020-10-02-trends-and-changes-in-the-choices-of-media-and-consumption-of-information-of-the-ukrainians-after-2019-elections-and-covid-19-outbreak/>

in 2017, and since then it has conducted four periodic follow-up studies. The National Endowment for Democracy funded the last wave, which took place in 2019.

Torbich noted that social networks, email, and telephone are the simplest feedback modes for media. While it is not clear how much media take feedback into account, many coverage topics are reader-initiated. Lauda said that plenty of tools are available to help online media measure their audiences — yet even with training, some local media do not make use of digital metering tools.

According to Zakusylo, not all media publish their contact information, let alone publisher data, so transparency in authorship, corrections, and apologies are inherent to credible media only. On-air reactions by large television channels to audience complaints make Zakusylo doubt the strength of their feedback procedures, she noted.

Information Consumption and Engagement Indicators

- People can safely use the internet due to privacy protections and security tools.
- People have the necessary skills and tools to be media literate.
- People engage productively with the information that is available to them.
- Media and information producers engage with their audience's needs.
- Community media provides information relevant for community engagement.

Financial losses tied to the pandemic and sinking advertising income pushed many media to intensify attempts to bring in audience revenue through paywalls, crowdfunding, and readers' clubs. These campaigns often highlight the media outlets' trustworthiness, objectivity, and absence of *jeansa* or links with politicians. Some regional media, including Volyn Online and RIA Media, introduced paywalls as well.

In Lauda's view, CSOs often have useful research or interesting news to share, but they lack the budgets and communication skills to package and communicate them to attract

media interest — while local journalists also have insufficient resources to produce quality content. Moreover, self-censorship can be especially strong in small towns. Some journalists avoid investigating and reporting on sensitive issues for fear of ruining relations with neighbors.

Zakusylo mentioned the development of the draft law on media as an example of an effort to bring together different stakeholders. She said that the working group was limited to some MPs and select representatives of CSOs, large television holdings, and industry associations — leaving many others with vested interests out of the proceedings. She noted that the Ministry of Culture's failure to involve media members, CSO staff, and other stakeholders in drafting the 2019 law on disinformation could have served as a lesson in the need to include all key affected parties.

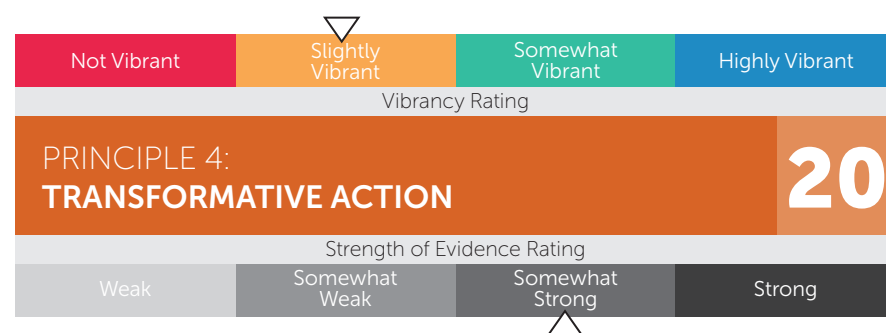
The government is the weakest link in terms of partnership with media and civil society, according to Bobyrenko. Velychko added that collaboration between activists and media is crucial for moving things forward; it takes both wide publicity and legal follow-up to prod the government into responding to anti-corruption cases.

The VIBE indicator on community media caused confusion among the panelists. Half of the panelists said Ukraine has no such media as they are traditionally understood, and refused to score it. With the destatization reform, municipal press became private, and the number of Ukrainian media that might correspond to the international criteria is negligent. About 60 municipal television stations operating across Ukraine were meant to transform into community media, but debate over their ownership, funding, structure, and editorial guidelines has stalled since 2015. Furthermore, Ukrainian legislation does not provide any definition of community media or their mandate, Bolshakova noted. Zakusylo explained that municipal broadcasters, being dependent on local government, cannot be considered community media, nor can social media groups, local private outlets, or non-profit media — even though they collect donations from the community.

Torbich said that Ukraine has local community media as defined by the VIBE methodology. They are mostly print or online and founded by NGOs

or civic activists. “Probably, our investigative reporting agency Chetverta Vlada is of this kind. However, citizens are not ready to support such media. Its crowdfunding revenues in 2020 amounted to 0.5 percent of the budget,” he said.

Kazanzhy predicted further rapid growth of grassroots information sources of small local communities or groups dedicated to certain topics. Velychko added that regional Telegram channels are gaining popularity, but they definitely do not cover events objectively or reliably. Kisilyova agreed that Ukrainians have no habit of supporting community independent media through donations or volunteering.



Nonpartisan news sources do not attract extensive audiences; people prefer staying within their information bubbles, according to the panelists. Constructive and healthy discussions are rarer than exchanges of accusations. Accordingly, panelists gave Principle 4's lowest score to utilization of information by individuals, seeing few signs that people base opinions and behaviors on quality information.

Panelists did give high scores to the contribution of reputable CSOs in communicating and using quality information, but they noted that media and government do not fully take advantage of the information and expertise that CSOs offer. Panelists also criticized the government for not providing strategic, consistent, or trustworthy communication.

Media cover corruption and violations of human rights and freedoms, and to certain extent prevent additional abuses. The coverage also inspires public pressure, which spurs the government to react — not always effectively, however.

Numerous media monitoring studies prove that Ukraine has reliable, verified information sources, with large audiences — but they cannot compete with oligarch-owned media or popular clickbait websites, said Romanenko. Public television has miserable ratings, but Ukrainske Radio ranks among the top 10 news radio stations, said Zakusylo.

The media landscape presents publications with different ideological lines: pro-Russian, pro-Ukrainian, loyal to certain political forces, etc., yet audiences keep to their bubbles. Discussion platforms exist mostly in social media and in comment sections, where exchanges are often toxic. Zakusylo gave a lower score to the indicator on people's trust in facts forming their perspective, citing the rapid dissemination of fake news and myths about the pandemic — “an apolitical and vitally important topic.”

Belousov commented that the situation is slightly better on television, where dubious channels have hardcore — but smaller — audiences.

A few discussions on television present constructive dialogues and demonstrate respect for opposing opinions, but speakers frequently interrupt each other. Social media discussions are often marred by loutishness, amplified by the interference of bots, Velychko noted.

Kazanzhy expressed the opinion that a culture of debate is almost absent in Ukraine. The key ideological break-up in Ukrainian society is pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian, and it is impossible for the two sides to listen and hear each other, let alone sway anyone. Garmash said that media create opportunities, but that does not mean that people use them wisely. Sometimes opening platforms only increases tension and conflict, and social media algorithms further reinforce information bubbles.

The panelists were unanimous that unreliable and manipulative information shapes the views of most people. Judging by the *Behind the News* experience, Romanyuk said, people look for confirmation of their views and prejudices regardless of truth.

During election campaigns, *jeansa* and manipulative news tend to rise. News from oligarch-owned television channels supporting certain

political projects crowds out independent, reliable information, said Romanenko. Kisilyova pointed to credible data released by CSOs OPORA, Center of United Actions, and CHESNO movement, but questioned how many citizens rely on their findings.

According to IMI monitoring of *jeansa* in the third quarter of 2020, just 11 of the 50 most popular news sites presented no commissioned materials. The vast majority — 70 percent — of planted stories amounted to political *jeansa* surrounding local elections. The main commissioner was the OPFL party, accounting for 55 percent of political *jeansa*.²⁴

The pandemic showed how susceptible people are to conspiracy theories. Zakusylo pointed out that according to surveys in October 2020, 68 percent of Ukrainians recognized the danger of coronavirus. That number jumped to 78 percent in December.

According to Belousov, CSOs provide more balanced and reliable information. They conduct quality research and openly share the results as well as the methodology. Media often rely upon them as expert commentators. However, large media are not eager to tap CSOs in their coverage of important issues. Some panelists expressed the opinion that more media/CSO interaction could enrich programming currently cluttered with pseudo-experts. Velychko added that negative and critical information tend to provoke more of a reaction, so coverage of watchdog monitoring reports could engage audiences more than positive news on government achievements.

Nonetheless, the government takes into account civil society suggestions, Romanyuk said. And according to Kisilyova, people trust CSOs and volunteer organizations more than governmental bodies.

Torbich noted that Ukraine has numerous strong, influential organizations that actively cooperate with media and drive societal changes. These groups receive most funding from foreign donors. Civil society is not homogenous, though, and the panelists pointed out the dead weight of CSOs that exist only nominally.

²⁴ “Jeansa in Online Media. Monitoring Report for the 3rd Quarter of 2020,” Institute Mass Information, September 17, 2020. <https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/dzhynsa-v-onlajn-media-monitoryngovj-zvit-za-3-j-kvartal-2020-roku-i35097>

Romanyuk scored highly this indicator for reputable CSOs and think tanks that work openly and honestly and report publicly. Most of the fact-checkers, media literacy organizations, and media-monitoring groups are NGOs; and CSOs often take the lead in debunking disinformation. On the other hand, some oligarch channels, pro-Russian websites, and bloggers conduct campaigns discrediting CSOs and fact-checkers in particular, Romanyuk said.

Transformative Action Indicators

- Information producers and distribution channels enable or encourage information sharing across ideological lines.
- Individuals use quality information to inform their actions.
- Civil society uses quality information to improve communities.
- Government uses quality information to make public policy decisions.
- Information supports good governance and democratic rights.

For instance, ZIK channel conducted two day-long television marathons: “It Stinks of Soros” and “Sorosyatnya’s Revenge” in February and November 2020, respectively. Texty looked into the Russian media origins of the “*sorosyata*” (piglets of Soros) meme.²⁵ The intent was to hint that Ukraine is being governed externally and to stigmatize those allegedly funded by George Soros’s foundations. The meme also was a reference to the NGOs and media receiving Western donor support as well as politicians and officials that have studied in the West. Pro-Russian outlets in Ukraine amplified the term, now widely used by mainstream Ukrainian media.

In November 2020, the Ukrainian Helsinki Union, Zmina Human Rights Center, and IMI launched the Media Fuflo initiative to counteract campaigns discrediting civil society, naming the 18 worst offenders among media outlets. One such campaign attempted to smear a CSO advocating anti-tobacco legislation.

²⁵ “Fables about Soros. How Russian *desa* turned into an internal Ukrainian discourse,” Texty. December 9, 2020. <https://texty.org.ua/articles/102493/bajky-pro-sorosa-yak-rosijska-deza-peretvorylasja-na-vnutrishnoukrayinskyj-dyskurs/>

Sydorenko lowered his scores for the indicator now encompassing civic groups, trade unions, and religious organizations. Rather than counteracting disinformation, some religious groups are often the source of myths. Velychko emphasized that regional activists reported an increase of phony CSOs, dependent on politicians or even authorities. Bolshakova pointed to NUJU, which is a huge membership organization. Its management shifted to translate messages of certain political forces on behalf of the public.

Zakusylo added that Ukraine has many examples of CSOs founded by politicians to protect their interests. For instance, Medvedchuk leads the pro-Russian movement *Ukrainskiy Vybir* (Ukraine's Choice), which peddles Kremlin propaganda. Panelists also gave a few examples of CSOs that have spread fake news or shared unreliable data.

Most government actors do not disseminate misinformation — except pro-Russian elements, which spread falsehoods over local elections, or the threat of US biological labs in Ukraine. In fact, these labs monitor the destruction of biological weapons and conduct innocent research, according to Romanenko.

Civil servants or appointed officials provide more reliable information than politicians, said Kisilyova. Velychko added that press conferences, health ministry briefings, and other communications are not very informative. Often, government actions require explanation, but information is doled out sporadically and abruptly — and evidence cited is typically thin or untrustworthy.

Politicians often misinterpret or intentionally manipulate facts, take them out of context, and refer to low-quality or commissioned surveys, Romanyuk said. VoxCheck, which monitors and rates politicians by their lies and manipulations, reports that Ukraine's MPs promoted fake news stories about the pandemic, healthcare reform, bank reform, cooperation with the International Monetary Fund, utility payments, and

the sale of agricultural land.²⁶ Zaporozhchenko added campaign lies to that list.

Belousov noted that state officials announced plans to shift to communicating directly with their audience through social media. He said that the change is especially obvious when the president regularly publishes his video pieces, but such formats do not allow reference to quality facts or debating of decisions. In Rivne, Torbich said, local officials communicate a little better. For example, in reaction to a

Chetverta Vlada complaint, both the city and the oblast councils opened their sessions for media, after initially attempting to restrict their sessions amid the pandemic.

The new government reacts poorly to reports on corruption and abuse, said Sydorenko, who observed significant regression in the indicator on good governance and democratic rights over the

last year. However, he said he is sure that media coverage of corruption keeps it in check. The government's reaction to coverage of human rights violations and civil liberties is usually higher, but paradoxically, its influence on outcomes is lower, as society tends to be more tolerant of such abuses. Only massive pressure, in rare cases, forces the government to react adequately, Belousov said.

Activists use lawyers to follow up on investigation results or to monitor relevant law enforcement and judicial bodies, and periodically their efforts succeed. According to Torbich, at times media investigations have resulted in offenders losing their position or facing criminal proceedings, but a slim few face real punishment. For instance, *Suspilne* showed a documentary of patients' rights violated in Ostrog Psychiatric Hospital, but its director was reelected by the oblast council — though his unprofessionalism cost the institution more than UAH 7 million

“ The media landscape presents publications with different ideological lines...yet audiences keep to their bubbles. Discussion platforms exist mostly in social media and in comment sections, where exchanges are often toxic.

²⁶ “VoxCheck Reports on Popular Fakes and Manipulations Shared by MPs.” Internews, September 2, 2020. <https://internews.in.ua/news/voxcheck-reports-on-popular-fakes-and-manipulations-shared-by-mps/>

(\$253,860) to cover the hospital's debts on salaries.²⁷

In Sydorenko's opinion, the influence of quality publications on national elections is doubtless. But the local level has too few activists and influential outlets for publications, along with limited access to news information.

Local elections coverage was unbalanced and superficial, with little educational or analytical materials and a high amount of hidden advertising and planted stories, as an EU/Council of Europe media project in Ukraine concluded.²⁸ Moreover, the elections were not a news priority in local online media. Of 43,056 news items in 33 regional online media, fewer than six percent focused on the elections. However, the EU report highlighted that candidates who resort to "such dishonest methods of struggle," such as placing *jeansa*, did not always win the election.

The 66-observer mission from the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) concluded that voters seeking to make informed choices were missing "unbiased and balanced coverage" in the media and consumed "a high volume of unmarked promotional materials in broadcast media."

27 "Debt 'pit' of Ostroh psychiatric hospital," Fourth Power. December 12, 2020. <https://4vlada.com/borgova-iama-ostrozkoi-psyhiatrychnoi-likarni>

28 "Findings and conclusions of the media monitoring of local elections 2020," Council of Europe. November 27, 2020. https://www.coe.int/en/web/kyiv/news-event/news/-/asset_publisher/m9nDZlgeFMpW/content/findings-and-conclusions-of-the-media-monitoring-of-local-elections-2020

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