

AZERBAIJAN



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

2019

Tracking Development
of Sustainable
Independent Media
Around the World



IREX

AZERBAIJAN

AT A GLANCE

GENERAL

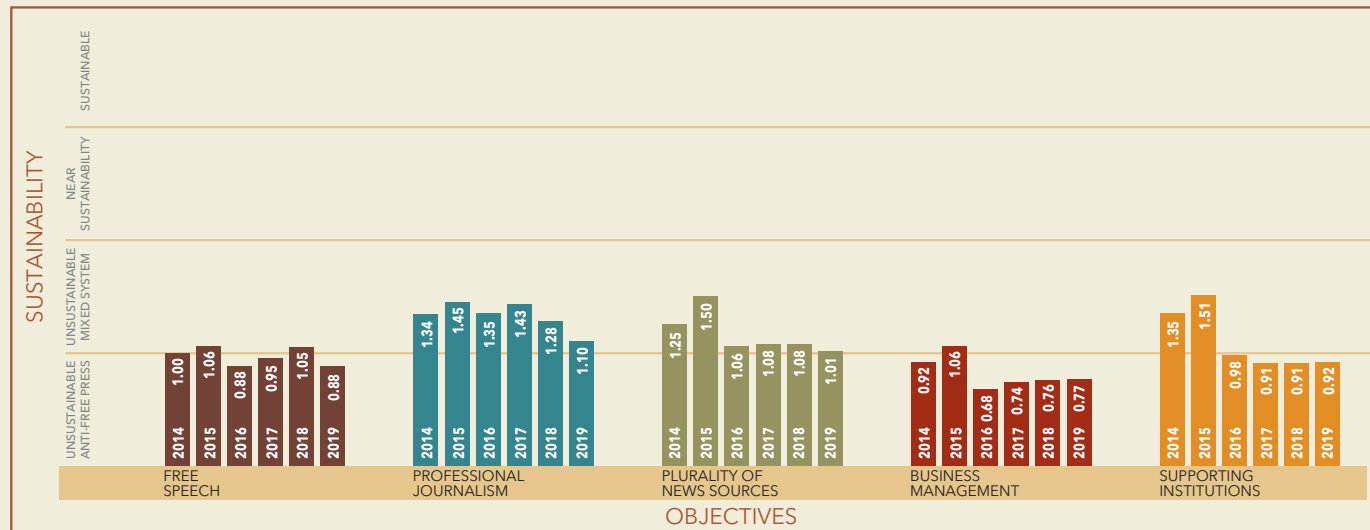
- **Population:** 10,046,516 (July 2018 est.)
- **Capital city:** Baku
- **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Azerbaijani 91.6%, Lezgian 2%, Russian 1.3%,
- **Armenian 1.3%, Talysh 1.3%, other 2.4%** (Note: almost all Armenians live in the separatist Nagorno-Karabakh region.) (*CIA World Factbook*, 2009 est.)
- **Religions (% of population):** Muslim 96.9%, Christian 3% (Note: Religious affiliation is still nominal in Azerbaijan; percentages for actual practicing adherents are much lower.) (*CIA World Factbook*, 2010 est.)
- **Languages (% of population):** Azerbaijani (Azeri) (official) 92.5%, Russian
- **1.4%, Armenian 1.4%, other 4.7%** (*CIA World Factbook*, 2009 est.)
- **GNI (2017):** \$40.8 billion (World Bank, Country at a Glance, 2018)
- **GNI per capita (2017):** \$4,080 (World Bank, Country at a Glance, 2018)
- **Literacy rate:** 99.8%; male 99.9%, female 99.7% (*CIA World Factbook*, 2016 est.)
- **President or top authority:** President Ilham Aliyev (since October 31, 2003)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- **Number of active media outlets (2017):** Print: 36 dailies, 100 weeklies, 85 monthlies; Radio Stations: 15; Television Stations: 23 (8 broadcasting nationwide, 15 regional)
- **Newspaper circulation statistics:** The most widely read publications are the opposition newspapers *Yeni Musavat* and *Bizim Yol*.
- **Broadcast ratings:** Not available.
- **News agencies:** Turan, Trend, APA (shut down on August 1, 2018), Day.Az, and 1news.az (all private); Azertag (state-owned)
- **Annual advertising revenue in media sector in 2016:** \$40.2 million (State Statistics Committee 2017 Yearbook)

1 The State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan no longer provides this information and it is impossible to find it elsewhere.

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: AZERBAIJAN



SCORE KEY

Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1): Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2): Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3): Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3-4): Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

Scores for all years may be found online at <https://www.irex.org/msi>



Azerbaijan's MSI score dropped to 0.94 this year, down from 1.02. The plurality of news objective took the largest hit as many independent media news sites are blocked, and even more were blocked in 2018. Legal changes that brought back military censorship and the elimination of requiring public officials to disclose public information caused a significant decrease in the freedom of speech objective. These factors coupled with low levels of justice for imprisoned journalists, a public that is susceptible to propaganda, and a weak media market moved Azerbaijan back into the unsustainable category this year.

Azerbaijan's media situation stayed stagnant in 2018, compared with the previous year. The national administration and legislation degraded, becoming more restrictive in all spheres. The laws that were adopted in 2017, which envisioned the enforcement of unconstitutional censorship during military operations, were further strengthened in May 2018 by applying similar changes to the Law on Mass Information. These changes made it possible for both the Ministry of Defense to censor any news or outlet that is covering active military operations or war. The Law on Access to Information also became more restrictive, making it more difficult to get public information through an amendment that made the disclosure of information subject to approval of the agency that, according to legislation, owns, controls, or releases the information, thus eliminating the legal obligation to disclose public information.

The number of blocked local websites has reached 85, compared with 25 last year. Although the president signed a large pardon act on March 16, 2019, that released many political prisoners, some journalists—including prominent ones like Seymour Hazi and Afghan Mukhtarli—remain behind bars. The government has also criminally investigated media outlets that have written about events in Ganja, the country's second largest city, where there was an attempted assassination against the governor

and clashes between angry crowds and police in mid-2018. Authorities also tried to keep prominent video blogger Mehman Huseynov in jail. He was arrested on libel charges in 2017 and was supposed to finish his sentence in March 2019. However, mass protests—both in the country and abroad by citizens and international organizations—shelved this plan, and he was released as scheduled.

Despite being owned by a powerful line minister, a major news agency, Azeri Press Agency (APA), was forced to shut down in summer 2018 after a clear political decision from the top. New and significantly high import tariffs were introduced for smartphones brought into the country on an individual basis, making them less affordable for people whose income has already been shattered by two major currency devaluations in 2016, along with continued worsening of the economy due to low oil prices. The ban on drones imported for personal use remained in place.

New media outlets that have appeared this year—such as Real TV, which employs some crew members from the previously shuttered Azerbaijan News Service (ANS) channel—have functioned more as an extension of state television rather than as independent channels, mostly praising the government for the majority of its policies and actions.

**OBJECTIVE 1:
FREEDOM OF
SPEECH**

0.88

Although the Azerbaijani constitution guarantees freedom of speech, the actual practice is less protected. Events of the past decade have demonstrated that changes to the constitution can be made by political force within the government. The most recent changes emerged from a highly disputed referendum in 2016 and included an extension of the presidential term from five to seven years. Problems faced by society cause serious public outcry only on social media, and the practical significance of this is very questionable because people do not go beyond social media to file an official complaint. Unfortunately, society does not regard freedom of speech as necessary. Courts remain unfree and make decisions that undermine the rule of law.

In 2018, constraints on the legal environment for media continued. In February 2017, the country adopted changes to the Law on Military Status, which returned military censorship to the country's legislation for the first time since 1998, despite the prohibition of state censorship in Article 50 of the constitution. On May 1, 2018, a line was added to Article 7 of the Law on Mass Information, further increasing military and special operations censorship "where a military situation is applied," such as Nagorno-Karabakh or operations targeting alleged religious radicals. A similar amendment was made to the Law on Broadcasting, running counter to Azerbaijan's commitment to eradicating official forms of censorship as part of the country's admission to the Council of Europe in 2001.

Changes to the Law on Access to Information have made it even more difficult to get access to

public information. The 29th and 30th articles of the law, adopted in 2005, mandated public offices to disclose publicly available information. On June 29, 2018, an amendment was made to Article 30 that eliminated this requirement and instead makes the disclosure subject to approval of the agency that, according to legislation, owns, controls, or releases information, thus effectively eliminating the legal obligation to disclose public information. One panelist anticipates this will particularly impact the ability to obtain information about the spending of public funds.

Although the Rules on Ensuring Information Security During Criminal Investigations in Communication Networks was amended by presidential decree on January 26, 2018, the essence of the change was not made public. This drew the ire of civil society, as personal data were breached frequently over the year. Mobile phone data from citizens are monitored, and information is shared between agencies without any court order or investigation. People near non-military areas of occupied territories, for example, receive SMS texts from the Defense Ministry telling them not to discuss military affairs via phone.

The constitution guarantees citizens the rights to both free speech and assembly, but legal norms that regulate gatherings and street rallies make it almost impossible to exercise these rights. A law adopted in May 2018 further restricts these rights by citing numerous buildings and "strategic" areas where gatherings are not allowed within 150 meters. Additionally, protests must take place 200 meters from government buildings, making it impossible to organize rallies anywhere in central Baku and Nakhichevan. The organizers of rallies and public gatherings must also submit a letter to city authorities at least five days before any event. In practice, local authorities can reject the application,

change venues or routes, and require organizers to submit slogans and chants for the event in advance.

The mainstream news media remain under strict control of the ruling elites, and even private television and radio stations are under some sort of government control. One panelist repeated a widely held claim that President Ilham Aliyev's aid, Ali Hasanov, controls most of the private radio and television stations via family businesses: Shamkhal Hasanov, his son, owns Araz FM radio, and Sona Valiyeva, his wife, is the founder of the newspaper *Kaspi* and a member of the board that oversees state broadcasting. The *Kaspi* Global company, also owned by the Hasanov family, regularly receives state television's most profitable orders.

Formally, crimes against media professionals, citizen reporters, and other journalists should be prevented and prosecuted. But the majority of political prisoners in the country are either journalists or have been targeted for their freedom of expression in media.

Alternative, independent broadcast TV and websites cannot directly air in Azerbaijan. As a result, pro-opposition websites try to reach audiences online, primarily via social media like Facebook and, more recently, YouTube. The government has blocked many of these sites, including the Prague-based Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Azerbaijani service website; the Berlin-based Meydan.tv website; the Paris-based Turan.tv; and two local websites, azadliq.info and abzas.net, which have been in Azerbaijani territory since 2017. The website for the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) was

also blocked in Azerbaijan after the publication of “The Azerbaijan Laundromat,” which implicated the Azerbaijani ruling elite, including the president’s family, in a global corruption scheme.

On February 5, President Ilham Aliyev unexpectedly called for a snap presidential election; it was held on April 11, six months before the originally scheduled October. Real opposition candidates boycotted the election, and the “challengers” were essentially puppet candidates who supported Aliyev. Ilgar Mammadov, the chairman of the Republican Alternative Party and a true opponent of Aliyev, was incarcerated during the elections. Ultimately, Aliyev won with 86 percent of the vote in an election the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) called flawed and undemocratic.

Formally, crimes against media professionals, citizen reporters, and other journalists should be prevented and prosecuted. But the majority of political prisoners in the country are either journalists or have been targeted for their freedom of expression in media. At least 12 journalists are still serving long-term sentences, including Afghan Mukhtarli (Meydan TV, Institute of War and Peace Reporting), Mehman Huseynov (Institute for Reporters’ Freedom and Safety), and Seymur Hazi and Ziya Asadli (*Azadlyg* newspaper).

As of 2018, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technologies has blocked 85 websites without a proper court decision, up from 25 in 2017. Several websites blocked in 2018, including Arqument.az, challenged the decision in the court in August. The court upheld the blocking of each site, except for Arqument.az—a rare success for an independent media outlet. The ministry also does not disseminate the list of blocked resources, as is required, and thus continues to function as a non-transparent censorship body.

Legal and social norms protect and promote free speech and access to public information.

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS

- ▶ Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- ▶ Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- ▶ Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- ▶ Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- ▶ State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- ▶ Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- ▶ Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- ▶ Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- ▶ Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

Editorial independence of media is not respected. One of the most disturbing examples in 2018 happened after the assassination attempt of the mayor of Ganja, the second largest city in Azerbaijan. After the assassination attempt, the suspect was assaulted at the police station, spurring protests downtown, where two police officers were killed. Editors and the heads of online media outlets reporting on the events were called to the General Prosecutor’s Office, threatened with arrest, and warned about their published stories; specifically, editors were warned about their published stories about the incident, which mostly covered stories about the mayor’s irresponsible activities and why

people were happy about the attempt on his life. At the end of 2018, criminal charges were filed against the heads of bastainfo.com and criminal.az for “spreading open calls against the state” and “violation of official duties.”

In 2018, several journalists were charged with defamation. Azerbaijan’s most prominent video blogger, Mehmen Huseynov, was slated to be released on March 2, 2019, after being found guilty in 2017 and sentenced to two years’ imprisonment; however, at the end of 2018, he was charged with assaulting a prison warden and faced additional time in prison. Since Huseynov had previously reported on corruption by government officials, civil society activists and his lawyer felt the 2018 assault charge was merely an attempt to keep him away from reporting. After Huseynov went on a hunger strike, protests and rallies by activists, and statements from international organizations (Reporters Without Borders, OSCE, and the EU), the assault charges were dropped on January 24, 2019 and was released as originally scheduled on March 2, 2019.

Although there are formal licensing procedures, the process is not entirely open. This is a serious obstacle to the development of broadcast media in the country. “While there are numerous national broadcasting channels, our country has a serious lack of creative and quality content on them,” one panelist explained. The National Television and Radio Council (NTRC), the agency that approves frequencies and issues licenses, continues to act in a secretive way. It has also been led by the same chairman for 16 years. Despite legal requirements, the NTRC has not published a single competition announcement for vacant frequencies. No clear explanations are provided when applications for licensing are rejected or, in some cases, never answered. The NTRC also does not provide information about the ownership or founders/

board of directors of licensed stations, a measure that is supposed to help prevent monopolization in broadcasting. One new license administered in 2018 was to a new channel called REAL Analysis Information Center, run by Mirshahin Aghayev, the former vice president of the now-defunct ANS Media Holding. On his new channel, he serves as an anchor for a Sunday evening show, where he targets and insults critics of the government.

A pressing issue for journalists, particularly freelancers, is the trend of being approached by police and plain-clothed officers asking for a press card. If a journalist has no proof that he/she is a journalist, it can delay reporting and, in the worst-case scenario, force the journalist to visit the police station. Police officers do not always recognize or understand the concept of freelance journalism and often request documents to prove that a reporter is part of a registered media outlet. This makes blogging, freelance work, and citizen journalism even more difficult.

The market can be difficult for broadcast and print media to access. Creating an Internet website is relatively free, and no license is required. There are no significant tax benefits for media outlets.

The NTRC donated AZN 3 million (\$1.8 million) to private broadcasters from the state budget on January 30, 2018—600,000 manats (\$352,000) for each broadcaster. The listed purpose was “assistance to nationally broadcasting channels in switching to the AzerSpace1 satellite.” According to the news, the funding was divided equally among Space TV, Lider TV, ARB TV, ATV, and Khazar TV, all of which are either owned or managed by ruling elites or their relatives—including Space TV, which is

owned by the president’s sister, and Lider TV, which is owned by the president’s second cousin.

At the end of 2018, presidential aide Ali Hasnov fired the director of public television, Jamil Guliyev, and replaced him with Balakishi “Balash” Gasimov, a television personality from the state-run AzTV. Gasimov’s hiring did not follow the replacement procedures mandated by the Law on Public Broadcasting. After blowback from civil society and media experts, the NTRC announced a hiring process for the job, only to re-hire Gasimov a month later. One panelist noted that this demonstrates how there is nothing “public” about the channel. “The people on the managing council of ITV have little weight in society and lack independent thinking, television broadcasting experience, or even an elementary understanding,” another panelist said.

Journalists do not have easy access to public officials to get information. At first glance, it seems that officials are answering questions from most critical media outlets. However, most officials do not directly answer questions and simply change the topics. Professional journalists do search for other sources and can produce detailed material, but often one journalist alone cannot get all the answers.

It also remains difficult for independent journalists to register to attend government events, as they are required to present a card from the media entity they represent, which is not something freelancers have. As of 2015, entrance examinations for journalists still require a talent exam, though more than half of the applicants² did not show up for the tests the first year they were applied.

**OBJECTIVE 2:
PROFESSIONAL
JOURNALISM**

1.10

Each year, the media landscape in the country looks more and more pro-government. The Azerbaijani government promoted or allowed popular journalist Mirshahin Aghayev to launch a new television channel. Aghayev was previously a leading anchor and vice president of ANS TV, which was shut down in 2016 after its Washington D.C.-based correspondent interviewed Fetullah Gulen, a Turkish cleric accused in the Turkish coup attempt of 2016. This decision was likely made under the influence of Turkish President Tayyip Recep Erdogan. ANS TV launched as an independent commercial channel in 1991 but became strongly pro-government after 2003. Still, it was more functional and flexible than state or oligarch-owned television stations. “It seems that even such a degree of loyalty is not acceptable by the ruling elite,” said one panelist.

Unlike ANS TV, the new Real TV is purely propagandist media, with a name thought to be purposely confusing to the public. In Azerbaijan, the original Real brand belongs to a new political party, the Republican Alternative, headed by Ilgar Mammadov, who served five years in prison before winning an appeal at the European Human Rights Court (ECHR). According to Thomas De Waal, a senior fellow with Carnegie Europe, the historical and main Azerbaijani opposition parties, the Musavat and the Popular Front, are “useful contrasts” to Aliev’s regime. In De Waal’s words, “The Real is more serious.”

Another pro-government, but more “open-minded,” media outlet, APA Holding,

¹ <https://sputnik.az/life/20190205/419257752/azerbaycan-televiziya-pul-ayirmaq.html?fbclid=IwAR0hGSYGNmAGgeRx5pWpNWo2YO7sL8jI8XLUK2EefSiKJLxeAmk3U8LgSI>

² <https://report.az/media/jurnalistika-ixtisasina-qabililyet-ımtahani/>

suddenly stopped its activity, without explanation, in mid-August 2018. Later, it became clear that the agency misquoted the president's remarks on Armenia, although it immediately corrected the quote. The head of the holding, Vusala Mahirgyzy, complained on social media about "dirty games" against her organization and said that the mistake occurred in translating the quote to Russian. The outlet remained dysfunctional, and a month later APA Holding, which employed 187 staff members, officially "closed."

According to one panelist, professionalism in the country is deplorable. "Most of the people in journalism come with a background that has no relation to journalism," said one panelist. "There are no standards for job interviews or hiring for vacancies anywhere in the sector. Employers also have no tools to measure the knowledge of applicants."

A handful of independent and objective media outlets check information with at least two to three sources of information. Professional reporters and editors consult with experts and carry out necessary investigations into stories.

It has been years since the Professional Code of Ethics for Journalists was adopted in Azerbaijan. There are some improvements in this area, but they are not always positive. Journalists following the requirements of the code are mostly professional media representatives from independent media organizations. However, journalists from television and radio have repeatedly violated the ethics codes in recent years; for example, hosts have insulted or

ridiculed audience members.

The positions of opposing sides are not provided, and official statements of law-enforcement agencies are published as is. Presumption of innocence is not observed, which in turn leads to cases in which the ECHR repeatedly penalizes the Azerbaijani state. When state-controlled media report on sensitive subjects, they still do not mention any rebuttal or reversal of the case by the ECHR, fearing blowback from the state.

There are no independent print media in the country. The state-financed Media Support Fund provides support to government and pro-government print media outlets. Newspapers are unable to engage in the advertising market independently because of businesses that are under the control of public officials and oligarchs.

The government applied new and significantly higher import tariffs on smartphones, one of the most common pieces of technology used by journalists. The new tariffs, which went into effect on August 2, 2018, are rated in relation to the price of the international mobile equipment number (IMEI), as opposed to the previous flat fee of AZN 5 (\$3.00) for any phone. If a smartphone costs more than AZN 500 (\$300) with two GSM card slots, it is an additional AZN 300 (\$175) for the IMEI registration. Experts believe that these new tariffs will limit the access of journalists and social media activists to modern devices and will slow down the country's technological development. According to them, these tariffs also serve the interests of the companies that have monopolized cell phone sales in the country.

The ban on the import of drones, the most up-to-date filming technology, remains, and no media organization can report using drones. However, drones are used extensively to film weddings in restaurants owned by the oligarchs, despite the ban. Furthermore, experts also believe

that the use of drones will become a criminal offense in the article of the criminal code regarding protection of privacy.

Except for online media aired from abroad through satellite and the Internet, nearly all in-country media practiced some form of self-censorship in 2018. Journalists are systematically questioned or interrogated by the police and prosecutor's office, causing fear that leads to self-censorship. Under different pretexts, people are persecuted and even imprisoned for expressing their thoughts on social media.

Almost all public websites, which should provide free information, ask additional questions of the user that are not required by law. These online applications are all formed in a way that is contradictory to the law.

Journalism meets professional standards of quality.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS

- ▶ Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- ▶ Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- ▶ Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- ▶ Journalists cover key events and issues.
- ▶ Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- ▶ Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- ▶ Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- ▶ Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

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Double-digit inflation in the country, paired with two devaluations of the national currency in 2016 and no increase in journalists' salaries since then, have made 2018 extremely difficult for journalists.

There are also specialized journalists covering specific issues, such as economics, health, business, and education. However, there are just a few platforms willing to publish objective and analytical articles. Internet regulation and pressure from the government remain major issues in the country.

According to one panelist, professionalism in the country is deplorable. "Most of the people in journalism come with a background that has no relation to journalism," said one panelist. "There are no standards for job interviews or hiring for vacancies anywhere in the sector. Employers also have no tools to measure the knowledge of applicants." This impacts the quality of the press and broadcasting. As of 2015, there is just one journalism school in the country, Baku State University. Although it produces a certain number of journalists every year, these graduates lack the skills and training necessary to meet the requirements of the labor market. In terms of remuneration, journalists receive an average of AZN 400 to AZN 800 (\$235 to \$470) per month, one of the most underpaid jobs in the country.

The fairness and objectivity of reporting, the availability of modern and efficient media facilities/equipment, and the existence of quality niche reporting and programming were difficult factors for some panelists to assess. They could not choose whether to score based on the hundreds of media outlets in the country, both traditional and online, or the few outlets that are independent, unbiased, and professional. For example, independent media, facing staunch pressure, have neither the offices nor equipment to meet current technological standards. However, state- and oligarch-owned media have the

most up-to-date equipment.

Azerbaijani television channels are in a better position to educate people, as they can easily "enter" into people's homes. However, television channels broadcast news that is either biased or half-true, or they simply do not report on controversial stories at all. Moreover, entertainment content and news are not balanced. One panelist cited the programs of three major national channels programming on January 14, 2019 as an example:

- Space TV: 19 shows were broadcast for the day, only six of which were news programs or contained news;
- ATV: 41 shows were broadcast for the day, only 12 of which were news programs or contained news;
- ARB: 21 shows were broadcast for the day, only eight of which were news programs or contained news

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS

1.01

Access to independent news sources in Azerbaijan gets more limited from year to year. Because the Internet is the main method of accessing alternative sources of information, restricting access to independent news portals severely limits the plurality of news. In mid-2018, the Ministry of Transport, Communications and High Technology launched a new wave of blocking independent news sites, including bastainfo.com, criminalaz.com, topxeber.az, gununsesi.az, and fia.az, without any court order, after a request from the Prosecutor General's Office. The popular pro-government APA news agency ceased its activities in 2018 after administrative interference.

Azadlyg Radiosu—the Azerbaijan service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, based in Prague, that has played a significant role in Azerbaijan's media landscape in the past several decades—has remained marginalized with its website blocked; its Baku bureau closed in 2014. BBC Azeri boasts a small team and few resources and operates only as a website, though it is accessible in Azerbaijani territory. Panelists mentioned that Berlin-based Meydan TV feels more like a political participant and does not meet professional standards of quality.

Journalists' ability to receive information from objective and numerous sources remains limited. As such, it is rare to find original, carefully investigated, and analytical material in local media or news agencies. Journalists also face some difficulties in filming on-the-street interviews, with many respondents refusing to participate for fear of persecution, though there are some courageous people who will speak their minds on controversial issues. Still, journalists usually have to spend more time filming and interviewing more people than necessary in order to obtain meaningful material for the final product.

The level of media literacy of the citizenry also appears to be a serious problem. The Azerbaijani audience tends to believe most propaganda and false material with which it is presented. An expert on the panel suggested integrating the subject into the upper classes of secondary schools.

Access to international media is free, but the number of those who benefit from it is quite limited. Traditionally, when one says "international media," many Azerbaijanis think of Russian television

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channels, which report a large amount of unverified or biased information, or Turkish news channels.

Multiple news sources provide citizens with reliable and objective news.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS

- ▶ A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- ▶ Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- ▶ Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- ▶ Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- ▶ State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- ▶ A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.
- ▶ Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings, circulation figures, and Internet statistics are reliable.

According to one panelist, in the event of a serious event locally or regionally, an Azerbaijani citizen has no objective and reliable source of information. In recent years, social media have begun to fill this gap, with eyewitness reports from those who are in the middle of such an event. This, of course, can make it difficult to determine what is true and what is not.

The level of media literacy of the citizenry also appears to be a serious problem. The Azerbaijani audience tends to believe most propaganda and false material with which it is presented. An expert

on the panel suggested integrating the subject into the upper classes of secondary schools.

The Turan Information Agency remains the country's only independent news agency. Its director, Mehman Aliyev, was facing a lengthy prison term in August 2017 under charges of tax evasion and abuse of power; human rights organizations described the charges as politically motivated. After condemnation and threats of sanctions from Western governments, including the United States, prosecutors dropped the charges and allowed the agency to resume its activities.

Independent media prepare and publish professional materials, including audio, video, and photos. Mainstream and oligarch-owned media prepare their own news, but the material is generally biased and one-sided.

The media partially cover local, national, and international issues, unless a story touches Azerbaijan's interests or leadership, in which case the news exclusively reflects the government's point of view. Rural areas tend to lack media outlets, and the few that do exist are under the control of the government and local authorities. The only exception is Cənib Xəbərləri (Southern News), a newspaper from the southern Masalli district. Still, one panelist said, "It gets a lot of disturbance from local authorities."

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

0.77

Although the legal and political constraints on freedom of expression are the largest adverse factor in media independence, the weak market in Azerbaijan also has a major impact. Media outlets are unable to be financially independent

or durable, with even pro-government media feeling the heat. The decision to shut down APA Holding over political reasons has impacted more than 200 employees working at agencies and web portals within the company.

Media funding in Azerbaijan is not transparent. Only public television and Azertaj (the State News Agency) have a clear funding source—the national budget. AzTV, a state broadcaster from the Soviet era, was turned into a closed joint-stock company in 2005 with no explanation as to why the transformation occurred. Meanwhile, the newly founded Real TV's website³ offers no information on its financial sources. Despite being founded by the Report Information Agency, a company established by the state oil company SOCAR, it is registered as an independent agency. SOCAR did not include expenses related to this agency in its most recent financial reports.

The primary source of the media's income is direct and indirect funding from the government. The government allocated AZN 57,721,175.0 (\$33,849,100) for radio, television, and print media in 2018.

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³ <https://www.realtv.az/>

and financial sustainability plans. Most importantly, they also do not consider advertising due to existing political pressures. These media organizations mostly survive on donations and financial assistance, usually without any impact on editorial policies from the donors; however, occasional sympathy for certain political groups can be detected.

Media entities do not have accurate information about their target audiences—primarily because there are no organizations or firms that provide such research and information, either for a fee or free—and media outlets do not conduct such research on their own. In many instances, television programs are designed chaotically or based on intuition. Recently, media outlets have been trying to expand their audience and gain feedback through activities on social networks. Usually, business plans are not drafted, and start-up projects are not common in broadcast media.

Independent media are well-managed businesses, allowing editorial independence.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS

- ▶ Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- ▶ Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- ▶ Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- ▶ Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- ▶ Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- ▶ Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- ▶ Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

According to some media managers, said one panelist, the volume of the advertising media market in Azerbaijan is about AZN 20 million to AZN 25 million (\$11.72 million to \$14.66 million), a small amount for a competitive, or even average, media industry.

**OBJECTIVE 5:
SUPPORTING
INSTITUTIONS**

0.92

Azerbaijan still lacks traditional trade unions among journalists, which is a major source of other problems in the industry. Journalism organizations have difficulty showing solidarity for the profession.

One legal expert on the panel thinks it is important to view the lack of established and functioning trade unions for the interests of television and radio broadcasters and newspaper owners in the context of Azerbaijani laws on the rights of organizations to associate. Currently, the Law on NGOs (Public Associations and Funds), the Law on Registration and State Registry of Legal Entities, and the Law on Trade Unions regulate establishing and functioning of professional associations. However, these laws do not allow for the smooth and unlimited state registration of public associations, including media organizations. This, in turn, leads to registration of these bodies with the Ministry of Justice, which is dependent on the consent of authorities. For example, the Union of Editors—which has supported the publication, dissemination, and advertisement of opposition and independent newspapers—has repeatedly applied for registration with the Ministry of Justice but has never received it.

In 2005, after the adoption of the Law on

Access to Information, information sharing worked relatively well through the creation of Internet portals or by sending inquiries. At the time, civil society was active, and many local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Media Rights Institute, sought to educate journalists and taught the relevant procedures. Currently, only a limited number of NGOs that educate journalists exist, and their ability to do so is limited.

“Journalism education programs, especially those in public universities, have to go through serious reforms,” said one panelist with experience in media education. Even the most basic skills required in the industry are not taught to students. Student-run media are non-existent, and there are no practical models for students to learn from. Because of this, the young people who do not learn the required skills for the labor market eventually have to change careers.

The panelists agree that multiple, short-term trainings in journalism can or should be offered. According to them, these often formal exercises from international media organizations are usually both productive and helpful and also offer flexible scheduling for practicing journalists.

“Journalism education programs, especially those in public universities, have to go through serious reforms,” said one panelist with experience in media education.

There are very few independent and professional training centers, though there are some, including the Baku School of Journalism and the School of Democracy. Those that do exist offer skills training in such subjects as writing, multimedia, ethics, and more.

Supporting institutions function in the professional interests of independent media.

- SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:**
- ▶ Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
 - ▶ Professional associations work to protect journalists' rights.
 - ▶ Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
 - ▶ Sources of newsprint NGOs support free speech and independent media.
 - ▶ Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
 - ▶ Printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
 - ▶ Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.
 - ▶ Information and communication technology infrastructure sufficiently meets the needs of media and citizens.

In most cases, it is possible to purchase equipment locally or import it from abroad, though sometimes it is necessary to keep secret which outlet ordered the equipment. As noted earlier, the import of drones is an exception and is restricted for both journalists and citizens. These limitations exist only for independent journalists; there are no restrictions for government-run outlets or their journalists.

Due to 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 sector.