Strengthening Media Systems Activity (SMS)

DEMAND-SIDE STUDY
"Comprehensive Study of the Public's Media Needs and Behaviors in Serbia"

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Abstract:
Key Findings from the Media Demand-side Study for the SMS Project

The goal of the USAID Strengthening Media Systems (SMS) project is to improve the legislative, regulatory, and economic environment for Serbia's media. This goal was crafted to provide **Serbian citizens** with the information needed to enable them to effectively engage in **informed citizenship** and **hold their government accountable**. The program theory of change describes how programmatic inputs will lead to this goal:

> *If relationships within the media system are strengthened and the capacities of system actors are improved, the Serbian media system will be able to develop a more favorable enabling environment and adapt to the realities of the digital market, enabling diverse, objective, and professional news and information to survive and thrive in Serbia's media market.*

With this in mind, IREX worked with CeSID to produce this "Comprehensive Study of the Public's Media Needs and Behaviors in Serbia" ('Demand-side Study') to inform the work of SMS and enable its partners and beneficiaries to tailor their development in more targeted ways. SMS will use this study's datasets to provide its primary target group with programmatic solutions and tools for improving content quality and delivery, and monetizing it through various means, including paywalls, memberships and donations, as well as advertising sales.

The Strengthening Media Systems project recognizes that increased audience engagement, in terms of quality and quantity, is one of the key long-term strategies for financial sustainability of media. As such, audiences should be the most reliable and measurable capital of media outlets. Utilization of that capital in a wider array of possible digital revenue streams (from ad inventory sales and membership models to crowdfunding) should be the main vehicle for media business development.

Following these guidelines, this study was specfically intended to:

1. Provide comprehensive insight into the public's media consumption patterns, and its underlying causes: a) values; b) needs and interests, particularly regarding media content; c) motivation and aspirations, with specific emphasis on buying media content; d) financial functioning and attitudes towards different types of payment systems, etc. and
2. Provide comprehensive analysis and recommendations to inform the SMS programmatic approach in all aspects of media sustainability, as well as to inform organizational and business strategies and tactics of different types of media outlets on the local, regional and national levels.

The research implemented in 2019 combined a variety of methods (both quantitative and qualitative) and techniques (a face-to-face-survey and computer-assisted web interviewing, or CAWI), and targeted a number of groups – a representative sample of 1500 respondents age 15 to 65 for the face-to-face survey, a sample of 100 daily internet users for web interviews, and 96 internet and local media users aged 15 to 65 for the 12 focus group discussions in Belgrade, Niš, Kragujevac, Novi Sad, Sombor, Loznica, and Zaječar.

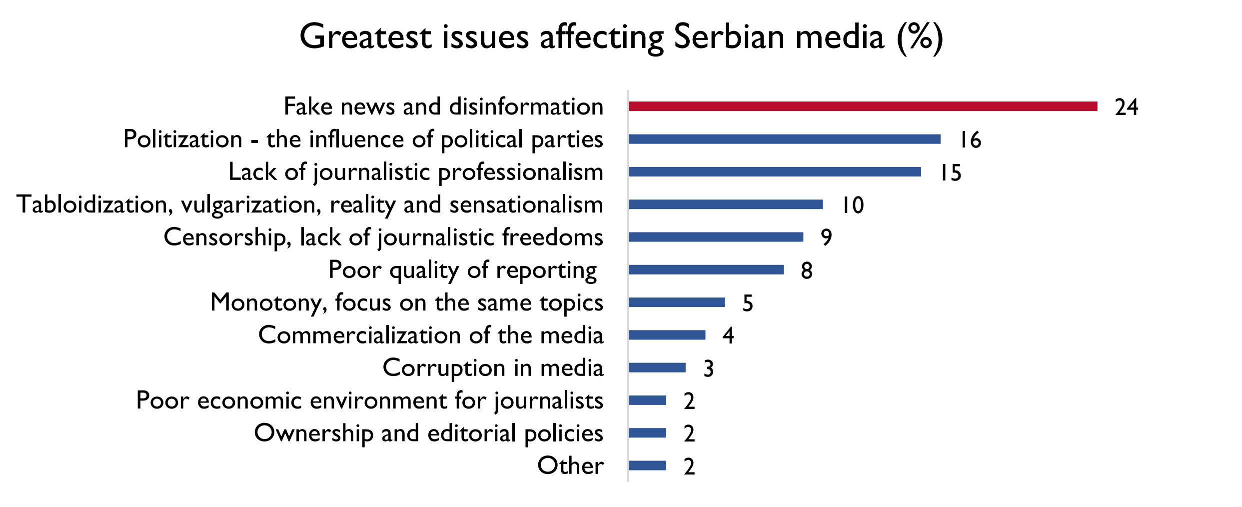
The key aim of the research was to gain an in-depth understanding of the needs, habits, and expectations of the audience, in order to facilitate rational and informed discussion about the media sector and public attitudes; and strategic decision-making by media businesses, with the starting assumption that understanding audience needs and profiling target groups constitutes integral parts of any media business strategy in terms of both preparing and formatting media content. Thus, the Study was structured to facilitate the achievement of SMS objectives and to provide directions for SMS strategic and operational

interventions in the following areas: **1. Content production and editorial policy, 2. Content sources and formats, 3. Interaction and community involvement, and 4. Financial sustainability.**

1. Content production and editorial policy

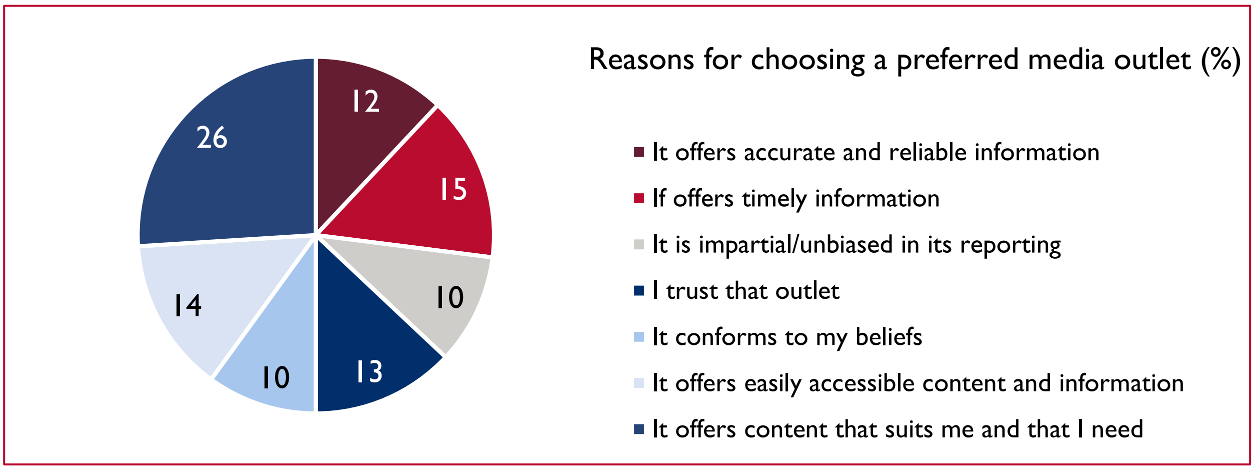
1.1. In aggregate, 28% of all respondents were dissatisfied with the performance of journalists, with 15% citing insufficient professionalism, 8% reporting poor quality features, and 5% complaining about monotonous content. According to the findings, other problems are 'fake news' and misinformation (as reported by 24% of those polled) and the influence of political parties (16%). Also ranked highly are the increasing presence of 'tabloid' or 'vulgar' content (10%) and the lack of media freedom (9%).

SMS has been providing comprehensive tailor-made support to online media outlets in Serbia and at least 25 will be supported in the Year 3. In our project approach, quality content production is seen as a sine qua non of media long-term sustainability and the growth of the media sector in general.



1.2. Regarding specific reasons for the selection of a preferred media outlet, content is the key factor in selection, as reported by 26% of those polled. Local topics that they reported preferring are sporting events and local cultural events. The other reasons are distributed rather evenly, meaning that editorial policy should take them all into account. The primary factors are: timely information (15%), easily accessible content (15%), trust in the media outlet (13%), and accurate and reliable information (12%). The SMS project also recognizes that many of the participants in the study hail from localities where no engaging local media sources are available, so their reported preferences may also reflect a lack of understanding or vision for what local media outlets can or could offer.

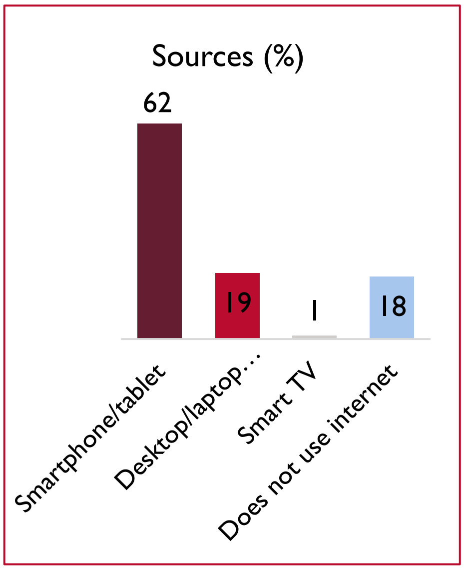
SMS work with editors and journalists will enhance media outlets' capacity to produce mainstream content that combines regional coverage (issues of regional importance) with topics close to the local community, such as (as revealed by this research) local public services and utilities, weather, local culture, local entertainment and heritage, and local security.

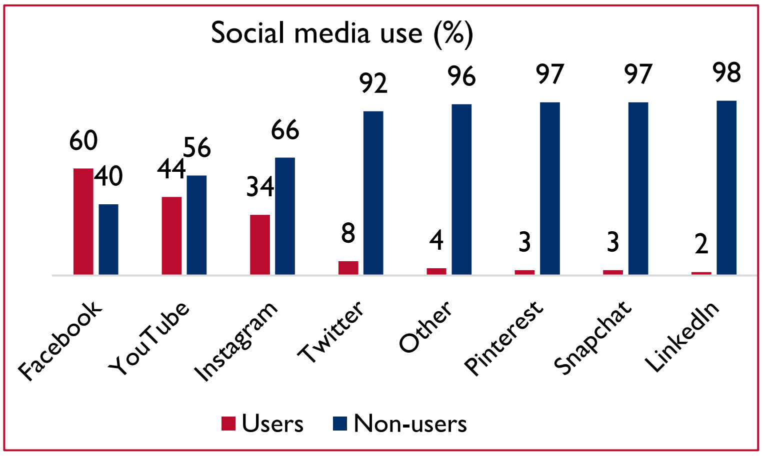


2. Content sources and formats

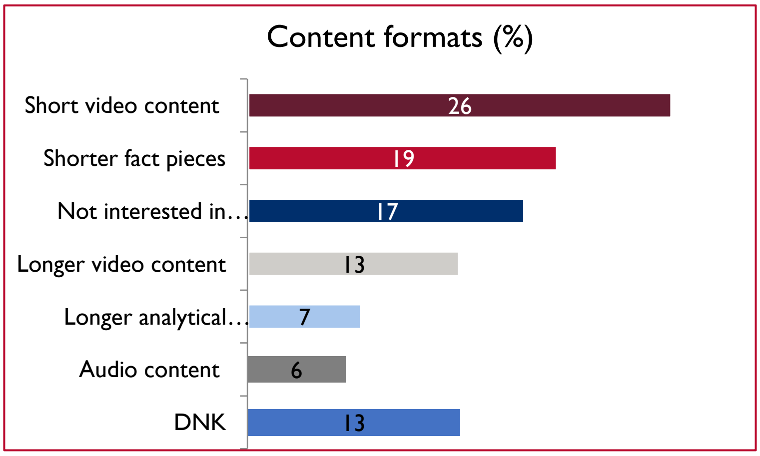
Respondents generally go online on their mobile phones or tablets, as reported by a significant majority (62%), as opposed to 19% who do so on their desktop computers.

Facebook is used by 60% of the population, YouTube by 44%, and Instagram by 34%. Twitter is used by only 8% of population but is perceived as an important network in Serbia because of the user structure - Twitter is a network used by a large number of decision-makers.





When it comes to online media, the respondents insisted on appropriate and timely coverage of emerging news and well-designed and accessible web sites where all relevant content is only a click away, and at the same time, they prefer short video content and short text formats.



SMS will provide support to a number of online media in mobile optimization in order to successfully reach new target groups/audience. In addition, since a major share of the audiences uses several media at the same time, assistance in adapting formats to shorter attention spans will be provided to online media.

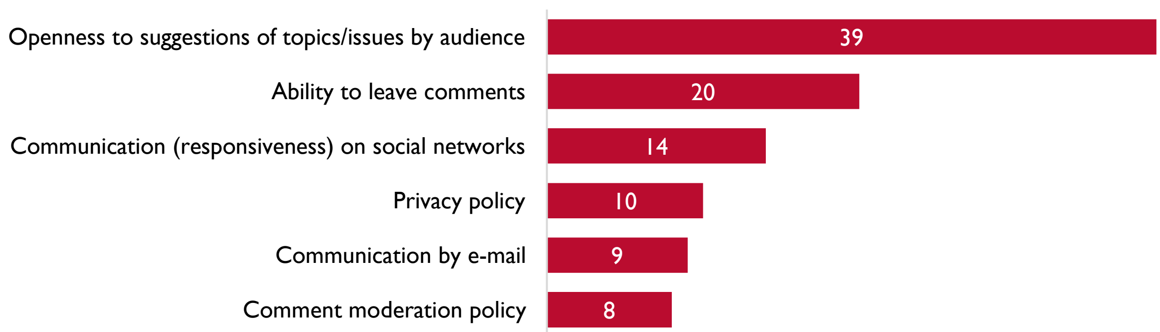
Additional support will be provided in developing effective communication strategies and social media outreach, as well as well-targeted content format development and use. Support will be provided to the local media for developing applications, platforms, or notification system to serve as guides to content for audiences at the local or regional level (power cuts, road closures, traffic information, concerts, cultural events, etc.).

3. Interaction and community involvement

Allowing audience members to propose topics or contribute to content creation matters most in a community or local media outlet (39%). The Study shows that media must be open to the public and provide opportunities to suggest topics or in other ways contribute to stories (as reported by nearly two-fifths of those polled). The findings reveal that 57% of respondents agree that local media is important to provide essential public interest information to residents and that many embrace local patriotism, a strong feeling of being connected to their local community and affinity with their fellow local residents and community values.

SMS will assess its beneficiaries' capabilities and resources for two-way communication with audiences as the first step in establishing stronger mechanisms for interaction with audiences. In addition, SMS will prioritize the issue of community engagement in its Year 3 approach. For example, SMS will support media in cooperation with civil society and local activists to develop local initiatives that engage media in local gatherings and events, rather than simply providing information 'from a distance'.

Interaction with the audience (%)

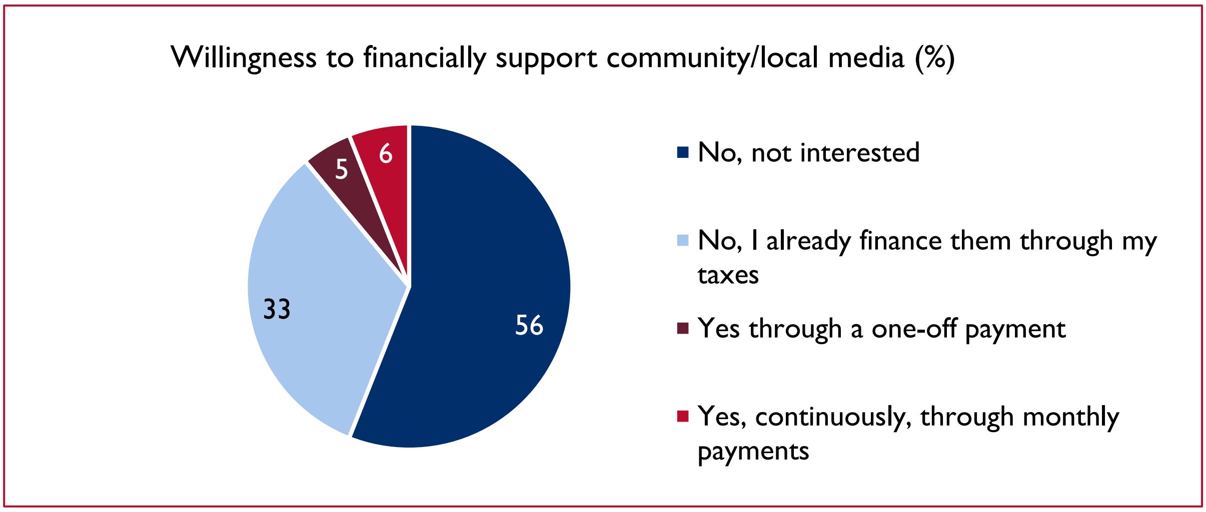


4. Financial sustainability

4.1. On average, respondents were ready to set aside up to 745 dinars per month for local media in their city or municipality. Most of those polled preferred making donations (as reported by 44%), followed by subscription (39%), and, finally, payment for particular content or information (16%). One in 11 respondents indicated a willingness to make a one-time payment in support of a media outlet facing financial difficulties in their locality.

SMS will continue supporting media to deploy various forms of e-payment solutions (subscription, membership, crowdfunding, etc.), as this has proven effective in both community involvement and providing for partial financial sustainability (Examples: Danas and Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina, both of which have launched successful online monetization campaigns with SMS support).
In addition, SMS will develop and support a "Free media is not free" campaign to raise awareness among the Serbian population of the need for providing direct financial support to the independent (local, online) media they rely on for reliable and diverse information.

These numbers are more promising for the SMS project and its partners than they may appear at first glance, as it tracks with global trends (a culture of paying for content generally starts with a small contingent of audience members that recognize the need for independent voices in a chaotic market) and reveals that a not insignificant segment of the population is willing to contribute a significant sum on a monthly basis *if* media are responsive to needs and reliable. The piloting of various online monetization approaches with SMS partners has also shown that if a media outlet is valued (reflecting preferences outlined- in 1.2 above), dedicated readers will begin to donate or subscribe, even in an environment like Serbia where online payment mechanisms are not yet fully mainstreamed (The Danas online edition secured nearly 400 paid memberships in less than a month after introducing online payment mechanisms, and the Independent Journalists Association of Vojvodina collected over $2500 through its crowdfunding campaign—these are significant sums for relatively small operations).



Perspective on the Media: Change is the only certainty

Given that perpetual change is the only constant in media audience behavior, it is of paramount importance to understand the direction of those changes, to identify audience expectations and preferences, and to find paths, opportunities and space for longer-term media sustainability. Media sustainability enables the survival of media, secures sources of income for journalists and employees, and ensures that entire communities can count on secure, credible and independent media.

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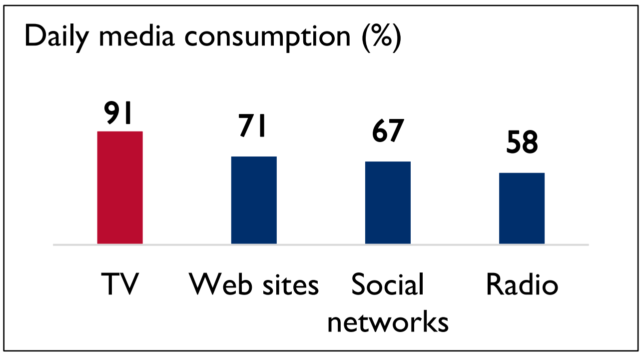
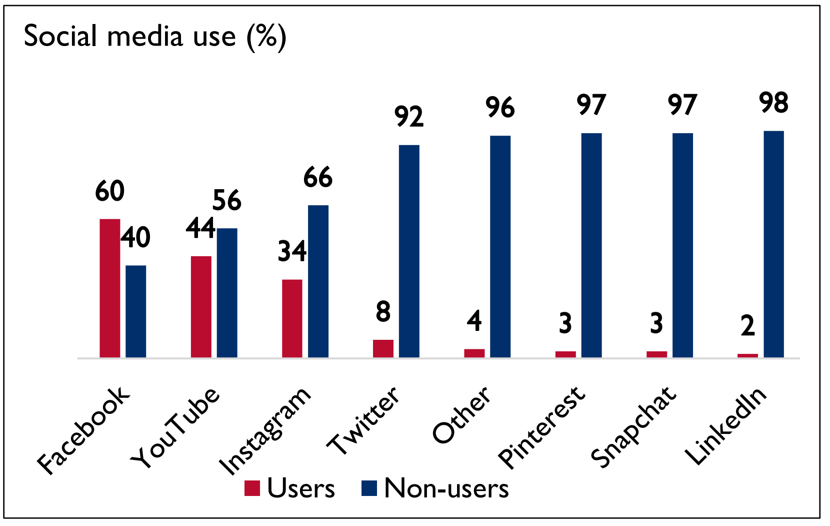
Slow but certain departure from tradition

Serbia's media audiences are taking small but steady steps towards integration into the digital world, despite the fact that this path is neither fast nor easy, in terms of reach or investments. The reasons behind this slow growth trend lie in the stability of television as the dominant medium in Serbia, the slow adjustment of the media and other media market actors to a digital environment, an unfavorable demographic structure and decelerated internet penetration growth. However, these reasons are complicated by broad reticence of Serbian citizens to engage extensively with the internet: at present, online shopping and commerce is still nascent (64% of Serbians surveyed in this study have not bought anything online in the last year) combined with an even more modest use of contemporary online payment methods (the average citizen may order products via the internet but typically pays directly on delivery).



Internet growth and the related rise of online and social media have had a dramatic impact on legacy print and broadcast news media, as can be seen most directly from the drop in print media circulation, and from the fact that only 15% of respondents to this survey reads printed editions four or more days per week. However, the press maintains its impact by defining the agenda and selecting topics. Radio has survived and outlived dark forecasts, but it has evolved into a medium focused on entertainment, music and relaxation almost exclusively. Globally, podcasts are on the rise, but in Serbia, their significance is currently minor, except among a subset of the younger generation. Combined with better online platforms, and especially at the local level, radio could represent an important media outlet in the future, as well. *(*See chapters 3.1 and 4.1.).*

While social networks show downward trends (especially Facebook) globally, with messaging apps such as WhatsApp on the rise, Serbian audiences seem to be showing social media networks durable loyalty, especially in migrations towards Instagram (which is the network of the younger generation). Internet users in our seven-day panel spent 156 minutes per day on the internet, of which more than half of the time (90 minutes) was spent on social networks. Moreover, the share of women using such networks shows a major potential for creating content directed at them. In keeping with broad global trends, two out of three of the respondents to our survey indicate that they access the internet via mobile phones or tablets. *(See chapters 4.1. and 4.2.6.)*

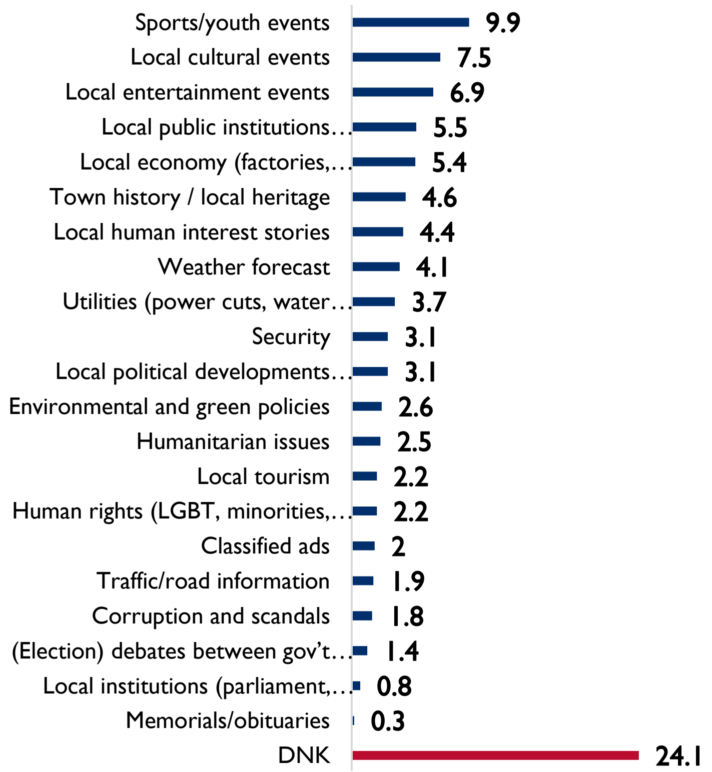


It is not easy to manage media in Serbia, and it is even harder to manage local media

Where, in all this, are the community-based or local media? First of all, audiences recognize bias in local media, which has led to some citizens losing hope that an objective media outlet could ever even appear. Therefore, some thought needs to be given to the context in which the majority of the local media function – in small markets, with extremely limited advertising revenue potential, and in specific ecosystems. However, this survey has also shown that citizens keep up with local topics on local media and that strictly local topics can come to the forefront very quickly – service, culture, entertainment information and social themes (history, life, human interest stories), while at the bottom of the list, but still with a high level of interest (about one-third of those surveyed), is politically-oriented content. Focus group participants in all cities reported that citizens at the local level require more impartial information about their current economic situation, prospects for the future, and employment opportunities in their cities, towns, and regions.

When creating content at the local level, it helps that citizens feel a strong sense of belonging to their local communities and feel a sort of local patriotism. However, the survey looked at the link between belonging to a local community and preparedness to pay for content and failed to find a pronounced statistical correlation. On the other hand, citizens still express caution when it comes to local stakeholders who fight for their interests, reporting that they mistrust them. When they mention individual stakeholders, however, there is evidence of an expectation to have numerous political and civil stakeholders, as well as local institutions, fighting for the interests of citizens. *(See chapters 4.2.4. and 4.2.5.)*

Topic of greatest interest respondents would like to see covered by community/local media (%)



Constancy of change and adaptation are the future

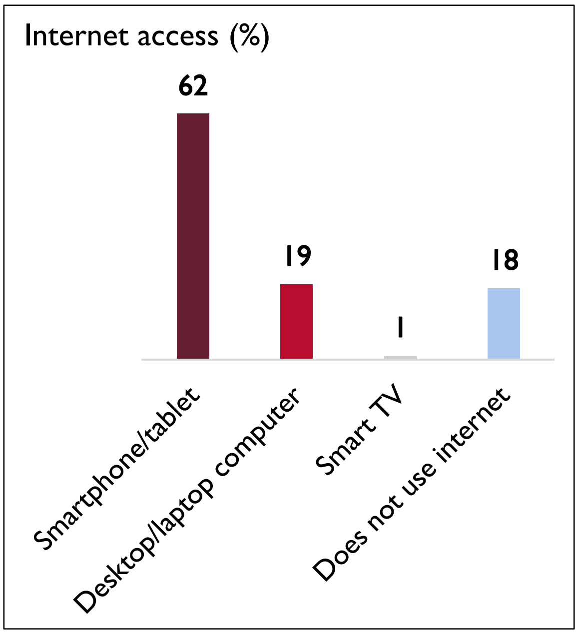
How, then, can audiences be reached? While this is a common question, it can be misleading. *The right question is: do we understand the audience and its evolving nature?* For the most part, gone are the days when there were frequent common moments, happenings and content that were eagerly awaited and consumed as a mass event. These are rare occurrences today (such as the World Cup Final, Eurovision and similar events), and news and information producers must respect the fact that focused attention is a thing of the past and that specific niches must be found for new content. These niche audiences function as small communities: they are internet-oriented and function based on content sharing, with specific topics, interests and interactions. As a result, media businesses must start from the understanding that citizens have massive choices today, that information is largely available and free to them and that when they do pay for content, they prefer premium content that can be expensive.

> Focus group findings reveal a shared understanding that local media are highly important to the community, a feeling particularly strong outside Belgrade.

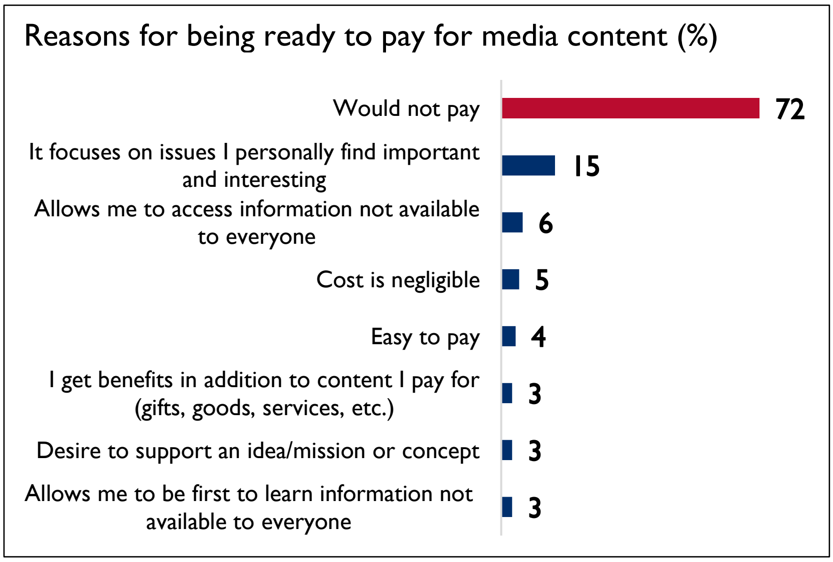
Community and local media must note that they cannot go it alone and that, with an audience of several tens of thousands of citizens, it is important for them to be open to cooperation with other media, or to shift their focus from the local level to include broader regional issues and concerns. This shift can better position their revenue streams, as larger audiences typically have a better potential for attracting advertisers. They need to re-position themselves as gathering points for their local communities, and that they provide a common platform for local initiatives, and that they are not solely a channel for information.

Political polarization and mistrust that stem from media bias suggest that approaches to political content must be carefully and well thought-out to avoid the trap of "taking sides" and, thus, undermining audience confidence Dynamic changes in lifestyle and consumption patterns--as well as the availability of other content (cultural, entertainment, sports) in the larger information ecosystem--demand clarity of presentation and precise timing, as well as investments in formats or platforms that can help citizens navigate their daily lives (for example, information on electricity, water supply, utility supply disruptions, traffic conditions etc.). In addition, the survey showed that a major share of the audience uses several media at the same time. As a result, formats must be adapted to decreased attention spans, and content must be released at the right time, especially if the media outlet has several different platforms. *(See chapters 4.2.4. and 4.3.)*

Additionally, Millennials and Gen Zs have already developed quite different media consumption habits, and media need to prepare for the generations that come after Baby boomers and Gen X. Therefore, online media outlets must be innovative, show their unique value, and must offer new formats (e.g. shows via Facebook Live, Instagram stories, Google talk, etc.). Finally, media outlets cannot remain walled off from audiences, and must include their interests in the selection and creation of content.



Audiences' ability and willingness to pay for content, thus creating another potential income stream for media, is extremely important. This survey dealt, in large part, with whether paying for content was a realistic option. Given our findings, it is clear that the first step is not - and must not be - media insistence on payment for media content. There are several reasons for this: 1) information availability; 2) weak economic and financial status of the audience; 3) insufficiently developed media market; and, 4) complexity of the entire process which includes dedicated, long-term work with the audience. In short, *it is not yet time to insist on payment for media content, but it is the right time to take the first steps in that longer-term process.*



Globally speaking, the first trends in online subscription growth, donations, and various memberships are emerging. However, it is too early to judge whether this is a permanent development or whether it is a positive trend achieved in highly developed countries (such as the US, the UK, and Spain) where media have invested a great deal of knowledge and money to achieve these results in recent years. In contrast, in Serbia, 6% of this survey's respondents have paid for media content online in the past, excluding cable TV packages. However, we must not forget that even the basic cable package is a considerable expenditure for many citizens. In addition, many see the subscription/tax for public media services as paying for content. Given this background, audiences need a very compelling reason to pay even a small additional amount for content. It is, therefore, unsurprising that most respondents indicated that they would be prepared to pay with only modest amounts for media content (500 dinars per month, approximately $5).

This survey also shows that several important steps must be taken before charging for content:

- Change and adapt formats (as discussed above),
- Transform professional habits and adapt them to the digital age: this survey showed that the majority of criticisms of work of the news media are aimed at journalists' poor performance and uninteresting content,
- Understand audiences by stepping outside of traditional frameworks and methods, and
- Carefully develop campaigns that are directed at the audience.

Thus, it is better as a first step to focus initially on how the news media operates, their professional standards (both in terms of quality and ethics) and strengthening their capacities. A second step could include organizing campaigns (for audience participation, awareness raising and significance of supporting the media) and launching small, creative and innovative crowdfunding and fundraising events or campaigns. The third step can be initiating subscription-based models, which can be introduced once there is content that the audiences are consuming and in which they are emotionally invested. By allowing this interaction between the audience and content, we anticipate that interest and willingness to pay for content through a subscription model will be strengthened; at present, only 16% of respondents said that they would pay a subscription for the content they consume if it were introduced at some point. *Finally, our survey shows that fundraising campaigns inviting audiences to support media should target employed, middle-aged (30-49) and younger, urban, highly educated populations; be premised on creating more specific content; and be built on incremental steps to monetization. (See chapters 4.3. and 6.2.)*

The survey showed that the voyage to ensuring a sustainable future for diverse media is more of a marathon than a sprint, that preparedness for change and commitment are expected, and that constant investments into quality content is necessary. The process of involving audiences in media sustainability is, in short, one in which media will have to invest to see the first significant results.

1. Key findings and recommendations: an overview

Introductory notes

This study is the result of wide-ranging and cross-cutting research carried out by CeSID in co-operation with the USAID Strengthening Media Systems (SMS) project, implemented by IREX. Three surveys were performed: a face-to-face survey of 1,500 respondents; a seven-day survey of a sample of 100 online media users; and a qualitative survey with 12 focus groups. The target group was aged 15 to 65. The key aim of the research was to gain an in-depth understanding of the needs, habits, and expectations of the audience so as to facilitate rational and informed (1) discussion about the media sector, the upcoming changes to it, and public attitudes; and (2) strategic decision-making by media businesses.

Key findings

With major changes occurring at the global level, some trends that had initially made only a tentative appearance are now rapidly gaining in importance. Today, over-the-top (OTT) television - consuming television via streaming live - is a major segment (for instance, US consumers will view an average of 18.9 hours of OTT TV content by 2020), as are all video segments, with so-called 'snack ads', blockchain, chatbots, and visual search becoming significant trends worldwide for this and the coming year. For users, social networks are declining in importance, with a parallel rise in apps, especially those able to guarantee security. Video consumption is on the increase, as is internet access via mobile phones; ad blockers are becoming increasingly common and podcast use is growing. Producers are endeavoring to monetize their content in various ways, as advertising revenue is not sufficient for media sustainability, and these efforts are set to mark the coming years. Subscription-only services are growing (especially in the US), but it is too early to tell whether this is a trend, while donation and membership fee models are common in the UK and Spain.

Turning to national trends, television has retained its dominance in Serbia (with terrestrial channels being especially influential), while internet media have been growing slowly but steadily. The media market is still far below its 2008 peak value of more than 200 million euros net. The market is saturated, with a large number of actors, but vertical and horizontal audience concentration trends have been persisting. Some global trends have been filtering into Serbia, such as Netflix, 'snack ads", and blockchain (at the beginning of 2018, the Serbian Blockchain Initiative was established). The poor economic situation, access to free information, and lack of online payment habits have all narrowed the scope for content monetization in the near future.

The key issues with the media as perceived by the Serbian public are poor content/poor journalism (28% in aggregate), which can be broken down into a number of aspects: lack of professionalism, dull content, and fake news and misinformation (26%). Mistrust of the media is widespread, with the public particularly wary of television, while young people generally do not associate news and current affairs content with the internet, resulting in somewhat higher confidence. Respondents spend most of their time (in hours) watching television (3.02), followed by listening to the radio (2.74), and using social networks (2.38) and web sites (2.02). Two fifths of those polled (41%) reported reading print editions of newspapers, while as few as 15% were identified as 'hardcore' users who read print editions of dailies four or more times per week. Television remains the most influential medium, but the internet is growing in importance, particularly with young people, and especially because it allows users to select content and combine multiple sources. Radio is managing to keep up with other media, albeit with dwindling budgets and by focusing on music and entertainment only. Respondents generally go online on their mobile phones or tablets, as reported by a significant 62%, as opposed to 19% who do so on their desktop computers. Facebook is used by 60% of the population, YouTube by 44%, and Instagram by 34%. Twitter is used by 8% of population and it is perceived as an important network in Serbia, not because of the large number of users, but because of the user structure - Twitter is a network used by a large number of decision-makers.

When it comes to online media, the respondents insisted on appropriate and timely coverage of emerging news and having well-designed and accessible web sites where all relevant content is only a click away. The respondents reported being aware of the media carrying misleading content ('fake news', spin, propaganda, and misinformation), and large numbers proved able to recognize it: most of those polled could identify propaganda (69%) and spin (62), with percentages also high for 'fake news' and misinformation (with 63% of all respondents believing this content was 'somewhat' or 'extremely' common in the media). Pink tops the list for these four types of content; the percentage of respondents who recognized misleading information carried by this media outlet ranged between 38 and 49 percent. Although aware of misleading information in the media, as much as one-third of the population reported never paying attention to the source of media content, while 22% claimed to do so very rarely: as such, in aggregate, one in two respondents had little or no awareness of the actual quality of the content they were exposed to. Online content is mainly accessed either directly on web sites or through search engines; access via social networks is on the rise. Altered media habits include changes to preferred content formats: the respondents opted for either (1) video content (shorter or longer video content was cited by 39% of those polled in aggregate) or (2) shorter formats.

What information did we glean from our week-long panel with internet users? Firstly, the average internet user spends 156 minutes online every day. Secondly, by far the most time (90 minutes) is spent on social networks. The respondents reported being online more often on weekdays than on weekends, in all likelihood due to differences in their daily routines (family, leisure time, days off work, etc.). The first types of content accessed each morning are politics (despite the fact that citizens note politics as a less interesting topic, they consume political content because they are aware that it influences life decisions) and entertainment (trivia). The most commonly accessed outlets are *Blic*, YouTube, Facebook, and N1, with Mozzart Sport leading among sports web sites. Local media users reported accessing these outlets mainly to find information about public institutions and read weather forecasts, current affairs pieces, and culture columns. In general, most of the respondents reported using their preferred web sites because the content offered suited their needs (as reported by 19%), followed by 16% who claimed they visited the web portals, sites, or forums because they were easy to access, with one in six respondents citing timely information as the reason for visiting their preferred online media outlets. Online users most commonly accessed content either directly (54%) or via social networks (24%); multimedia use is widespread, with nearly one in two respondents reporting the use of one other media outlet in addition to the internet. A total of 13% of all respondents claimed they would be prepared to pay for online content in the future.

Community/local media are important for 12% of those polled, particularly respondents who completed secondary education (17%), retirees (20%), those aged 60 to 65 (18%), and persons living in severely underdeveloped municipalities (22%), Southern and Eastern Serbia (16%), and small municipalities (up to 18%). The public is also highly interested in weather forecasts (46%) and news about utilities and public services (45%) and local culture and entertainment (41% each). The explanation for this could be the fact that those citizens have modest media choices in their communities. The survey revealed that communities that had recognizable local media, in terms of both reach and tradition (long-term presence), used them to follow local issues; 'Local information is also provided by PSBs, as many respondents said". The key shortcomings of community/local media, according to respondents, are their lack of professional journalism (30% for local media users) and their bias and partiality, followed by poor quality reporting and unresponsiveness, with 5%, or 18% for local media users.

In terms of media identity, respondents suggested that community/local media must be careful as to which issues they raise and consider how involved they are with the local community. At the same time, these media must make sure they are open to the public and that the audience is given the opportunity to suggest topics or take part in content creation (as reported by nearly two-fifths of those polled). The findings reveal that many respondents embraced local patriotism, a strong feeling of being connected to their local community and affinity with their fellow local residents and community values. This, however, does not mean they are prepared to contribute financially to their local media. Turning to attitudes towards public interest and the market, 57% of those polled agreed that 'There must be a local media outlet in every town to provide essential information to the residents because this is in the public interest', whereas 36% of respondents agreed that 'The media market is free and only well watched/listened to/read outlets ought to survive'. At the same time, 34% of those polled agreed with the statement that 'The media market is unstable and I would always support quality media if their survival depended on my help'. One in three respondents claimed that no one was advocating for their interests at the local level, and reported they expected this in the future from a wide variety of local actors, mainly local institutions, political parties, and local politicians.

No more than 6% of those polled reported having paid for media content in the past, not taking into account basic cable subscriptions. That said, as many as 24% declared their willingness to do so in the future (mainly for sports, films, and TV shows; the amounts mentioned generally do not exceed 500 dinars per month), while 16% would be ready to pay for content they currently use, if it became subscription-only. Surveys showed that previous experiences are related to paying for premium content rather than paying for news, and the willingness to pay for the news in the future is still low. Most of those polled would be ready to pay monthly (as reported by 61%), with nearly one-quarter (24%) ready to do so as and when needed. The greatest portion of respondents (51%) claimed the most convenient payment option was a traditional (physical) payment using a money order. One in five noted they would rather pay online by card, while 15% preferred mobile or e-banking. In total, 11% of all respondents claimed they would be willing to finance community/local media, by making either a one-time or periodic payments.

Willingness to support community media is above average in Vojvodina, Western Serbia and Sumadija, cities with more than 100,000 residents and, according to the development parameter, those that ranked as more developed than the national average. Willingness to pay is more common among those more than 60 years old, whose main income is a monthly pension, while it is lowest among young people between 15 and 19 years old. Expectedly, this category consists of more educated citizens compared to the average, who do not agree with the policies of the current Serbian government. In the general climate of mistrust in the Serbian media, this group has slightly higher than average trust in the media content they consume, while within this group there is more than twice the number of those who think that citizens' associations represent the interests of the local community in the best way. It should be noted that the willingness to pay for community media is shown by those who are willing to engage in activities that will benefit the community. Local topics focusing on respondents in this category are primarily: sports events, local economy, local cultural events, and local political events.

On average, respondents were ready to set aside 745 dinars per month for local media in their city or municipality. Most of those polled preferred making donations (as reported by 44%), followed by subscription (39%), and, finally, payment for particular content or information (16%). One in 11 respondents claimed to be prepared to make a one-time payment in support of a media outlet in their town facing financial difficulties.

Strategic interventions and recommendations

Strategic interventions are plans of action for the short- and medium-term. In this report, we have divided them into interventions to 1) support the development of a more enabling legal, regulatory, and market environment for the media in Serbia and 2) support the development of financial sustainability, innovation, and partnerships in the Serbian media sector. When it comes to enabling the regulatory environment, it is necessary to maintain a relatively strong role in monitoring the adoption of the new media strategy, especially in the phase of changing media laws in accordance with the strategy. Specific interventions are possible and desirable in the pursuit of establishing a functional, sustainable and fair media market protected from political influence and improving professional knowledge and developing the digital competencies of citizens, journalists, media representatives and media workers. In the area of supporting the development of financial sustainability, innovation, and partnerships in the Serbian media sector, interventions can be aimed at improving content production, interaction, assessment of resources for two-way communication, organizing media campaigns (for audience participation in topic selection or for various types of media support, crowdfunding events), collaboration with IT companies for digital marketing and the promotion of privacy policies.

Below is a set of key specific practical recommendations:

Media content, paying for media content and editorial policy

- → Ensure editorial policy can allow for more varied and responsive content and mainstream concepts (at least content seen as mainstream in the region) that are not solely linked to local topics and events;
- → Organize editorial workshops for (major) political issues, as these are sensitive topics that polarize the public and shape audiences' attitudes towards the media. The workshops should also aim to bring these topics closer to citizens;
- → Organize editorial workshops for topics from local niche audiences identified by this survey, such as green policies and the environment, vulnerable groups and humanitarian work;
- → Work with editors and journalists to enhance media outlets' capacity to produce mainstream content (spreading the concept out of "hard news", not necessarily commercially, much less tabloid) that combines regional coverage (issues of regional importance) with topics close to the local community, such as (as revealed by this research) local public services and utilities, weather, local culture, local entertainment and heritage, and local security;
- → Develop an app, platform, or notification system to serve as a guide to content for audiences at the local or regional level (power cuts, road closures, traffic information, concerts, cultural events, etc.);
- → Develop media campaigns to promote audience involvement in selecting and, possibly, paying for content that would target employed, middle-aged, well-educated and more sophisticated residents of larger and better-developed cities;
- → Identify technical media capabilities and provide assessment of resources for two-way communication with audiences as the first step in establishing stronger mechanisms for interaction with audiences;
- → Create content targeting women, since they have reported being more willing to pay for content that suits their needs and covers issues, they find important (concept out of "hard issues" such as news, chronicles…). The idea is to use not only above-average willingness of women to pay for content, but also the potential that women have in the use of social networks.
- → Work with managers/owners to enhance media outlets' capacity to collaborate with other media, network production facilities, and develop project proposals that permit synergies in accessing markets beyond just the local environment.
- → Work with the media (by organizing workshops and developing strategies and action plans) to enhance their capacity for networking and shared production of content (jointly with other media), focusing particularly on online media;
- → Mentor owners/managers and editors of local online media in developing business plans and producing content (while drawing on the findings of this study) that could be monetized.
- → The project team should work with IT firms and foster collaboration with them to promote the creation of digital content through strategic partnerships;
- → Develop a technical assessment of local online media to identify how well they work with IT firms and to what extent they are able to utilize the technologies they have at their disposal;
- → Enhance media outlets' capacity to harness their advertising potential and organize workshops or educational programs/seminars on programmatic ad sales, a major global trend that has yet to achieve significant penetration in Serbia. Alternatively, collaboration between media outlets can be encouraged, to reach the numbers necessary for programmatic ad sales.

Content sources

- → Hold workshops and/or co-operate with IT firms/media agencies to enhance media outlets' capacity for managing social media accounts and boosting content on social networks;
- → Work with media to produce their own and original content, adapted for local thematic niches and community needs, which would be more attractive than the content being transmitted from other media/sources.

Content formats

- → Hold workshops and/or co-operate with IT firms/media agencies to enhance media outlets' capacity for creating video formats/vertical videos, or mixed video-short text content;
- → Hold workshops and/or co-operate with IT firms/media agencies to enhance media outlets' capacity for creating emerging formats such as Google Spotlight Stories, Facebook Live features, etc.

Interaction between media and audiences

- → Enhance media outlets' capacity to interact with their audiences by harnessing social media, moderating comments, or developing platforms that audiences could use to actively participate in reporting by their preferred media outlets by suggesting topics and influencing them. Work with media should include the specificities identified in the survey: men, with lower education, elderly people, retired show an above average preference for openness of media (for selection of topics/media content) while women students and the younger population in general are focused on social networks and comment options. Openness of the media is very important for people in Belgrade.
- → Organize workshops to instruct media in how to use research findings (media measurements) or perform their own small-scale audience surveys to segment audiences and tailor content;
- → Improve web sites, strongly focusing on mobile optimization and interactivity.

Media involvement in day-to-day community life

- → Work with civil society and activists to develop local initiatives (important for the local community) that should make the media places for gathering together rather than just outlets for finding important information.