

BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA



Vibrant Information Barometer

2 0 2 1



Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL SCORE
18

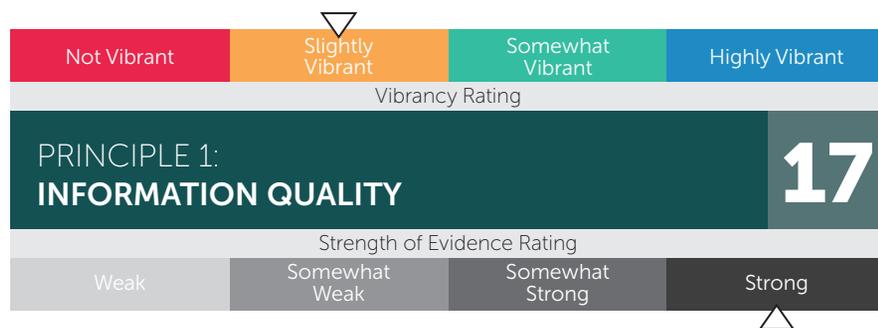
The COVID-19 pandemic heavily impacted the political, economic, and media sectors in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) and emphasized issues, including complex administrative divisions and corruption, that have been stalling the country’s progress to a fully functioning democratic society. At the beginning 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 Cvjetičanin 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

1 CRA, 2019. *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.*

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.

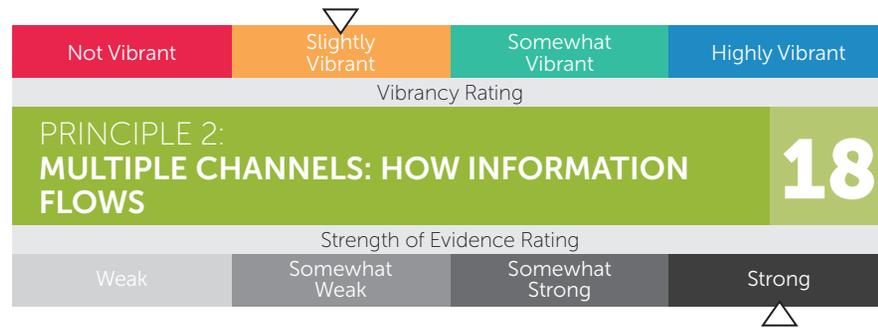
Gojković-Arbutina argued that the decline of revenues was higher, around 50–60 percent, based on the estimates within her newsroom. Despite an improvement by the end of 2020, the media are still facing financial consequences; many had to lay off part of their staff and lower the salaries of their employees, 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

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 Cooperation 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

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-ogranicava-medijske-slobode/>.

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

6 "BH novinari: Pritisci, nisce 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-protiscima-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 Ombudsmana, 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

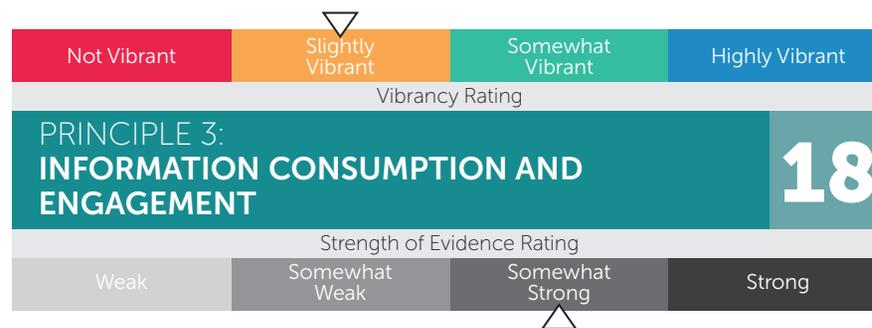
- People have rights to create, share, and consume information.
- People have adequate access to channels of information.
- There are appropriate channels for government information.
- There are diverse channels for information flow.
- Information channels are independent.

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 Gugjić, 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 Cvjetičanin 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, Ibrahimefendić 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 Birac 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>.

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

“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.

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>.

LIST OF PANEL PARTICIPANTS

Azra Maslo, program standards coordinator, Communications Regulatory Agency (CRA)

Aldijana Purić, editor, RTV Velika Kladuša, Velika Kladuša

Borka Rudić, general secretary, Association of B&H Journalists, Sarajevo

Boro Kontić, journalist and director, Mediacentar Sarajevo

Damir Đapo, editor-in-chief, RTV Slon, Tuzla

Đorđe Vujatović, editor, Elta TV; journalist, Gerila.info

Edin Ibrahimfendić, lawyer, Institution of Human Rights Ombudsman of B&H, Sarajevo

Leila Bičakčić, director, Center for Investigative Reporting, Sarajevo

Lejla Turčilo, professor, Faculty of Political Sciences, University Sarajevo

Sandra Gojković-Arbutina, editor-in-chief, Nezavisne novine daily, Banja Luka

Sladjan Tomić, freelance journalist, Pale

Senad Zaimović, director of the marketing agency Fabrika, Sarajevo

Tijana Cvjetičanin, editor of the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje, Sarajevo

MODERATORS AND AUTHORS

Anida Sokol and Elvira Jukić-Mujkić, Mediacentar Sarajevo

Copyright © 2021 by IREX

Notice of Rights: Permission is granted to display, copy, and distribute VIBE in whole or in part, provided that: (a) the materials are used with the acknowledgment “The Vibrant Information Barometer (VIBE) is a product of IREX with funding from USAID.”; (b) VIBE is used solely for personal, noncommercial, or informational use; and (c) no modifications of VIBE are made.

This study is made possible by the support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, the United States Government, or IREX.