UKRAINE

Vibrant
Information
Barometer

2 0 2 1

Highly Vibrant

Somewhat Vibrant

Slightly Vibrant

Not Vibrant

OVERALL
SCORE

22

In 2020, political tug-of-wars and turnovers dashed hopes for a more prosperous path of sustainable growth and reform. In autumn, the Constitutional Court derailed much of the past years' anti-corruption progress and hinted at the potential to reverse other key reforms. The most pressing policy matter remains the need to reform the corrupt judiciary system.

Externally, the most serious pressures were COVID-19 and Russian aggression on multiple fronts. Along with armed conflict in the Donbas region and the illegal annexation of Crimea, Russian information wars and cyberattacks continued. Pro-Russian politicians, represented in the parliament primarily by the Opposition Platform – For Life (OPFL) party, controlled a number of media outlets and social-media influencers, stirring up constant pro-Kremlin propaganda in Ukraine. Efforts to fight these coordinated campaigns have so far been in vain.
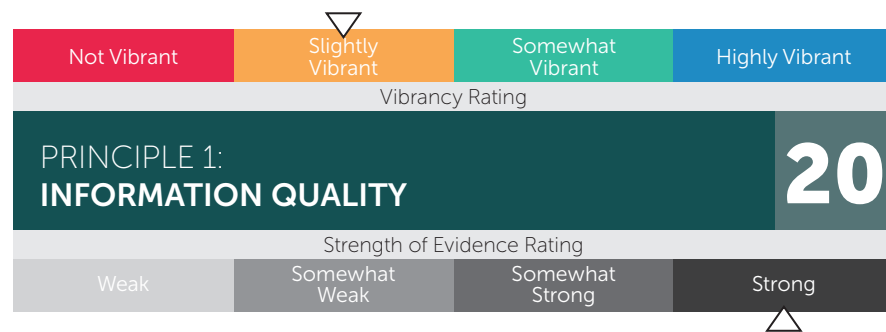
Rampant mal-information, combined with poor prospects for media as businesses as long as oligarch-owned television dominates the narrow market, kept Ukraine VIBE panelists from giving high marks to Principle 1 (information quality).

Ukraine's strengths in press freedoms, media infrastructure, and access to public information led to higher scores for Principle 2 (multiple channels), but editorial interference by mainstream media owners remained a major weakness. Other trouble spots included impunity for crimes against journalists, poor Internet access in rural areas, a lack of Ukrainian media in the border districts (Poland, Russia, and Moldova), the substantial concentration of mainstream

media with a handful of oligarchs, non-transparent media financing, politicized broadcast licensing, and regular underfunding of the public service broadcaster (media brand Suspilne or UA:PBC).

Although scores for Principle 3 (information consumption and engagement) improved slightly, weak media literacy and digital security skills among the population, inadequate platforms for evidence-based debates, and absence of community media have hindered progress.

Panelists had doubts over the consistency and reliability of government communications in 2020, and lowered scores on Principle 4 (transformative action). Reputable civil society organizations (CSOs) helped by generating and sharing reliable information, but most Ukrainians did not base their decisions or actions on high-quality information — instead tending to stick to information bubbles.

	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant
Not Vibrant			

Vibrancy Rating

**PRINCIPLE 1:
INFORMATION QUALITY**

20

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Panelists scored the Principle 1 indicators slightly above average (20), giving the lowest scores to the indicators for mal-information and media business prospects.

Ukraine's infrastructure allows for production of abundant, varied, and quality content in all types of media, and technology has grown more affordable. The media market is oversaturated with legitimate content as well as imposters angling for a share of the limited advertising revenues. The diversity of mainstream media owners provides a measure of pluralism, but the oligarchs that run the largest and most popular television channels are bent on shoring up their political and economic interests. The Russian Federation spreads its narratives through fake news, manipulation, and hate speech, either directly or through proxies.

The most-consumed media do not distort the facts intentionally, but partisan media clearly attempt to influence and manipulate attitudes with narrow context and interpretations. Amateur and unprofessional media, unconcerned with fact-checking, also produce a flood of harmful, poor-quality information — and face no serious ramifications.

Ukrainian media do not actively exclude marginalized groups (age, ethnicity, gender, LGBTQ, etc.), but inclusivity and attention to their concerns is low.

The annual USAID-funded Internews Media Consumption Survey (MCS)[1] showed that television ranked as the second major source of news (down

to 52 percent from 66 percent in 2019) for the second year running. While most Ukrainians pull their news from several types of media, the number of those relying on one source — most frequently social media — increased this year. The number of those who prefer radio and print media continues to decline significantly.

Among social networks, Facebook, with 47 percent, has topped the list for several years in a row. A rising number of Ukrainians (30 percent) actively use YouTube, and a little more than 20% turn to Telegram, primarily for news briefs.

Public trust in the national television channels dipped to 41 percent, down from 49 percent in 2019. National and regional online media share the distinction of being the most trusted information source, at 48 percent each.

Despite a pluralistic media environment, Ukraine's largest television groups and other media remain under strong oligarch influences and are divided along political lines. Among the top television groups, Viktor Pinchuk's StarLightMedia takes the largest share and includes the leading ICTV, Novyi, and STB channels. The second-most popular group is Ihor Kolomoyskyi's 1+1 Media. His group is composed of six channels, including one of the audience leaders, the 1+1 channel. Rinat Akhmetov's Media Group Ukraina, with its leading Ukraina channel, takes third place. In fourth position is Inter Media Group, reputedly with pro-Russian leanings, owned by Dmytro Firtash and Serhiy Levochkin. News channels Pryamyi and 5 kanal are connected to ex-President Petro Poroshenko. Since 2019, Viktor Medvedchuk, through Taras Kozak, has consolidated his control over three news channels (112, NewsOne, and ZIK).

Ukraine has a total of 46 universities that teach journalism, but the quality falls far short of meeting industry needs. "There is no adequate infrastructure to train content producers," said Volodymyr Torbich, editor-in-chief of Chetverta Vlada, an investigative reporting agency in Rivne.

University journalism schools remain outdated and theory-centric; their faculty lack practical journalism experience themselves. The Ukrainian Catholic University's journalism school, named the best along with

1   "2020 Media Consumption Survey," USAID-Internews. August 2020. https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-Media-Consumption-Survey-FULL-FIN-Eng-1.pdf

the Kyiv Mohyla Academy's program, shifted towards more religious education in mid-2020, according to Torbich — and faculty members who had upheld the program since 2011 have left.

Aside from newsroom on-the-job training, journalists develop practical skills only through donor-funded workshops, which were mostly online in 2020. The panelists named numerous media support organizations and foreign donors that provide forums, training programs, internships, and journalism contests. Zoya Kazanzhy, a blogger and adviser for E'COMM communication agency, added that motivated professionals have an array of opportunities to help master journalism beyond universities.

Only a fraction of media outlets conduct themselves ethically and accountably, said Alyona Romanyuk, the Regional Press Development Institute's *Behind the News* editor. The rest of Ukraine's outlets are susceptible to sensationalism, use manipulative headlines, and prize speed over accuracy. Viktor Bobyrenko, an analyst at Policy Analysis Bureau NGO in Sumy, agreed. He acknowledged that the public broadcaster, some of its regional affiliates, and a few strong online and specialized media comply with professional standards. But he said that most other outlets place *jeansa* (paid content disguised as legitimate news) and serve owner or government interests.

In 2020, Detector Media (DM) analyzed prime-time newscasts of six television channels (Inter, 1+1, 112 Ukraina, 5 kanal, public service UA:Pershyi, ICTV, Ukraina, STB).[2] DM found that 43 percent fail to separate fact from opinion; 28 percent violate the standard of fullness; 11 percent fail to provide balanced perspectives; 12 percent fail to source their material; and 5.7 percent of news stories are commissioned.

According to the DM survey, the public broadcaster Suspilne earns the highest marks for complying with television broadcast standards. The Institute of Mass Information (IMI) compiled a "whitelist" of high-quality national online media[3] based on its monitoring of compliance with professional journalism standards. The websites for Liga, Dzerkalo Tyzhdnya, Hromadske, Suspilne, Radio Liberty, Bukvy, Ukrinform, and Ukrayinska Pravda (UP) made the list. Their inclusion indicates they are free of *jeansa*, hate speech, sexism, fake news and mal-information. These media are also highly transparent about their ownership, and Hromadske, Suspilne, Liga, UP, and Radio Liberty have detailed editorial policies.

Maryana Zakusylo, DM's editor-in-chief, noted that the Commission of Journalism Ethics (CJE), the Independent Media Council (IMC), and DM's MediaCheck initiative regularly document ethical violations. However, media mostly ignore CJE's and IMC's censure resolutions. The National Union of Journalists of Ukraine (NUJU) continues to defend clearly propagandist pro-Russian media with the slogan "don't divide the journalists into sorts," referring to both types of journalists and their degrees of professionalism.

For television and radio stations, if ethical lapses intersect with legal violations, the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Council (NTRBC) can issue a warning or a fine. But even NTRBC often fails to enforce its fines in courts. Gennadiy Sergeyev, director of Chernivtsi City Television and Radio Company, expressed outrage that producers of anti-Ukraine content bear no responsibility for the threat they pose to national security. Only the Security Service of Ukraine and the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine have any power to curb them, by following their funding sources.

Media that ignore professional standards may risk their reputation, but audiences often stand by them, said Nadiya Romanenko, chief of the machine text analysis department at Texty, a data journalism agency. Romanyuk held the view that mostly journalists of quality media or those aligned with influential figures that face public reproach or cyber bullying; those working in social media or "dustbin" outlets can seemingly publish any trash without consequences. Lera Lauda, co-

2   "Chickens are counted after the election. What was talked about and who was publicized by TV news in November 2020," Detector Media. December 11, 2020. https://detector.media/shchodenni-telenovini/article/183249/2020-12-11-kurchat-pislya-vyboriv-rakhuyut-pro-shcho-govoryly-y-kogo-piaryly-telenovyny-v-lystopadi-2020-roku/

3   "White list: Eight media that have become the highest quality," Institute of Mass Media. February 24, 2021. https://imi.org.ua/news/bilyj-spysok-visim-media-shho-staly-najyakisnishymy-i37769

founder of Abo Local Media Development Agency, noted that numerous media-monitoring efforts remain within the sphere of experts. Members of the media community, let alone average citizens, pay little attention.

During elections, political forces commission *jeansa* and black PR in most regional media and social media, as well as bot farms, Torbich said. These media experience no real punishment for spreading false information, aside from lawsuits and ethical complaints – which also do not bring serious consequences.

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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.

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According to Serhii Sydorenko, editor of *Evropeiska Pravda*, thematic diversity is limited, although political and social reporting is widespread. Zakusylo agreed that the market poorly supports specialized publications, adding, "Thanks to the coronavirus, Belarus protests, and the US elections, international news moved into the epicenter of coverage by Ukrainian media."

Local elections in October 2020 stirred national media to increase local-news coverage. Yet local media did not prioritize campaign coverage, failing to delve into the new electoral code or provide analysis of candidates, Zakusylo said. She described local publications as lacking context, fullness, and background.

VoxUkraine analyzed the topic structure of 400,000 news stories within three months in 46 online media.[4] The analysis identified the most-covered topics as emergencies and crimes (15 percent); politics (11-16 percent); and economics (8-10 percent); trailed by coronavirus, the world and foreign policy, showbiz and culture, society, sports, war and military, lifestyle, science, and technologies.

Depending on owner current interests, oligarch-owned media dominating the market may sit at one extreme or the other: loyal and complimentary to the government, or overly critical and biased against it. In Sydorenko's view, media and opinion leaders do hold the government to account and all criticize government misdeeds. According to Romanenko, anticorruption investigative reporters are primarily the journalists that fulfill this role, but their impact is still low. Even high-profile cases do not spur the dismissal of officials. Romanuyk added that another set of media simply copy governmental press releases and arrange "warm baths" for interviews with public figures. Sergeyev noted that local officials always find — or pay — friendly media outlets to cast them in a positive light.

Investigative agencies (RFE/RL's Skhemy, Bihus.Info, Slidstvo.Info) and numerous fact-checkers force politicians to be more accurate in their statements and income declarations, said Maksym Zaporozhchenko, ICT, media education, and system administration lab methodologist at the Mykolayiv Regional Institute for Post-Graduate Pedagogic Education.

However, the challenge of unreliable information sharpened amid the pandemic and 2020 local elections. COVID-19 especially exposed weaknesses in fact verification and the spread of conspiracy theories, Romanenko observed. In 2020, MCS revealed that more than 80 percent of respondents had heard false coronavirus narratives[5] (e.g., that coronavirus is a bioweapon made in a Chinese or a US laboratory, invented by the media, or caused by the launch of 5G Internet technology). Approximately one-third of respondents believed such stories; more than one-third said that they had shared this disinformation with others.

In April 2020, pro-Russian media reanimated the old Russian campaign against US programs to counteract biological threats in the former CIS

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4   "What do Ukrainian online media write about the most?" Vox Ukraine. December 14, 2020. https://voxukraine.org/uk/temi-misyatsya-pro-shho-najbilshe-pishut-ukrayinski-onlajn-zmi/

5   "2020 Media Consumption Survey," USAID-Internews. August 2020. https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-Media-Consumption-Survey-FULL-FIN-Eng-1.pdf

countries. It started with an OPFL party statement about "15 military biological labs in Ukraine" that experiment with biological weapons of mass destruction under a secret Pentagon program. ZIK and 112.ua published the statement, Telegram accounts picked it up, and Strana.ua turned it into a full-blown conspiracy theory. Pro-Russian elements and Kolomoyskyi's UNIAN spun it into a hysterical campaign with frightening headlines, hinting that the coronavirus originated from these labs and biological trials were conducted on Ukrainians. It culminated in a mainstream 1+1 channel program. The channel later removed the video, but as Zakusylo noted, NTRBC did not react to this case, and a 1+1 journalist was later elected to Kyiv's regional council.

According to DM election coverage monitoring[6], most pro-Russian propaganda is very localized and can be traced largely to OPFL. It is concentrated in national TV channels 112 Ukraina, ZIK, NewsOne, as well as online Strana, Vesti, Inter channel with Podrobnosti website, and MigNews. At the regional level, the picture is not homogenous, but the Kremlin's influence over editorial policy is an exception in the eight south and east regions that were monitored. Local media mostly republish information from key propaganda sources rather than create their own stories. Additionally, there are pro-Russian nests in some regions. Russian influence in some regions spurred some local politicians to consider whether they need to use Russian messages to mobilize their electorate. The role of social networks and Telegram channels differs, but propaganda is not ubiquitous. Otar Dovzhenko, DM's head of the Center for Monitoring and Analytics, said it is necessary to stop treating these sources as media, and to fight them at the source — those investing millions of dollars in them, not the local channels earning kopeks by retransmitting the propaganda.

A considerable share of content is more subtly manipulative, Romanuyk said. "Dustbin" websites, e.g., Politeka or Znaj.ua, intentionally publish false or deceptive information and distort polls, she said, but many content producers lack the time or skills for verification.

6   "If you cut off the light of the three channels - the propaganda would be reduced many times over,' - Otar Dovzhenko," Detector Media. November 27, 2020. https://detector.media/infospace/article/182898/2020-11-27-yakby-vyrubyty-svitlo-trom-kanalam-propagandy-pomenshalo-by-v-razy-otar-dovzhenko/

Zakusylo noted that blogs are often the source of fake and manipulative news and hate speech. For instance, video blogger, provocateur, and Russian propagandist Anatoliy Shariy craftily packages small doses of half-truth and lies to manipulate public opinion, and his popularity and trust in his messages only grows. He is the face of Shariy's party, which entered a few local councils in south and east of Ukraine in 2020 and came close to gaining parliamentary seats (2.23 percent of national votes) in 2019.

Fake news getting picked up and reposted in media with much larger reach — gaining legitimacy — is another widespread and concerning practice pointed out by Pavlo Belousov, manager of Internews Ukraine. Romanyuk noted that the developing Ukrainian-language segment of YouTube offers more quality, verified content.

Some panelists said that they do not see government as the primary source of misinformation, but noticed a dramatic increase in officials sharing erroneous, unreliable information and outdated data in 2020 — especially related to the pandemic. Svitlana Kisilyova, a communications consultant, said the government publishes mostly reliable information, but media often interpret complicated or incomplete information incorrectly, or base clickbait news on facts taken out of context.

Bobyrenko, however, insisted that government sources intentionally spread disinformation and distortions. Sydorenko agreed, saying that government disinformation was probably the key development of the year for Principle 1. He said that other phenomena existed earlier, and official sources face no professional ramifications for government misinformation.

Five fake news reports on emergencies that never happened were published to discredit NATO, and numerous local media outlets immediately reposted them without verification. In addition, the SSU revealed numerous Russian-fueled bot farms in 2020 in various regions of Ukraine and ruled to block four Telegram channels they suspect were managed by Russian special services.

Strong fact-checking agency websites, which debunk Russian and local disinformation, include StopFake; VoxCheck; Slovo i Dilo; BezBrehni;

Po Toi Bik Novyn (Behind the News); Texty, which provides a browser extension to help readers identify unreliable websites; and fake.net, the register of fake-news websites. A number of initiatives and media companies launched efforts to debunk fake and manipulative news related to COVID-19. One example is the website Po Toi Bik Pandemii (Behind the Pandemic). However, these sites do not reach audiences at the same wide level as television. The only positive example of television remains the Suspilne talk show *Zvorotnyi Vidlik*, featuring a VoxCheck analyst that verifies statements by the guest speakers.

Social media moderation mechanisms are mostly adjusted to filter hate speech and obscene lexicon, but moderators have no tools against manipulative statements, Zaporozhchenko noted. In March 2020, StopFake and VoxCheck became the local partners of a Facebook counter-disinformation program. Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube have all introduced some measures to flag, remove, and/or replace disinformation — often related to COVID-19. These fledgling efforts, however, are insufficient to address the enormous volume of social media content, Zakusylo commented.

The Russian Federation spreads discord, through a pool of influence agents in Ukraine and proxies among Ukrainian politicians, Romanenko said. They criticize friendly relations with the EU, NATO, and the US as well as laws on the state language, education, language quotas in media, the independence of Ukrainian church and Ukraine itself, and more. Zaporozhchenko said that this trolling is part of a strategic, long-term campaign to discredit Ukrainian values and institutions.

DM summed up the Russian campaign well in a November 2020 article on DM's election monitoring: The coordinated and centralized pro-Russian disinformation system produces attractive and diverse content, using a huge arsenal of manipulative tools targeting pain points of Ukrainian society: a lack of confidence in future, fear of coronavirus, fatigue of war, dissatisfaction with living standards, interethnic tensions, language and

religious issues.[7]

Sydorenko said that hate speech from the government is not the rule, though it happens at the highest levels, including the president. Consequences for politicians are limited; their reputation never seems to falter with their supporters.

According to Bobyrenko, President Zelensky shares videos that contain false, manipulative information. Oksana Velychko, director of the NGO Together Against Corruption, recalled how in April 2020 Ivano-Frankivsk's mayor allowed xenophobic statements about Roma that stayed in the city park and violated quarantine restrictions. He apologized for his "emotional" words, and won reelection. However, citizens on social media and media-outlet websites do promptly discuss and condemn false statements by politicians, Kisilyova noted. She cited outrageous statements from MPs degrading children raised in socially insecure families and pensioners as examples.

> **Despite a pluralistic media environment, Ukraine's largest television groups and other media remain under strong oligarch influences and are divided along political lines.**

For their part, pro-Russian news channels disseminate hate speech, propaganda, and fake news through their guests, Zakusylo said. The panelists expressed the view that the NTRBC is failing in its obligation to punish broadcast media for these ethical breaches.

Sydorenko also highlighted an increase in Ukrainian-language sources. Except for Western Ukraine, Russian-language media are considered more commercially viable in the market. However, the recent language law requires the duplication of information in Ukrainian — which is too costly for some outlets. The newspaper *Novoe Vremya*, for instance, plans to switch to just Ukrainian in mid-2021 as a result.

Torbich noted that two major genders are represented quite equally in

7   "Sauron and Saruman of pro-Russian propaganda. Results of monitoring of disinformation narratives during the 2020 local elections," Detector Media. November 27, 2020. https://detector.media/propahanda_vplyvy/article/182872/2020-11-27-sauron-i-saruman-prorosiyskoi-propagandy-pidsumky-monitoryngu-dezinformatsiynykh-naratyviv-pid-chas-mistsevykh-vyboriv-2020/

hyperlocal media — but other genders are not covered in local media, which remain very traditional.

According to IMI,[8] on the eve of elections, women made up 27 percent of experts commenting in 20 popular national online media, five print publications, and 11 national television channels. Local elections took place under the new electoral code with gender quotas – at least two people of each gender for every five candidates. As a result, the number of women in many city councils doubled, reaching 30-35 percent in some areas.

By the Council of Europe's measure,[9] women received only 12 percent of media mentions, while men received 57 percent of media attention in regional media's local elections coverage. Gender equality in politics ranked among the three least-discussed topics, along with national minorities and Crimea.

Mainstream media provide sporadic coverage of ethnic groups, Zakusylo said, while LGBTQ issues are marginalized, and an Orthodox Christian outlook prevails. Men dominate political talk shows, and sexist statements go unchallenged. To highlight this problem, a number of CSOs launched an "anti-award," calling out sexism in the media.[10] Romanenko noted that entertainment content often furthers gender stereotypes and sexism and objectifies female popstars and bloggers. News programs, for example, will report on a female politician's hairstyle instead of her actions.

People of certain ethnic and religious backgrounds, such as the Crimean Tatars and dwellers of the Zakarpattya region close to Hungary, receive

little media representation, Kisilyova noted. Other marginalized groups, such as Roma, usually are mentioned with a negative connotation.

Media outlets do not exclude social groups, and marginalized groups can run platforms, although with smaller viewership. Olga Bolshakova, a lawyer and Advocacy and Lobbying Center chief of the National Association of Media (NAM, previously the Independent Association of Broadcasters), noted that marginalized citizens feel distanced from mass-media audiences. Belousov noticed that more voices from marginalized communities have come online, due to growing Internet penetration as well as the shift to online activities during the pandemic.

Media cover internally displaced persons (IDPs) sporadically, Velychko said. She added that the media generally ignore, or cover manipulatively, the lives of people living in occupied Donbas and Crimea. This reporting boosts the Russian narrative that Ukraine does not have citizens living there, and those who do live in occupied territories have betrayed Ukraine's interests. Only RFE/RL's Donbas.Realii and Krym.Realii, along with Novosti Donbasa at Hromadske, cover these topics well.

Men hold most leadership positions at media outlets, although women make up the bulk of the media's workforce — which Torbich argued can be explained by low salaries for media workers. Panelists noted more gender diversity among the bloggers.

Media businesses are generally subsidized by owners. Large media holdings have enough resources to cover operations; the rest scramble constantly for funds to cover critical needs, Lauda said. Online media have no resources for analysis and investigations. In 2020, several online publications closed, including Insider, Telegraph, Design, and Telekritika. Ukrainian weekly magazine *Tyzhden* had to cut some staff, and NV radio reduced its talk shows and analytical content in favor of music. The independent outlet Zaborona resumed in April, after a one-year suspension. The online magazine Vector suspended activities for seven months before it found a new investor.

Zakusylo noted that among the largest television groups, only StarLightMedia became profitable in 2019, but it still had to cut content production expenses. Four main television groups completed coding

8   "The Number of Women Experts in the Media Increased by 3% During the Election Campaign – A Study," Institute of Mass Media. October 23, 2020. https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/kozhen-chetvertyj-material-v-ukrayinskyh-media-komentuye-ekspertka-pres-reliz-i35821

9   "Findings and conclusions of the media monitoring of local elections 2020," Council of Europe. November 27, 2020. https://www.coe.int/en/web/kyiv/news-event/news/-/asset_publisher/m9nDZlgeFMpW/content/findings-and-conclusions-of-the-media-monitoring-of-local-elections-2020

10   "This egg": Arahamiya, Vereshchuk, ZIK and others received an anti-award for sexism," Media Sapiens/Detector Media. December 8, 2020. https://ms.detector.media/profstandarti/post/26142/2020-12-08-tse-yaitse-arakhamiya-vereshchuk-zik-ta-inshi-otrimali-antipremiyu-za-seksizm/

their satellite signals and started charging fees for them in January 2020.

The scarcity of funds remains one of the biggest issues for non-partisan media, and their cost-cutting measures hurt their ability to produce quality content, said Sydorenko. Bolshakova noted that television and radio must cover 30-50 percent of costs to transmit their content. However, media traditionally earn well during the local elections, Torbich noted.

COVID-19 lockdowns further reduced media revenues in 2020, driving many outlets to launch readers' clubs, paywalls, donations, and crowdfunding events, Romanyuk said. Kisilyova noted that media must be creative with new formats for advertising and special projects. Independent media survive on account of foreign donor grants, added Sergeyev.

Valeriy Garmash, CEO of Slovyansk city site 6262.com.ua in the Donetsk region, noted that some media gained an advantage due to COVID-19. Many businesses that adapted to new conditions increased their online communication with potential customers. Although advertising revenues fell in the first months of COVID-19 restrictions, they managed to recover a little. Garmash said that he does not see great potential in media paywalls or memberships in the next few years, as the population is not ready to pay for content that they can obtain for free.

Since its establishment in 2017, Suspilne has never received more than 60 percent of the full funding provided by the law (no less than 0.2 percent of the previous year's state budget spending). For 2020, the parliament initially allocated the full amount — above UAH 2 billion ($72,608,300). That was gradually whittled down in the final approved budget, during cuts forced by the pandemic, and because of debt obligations. Ultimately, Suspilne ended up with only 57 percent of its planned state funding.[11]

The private Crimean Tatar channel ATR, which had to relocate from Crimea in 2015 due to Russia, has been obtaining state funding since

2016, as support for indigenous people of Ukraine. However, ATR was also underfunded in 2019 and experienced delays with receiving state funds in 2020. In early 2021, ATR was in danger of suspending operations, because it could not receive state funding immediately. Also in the initial months of 2021, the government chose to introduce a competition for funds for broadcasting in Ukraine's temporarily occupied territories in order to support a few entities.

Bobyrenko explained the process of funding disbursement. Budget allocations for so-called "coverage of authorities' activities" must go through ProZorro, the electronic public procurement system, but local governments commonly allocate a few million UAH (a little over $100,000) for certain programs, disbursed outside of standard tender procedures. They channel the money to friendly media, or to all media of the region, often leading to the governor enjoying positive coverage.

Bolshakova confirmed unfair competition between private and municipal broadcasters in certain regions, as the latter receive funding from local budgets. Such state subsidies can amount to 70 percent of an outlet's budget. According to the panelists, private-media members claim that the subsidies distort the market and endanger their future. In some regions, Kherson for instance, councils distribute budget money to private media but always to those loyal to local authorities.

Torbich said that Rivne councils commissioned advertising and information coverage from various media, but the process was not transparent through open bids or public reports on spending these funds. He added that the overall funding was not that much, considering the market.

Lauda described the two scenarios of "The City," a hyperlocal media network of about 50 online media outlets. In many regions, these media try to attract local government ads with the prospects of decent coverage, modern formats, and large audiences, but officials prefer to support the dying newspapers with poor circulation. In very small communities and towns, the advertising market is extremely limited, and the local budget so slim that no funds are allocated for media coverage. In such areas, media have little hope of surviving without government support.
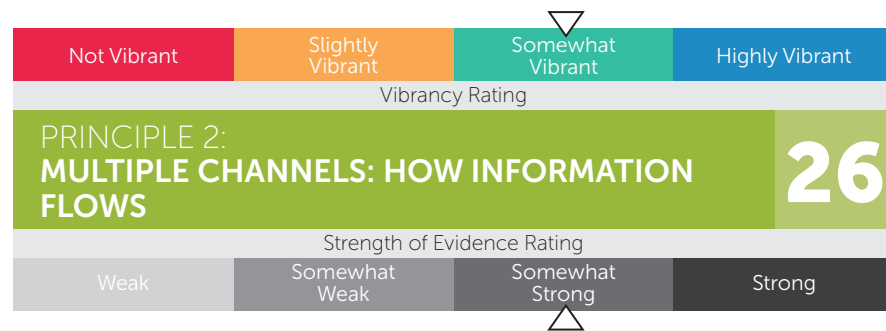
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11   "Will Parliament provide funding for the Public?," Detector Media. October 20, 2020. https://stv.detector.media/kontent/movlennya/chi_nadast_parlament_garantii_finansuvannya_suspilnogo/

Political advertising tends to be placed in politically aligned media, although Bolshakova could only think of a few cases when mayors forced companies to limit advertising to friendly media.

Zakusylo mentioned that the largest television groups have agreements and unions to sell advertising. In 2020, StarLightMedia, Media Group Ukraina, and Inter teamed up to oppose 1+1 Media. The practice has spurred complaints from anti-trust groups that they constitute a monopoly and cause anti-competitive practices in advertising.

Journalists earn the lowest salaries within the communications sector — from UAH 7,300 ($265) for entry-level to UAH 19,700 ($715) for senior practitioners.[12] Lauda said regional journalists earn perhaps UAH 6000-7000 ($218-$254), which are not livable wages. One of the editors -said that he does three months of seasonal work in Finland to support his family. During elections, many journalists pick up extra income working for election headquarters.

Low pay, Romanyuk noted, drives many journalists to place paid stories, choose to work in media that violate standards, or move to advertising, public relations, or copywriting. With rare exceptions, the media business is not able to retain professional cadres.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 2: MULTIPLE CHANNELS: HOW INFORMATION FLOWS	26

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Many indicators and sub-indicators in Principle 2 scored higher than average — in particular Indicator 7 (channels of information) and Indicator 8 (channels of government information). Meanwhile, panelists

gave Indicator 10 (independence of information channels) a score of 18. The rest of the indicators were on the lower end of the scale due to the influence of negative pressures including: self-censorship driven by the political affiliations of owners; attacks and other forms of pressure on journalists and the impunity of perpetrators; inadequate ICT infrastructure in some geographic areas and for people with disabilities; considerable concentration of the television market by several oligarchs; and the politicized process of NTRBC licensing and membership.

Ukrainian legislation protecting free speech and free media has been in line with European norms for many years, but poor application and enforcement limit its effectiveness. Torbich said that the unreformed court system is the weakest link; still, in most cases court protection works for journalists and media. IMI monitoring shows that journalists do not suffer severe violations of their rights. More threatening to journalists, Torbich explained, are private businesses exposed in media publications that enlist the courts or threaten lawsuits in retaliation. Legal pressure, in turn, drives self-censorship.

In November 2020, a group of human-rights defenders and media CSOs published an open statement of concern[13] about the quality, proportionality, lawfulness, and fairness of court rulings in lawsuits against journalists, media, and Internet users. The authors said that the courts overuse defamation legislation and ignore the practice of the European Court for Human Rights — which have chilling effects on the freedom of speech.

In Bobyrenko's view, the government undermines freedom of speech by discrediting media — for example, using the slogan "we do not need mediators." Velychko, however, traced self-censorship primarily to the financial dependence of media outlets, which often promote the interests of a certain politician or a business. In Lauda's opinion, local journalists exercise self-censorship to absurd levels. She gave the example of a young journalist declining to cover issues at a maternity hospital, in case she has a baby and ends up delivering it at the place she critiqued.

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12 "How much do communicators earn in Ukraine?," Happy Monday. 2020. https://happymonday.ua/specproject/skilky-zaroblyayut-komunikatsijnyky-v-ukrayini-doslidzhennya-vid-happy-monday

13 "A number of court decisions threaten freedom of speech - human rights activists," ZMINA Human Rights Center, November 19, 2020. https://zmina.ua/statements/nyzka-sudovyh-rishen-nesut-zagrozu-svobodi-slova-pravozahysnyky/

In 2020, IMI monitoring[14] counted 229 press-freedom violations in Ukraine, excluding occupied areas, compared to 243 cases in 2019. Three-quarters (about 170) of the cases involved physical aggression against journalists, including 20 beatings. IMI documented 125 instances of journalists prevented from carrying out their professional activities, 22 cases of denied access to public information, 19 threats, 19 cases of legal pressure, 11 cyber-attacks, and 13 other cases (property damage, censorship, etc.). Journalist rights were most often violated by private individuals (102), local authorities (55), law enforcement officers (24), the judiciary (17), and the Office of the President (7). IMI tied many of 2020's violations to anger over lockdown restrictions misdirected at journalists.

Few journalists report attacks, reflecting their lack of faith that police will investigate. Only 8-10 percent of criminal cases are submitted to the court per year. In 2020, out of 249 criminal cases registered, only 16 were submitted to the courts, 88 are in progress, and the rest are closed. Still fewer cases (just four in 2020, for example) lead to sentences.

Romanenko expressed the view that, while the situation is not critical, some free speech violations raise concerns. Sydorenko named moral pressure, shaming, and hate speech towards journalists as some of the most serious abuses.

Journalist Lyubov Velychko, for example, experienced extreme bullying following several of her reports in 2020.[15] Her investigations included the panic sparked in Novi Sandzhary when passengers from China were placed in COVID-19 quarantine isolation, the influence of Russian-managed Telegram-channels on Ukraine's parliament, and illegal online casinos. Velychko experienced verbal and written attacks to discredit her, and threats of lawsuits and death on social media and by SMS. She complained to police, who refused to open a case at first. After a court

ordered police to open a case, they failed to launch an investigation. Courts are now deliberating over a casino owner's lawsuit against Velychko and Mind.ua, claiming UAH 1 million ($36,140) in moral damages.

Zakusylo recalled that social-media bullying pushed *Zaborona* founder Katerina Sergatskova to leave Ukraine, although the story that caused it violated professional standards. The story accused reputable fact-checking group StopFake has links with far-right extremists.

On August 8, Mykhailo Tkach, an investigative reporter with Skhemy, found a hole in the ceiling of his apartment. He said he believed it was preparation for the planting of a bug. Earlier, he had received warnings that his investigative activities had irritated top officials. On August 17, unknown attackers set fire to a car owned by Borys Mazur, a Skhemy film crew driver, in a Kyiv suburb.

Ukrainian state law protects journalists' sources. While panelists reported struggles on this point in prior years, they shared no new cases in 2020. Libel law is a civil code issue.

According to the Internet Association of Ukraine/Factum Group research,[16] Internet penetration is 71 percent (almost 23 million people) while 21 million access to the Internet at home. Higher Internet penetration correlates with the larger cities, younger ages, and higher levels of education and income. Ukraine's ICT infrastructure generally meets the information needs of consumers, but more options are

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

14   "In 2020, IMI recorded 229 cases of violations of freedom of speech in Ukraine," Institute Mass Information. December 28, 2020. https://imi.org.ua/en/monitorings/in-2020-imi-recorded-229-cases-of-violations-of-freedom-of-speech-in-ukraine-i36909

15   "Lyubov Velychko receives threats after an investigation into the business of the wife of a National Police official," Detector Media. October 28, 2020. https://detector.media/community/article/181963/2020-10-28-lyubov-velychko-otrymuie-pogrozy-pislya-rozsliduvannya-pro-biznes-druzhyny-chynovnyka-natspolitsii/

16   "Internet Penetration in Ukraine," Internet Association of Ukraine/Factum Group. 2019. https://inau.ua/sites/default/files/file/1910/dani_ustanovchyh_doslidzhen_iii_kvartal_2019_roku.pdf

available in the cities than in rural areas and small towns. As for affordability, Ukraine is thought to have one of the world's cheapest fixed Internet fees.

According to the Ministry of Digital Transformation, however, more than 5.75 million Ukrainians lack access to quality Internet. There is no broadband internet in 40 percent of schools, 92 percent of libraries, and 37 percent of hospitals, which are primarily located in villages and small towns. Torbich mentioned that poor mobile Internet access is an issue for a village 28 kilometers outside Rivne, forcing journalists to travel close to the city to participate in online Zoom events.

A GlobalLogic open data survey conducted in 2020 indicated that the number of Ukrainian Internet users increased by 2 million to 30 million people, i.e. 67 percent of the country's population. Social media users increased by 7 million – to 26 million Ukrainians. Instagram and Facebook are used by 14 and 16 million people, respectively. TikTok reached 16 percent of Ukrainian users, while YouTube covers 96 percent.

With regard to consumers with disabilities, Zakusylo noted that only Suspilne, 1+1, and Pryamyi channels include sign language or subtitles for certain programs. Despite the law on the state language, a considerable number of websites do not provide a Ukrainian version. The online sector has almost no websites adapted for people with poor sight, but some assistive applications and browser solutions are available.

No groups are precluded from access due to legal or social norms, although geography can be an issue. Kisilyova added that Hungarian speaking citizens living in the Zakarpattya region's Berehiv district only have access to Hungarian-produced news about Ukraine. Sergeyev noted that following the switch from analog to satellite television, viewers in the Ukraine border regions mostly access television stations of

> **To obtain a contract for covering activities of state authorities, local media may exercise self-censorship or set an informal agreement with the local government. They can also avoid covering the authorities as journalists, and just place government press releases for money, noted Zakusylo.**

neighboring countries — in particular, widely available Russian channels.

Consumers can receive Russian television via satellite. However, since 2017, the Ukraine government has blocked free access to Russian television channels and social networks, along with hundreds of online media sources from Russia and occupied Crimea and Donbas. Advanced Internet users can still access these outlets through tools such as virtual private networks (VPNs).

The wired radio system is in ruins, Zakusylo noted, while FM and ultra-short waves do not cover the whole country. Analog television is switched off, with the exception of the Joint Forces Operation zone. The private monopoly Zeonbud controls digital broadcasting — and many question its claim of covering 95 percent of the population.

In May 2020, Ukraine became the tenth country to ratify the Tromsø Convention — the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents. Ukraine's 2011 law on access to information, developed in line with this convention, adheres to even higher standards. Citizens can submit information requests, appeal denials in courts, and attend local government sessions.

Internet users can access numerous open-data information sets. According to the panelists, the key improvement needed is to establish independent, plenary powers and an effective body overseeing access to information.

Usage of a governmental open-data portal continues to grow, drawing 1.1 million visitors in 2020, up from 738,000 in 2019.[17] Still, citizens and journalists that request access to public information from the government often experience roadblocks. Replies often arrive after

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17   "Open Data Portal." Government of Ukraine. https://data.gov.ua/stats2/common

deadlines, contain inaccuracies, are vague, or refer to the "secrecy of investigation."

Journalists can find it difficult to obtain prompt commentary from press offices. Torbich said he appreciates press offices launched by judges and their spokespeople. His agency sends numerous information requests, with only 10 percent requiring additional enforcement, and he has never encountered intentionally misleading officials. But he described as very frustrating the information request process at the regional office of the State Bureau of Investigations, customs and tax services in Rivne, the Ministry of Health, and other national governmental bodies.

IMI found more restrictions on access to public information under the pretext of lockdown. Local council sessions barred journalists and failed to arrange online broadcasts. IMI noticed selectivity in inviting mass media during the president's working trips to the regions. Several Kherson-based online media, whose journalists were refused accreditation, published blank pages with no text. In October, the parliament committee of free speech decided to suspend accreditation to journalists of 22 media, including Slidstvo.Info, due to their lack of parliamentary coverage. A media outcry forced the committee to cancel the resolution.

The panelists acknowledged that applicants might not know the specifics of filing proper requests for government information. The general public might lack interest or consider applying too laborious, but citizens do not shy away out of fear. CSOs regularly exercise their right for public information.

Ukraine has donor programs that support media lawyers in properly requesting information and with their appeal denials. Courts mostly rule in favor of journalists or citizens in cases on public information. Romanyuk mentioned that 79,000 people filed requests through the Dostup Do Pravdy (Access to Truth) website.

Overall, though, governmental communications with the public declined in 2020, Kisilyova emphasized. Officials slid down to mechanically publishing general news on websites, lacking planned strategic communications. Reform of government communications is incomplete,

and turnover of press office teams is heavy. Velychko added that generally authorities communicate truthfully, but the information does not correspond to requests—undermining understanding of policies by the people and eroding their interest and trust.

Pro bono for the Ministry of Health, a private communications agency launched COVID-19 information channels in Viber and Telegram formats. The channels gained millions of subscribers and were shortlisted by the European Excellence Awards as one of the most successful campaigns. The same company maintains "School Info" channels for the Ministry of Education.

The panelists noted that while surveyors have no data on trust in spokespeople, trust in governmental bodies is low. Sydorenko noticed a serious decline in access to governmental policy and decision-making, as these procedures became chaotic and non-systematic.

Current provisions to restrict ownership concentration of television and radio broadcasting do not work in practice, said Bolshakova. One reason is that the Antimonopoly Committee of Ukraine cannot measure the size of the television market, preventing the committee from determining market shares of television media companies. Ukrainian law has no such provisions for other types of media.

According to a 2020 DM survey,[18] only 38 percent of respondents care about media ownership. While the law requires disclosure of final beneficiaries of television and radio companies, Zakusylo said that legal mechanisms are needed to punish people who submit false ownership information to NTRBC. Zakusylo recalled only one example: the Ukrainian Media Holding, which was denied frequencies due to opaque ownership. A parliamentary investigative commission found proof of non-transparent concentration of Taras Kozak's channels, but the parliament has not supported its findings. In addition, acquisitions of 112 Ukraina, NewsOne, and ZIK did not apply for permission from

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18 "How Ukrainians' preferences and interests in the media have changed after the 2019 elections and the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic," Detector Media. September 29, 2020. https://detector.media/infospace/article/181066/2020-09-29-yak-zminylys-upodobannya-ta-interesy-ukraintsiv-do-zasobiv-masovoi-informatsii-pislya-vyboriv-2019-r-ta-pochatku-pandemii-covid-19/

the Antimonopoly Committee. Zakusylo called for provisions allowing NTRBC to investigate ownership, plus amendments to the current laws on funding transparency. Romanenko gave very low scores to ownership and financial transparency for impossibility to control funding. She said that the only positive aspect is that inquirers can find entity titles in the state register and beneficiaries for some media.

Ukrainian law does not regulate online media or their ownership. Belousov noted that according to IMI monitoring,[19] most popular national online media have poor transparency of ownership and newsroom contacts. Only 40 percent demonstrate transparency, although the trend is on the rise – averaging 10 percent up from 2019. Lots of websites with considerable audiences remain anonymous, not even naming chief editors, Romanuyk added. Torbich noted that a lack of regulation fosters development of "dustbin media."

Internet providers are generally not monopolized, with some regions of the country being exceptions. Certain providers block media at their discretion — for instance, the provider Lanet blocks ZIK and NewsOne websites over an old business conflict.

Print media's distribution infrastructure has been in decline. This trend has resulted in reduced subscription agents and retail networks for selling their publications, especially in cities with fewer than 50,000 residents.

Broadcast signal transmission is monopolized. Zeonbud, with opaque ownership, is a private digital television broadcasting monopoly. Concern RRT, the state monopoly for analog broadcasting, provides Zeonbud's transmitter facilities. Ukraine has smaller private telecommunications operators, but they do not ensure sufficient competition with Zeonbud or Concern RRT.

NTRBC's issuance of broadcasting licenses is not apolitical, but it consists of counterbalancing forces. Bobyrenko commented that the same media cartels represented on the council divide the frequencies

between themselves. According to Bolshakova, though formally NTRBC operates quite transparently, convening its sessions online and publishing its decisions, criteria to award licenses remain unclear. In 2020, NTRBC canceled all the frequency competitions under the pretext of COVID-19 restrictions.

People can freely establish media, especially online and low-cost traditional outlets. Bolshakova stressed that free establishment of media that use frequencies is impossible. Velychko noted that expensive maintenance of large broadcast media makes the format affordable to oligarchs only.

Public service media cannot adequately fulfill their mission due to chronic state budget underfunding. The public broadcaster continues to provide quality news and balanced information, and thus far, all attempts at editorial interference have failed. The government holds UA:PBC's funding hostage, waiting for a political allegiance that has not happened. Panelists recalled that President Zelensky gave interviews to journalists at four television channels but ignored Suspilne. Romanenko commented that he might have supported Suspilne, otherwise it looks like ruling politicians use friendly private media when needed, and just tolerate public media.

In Rivne, the public broadcaster is one of the few that do not publish *jeansa,* Torbich confirmed. However, he added that Suspilne's content quality, reach, and staffing in the regions needs to be improved. The audience of the public broadcaster is very small, and due to the lack of funds and staff, they do not run investigative programs or even critical analytical programs. Still, among regional television, Suspilne affiliates are the most independent and comply with professional standards.

The panelists were unanimous about the lack of media independence, which they tie to the broad problems with financial security throughout Ukraine's formal media sector. Pressure and interference of owners into editorial policy is one of the major issues for Ukrainian media, said Zakusylo. Sydorenko confirmed that most owners and investors, with incredibly rare exceptions, influence media content, while advertising pressure is not that decisive.

19   "40% of Ukrainian online media demonstrate the transparency of their data – IMI research," Institute of Mass Media. August 20, 2020. https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/40-ukrayinskyh-onlajn-media-demonstruyut-prozorist-svoyih-danyh-doslidzhennya-imi-i34621

Torbich observed a clear shift in editorial policy of two Rivne television channels, Rivne-1 and Rytm (rebranded to ITV), which were bought respectively by two politicians on the eve of local elections, in favor of these political forces. He also mentioned instances when advertising departments asked journalists to avoid criticizing their political clients.

To obtain a contract for covering activities of state authorities, local media may exercise self-censorship or set an informal agreement with the local government. They can also avoid covering the authorities as journalists, and just place government press releases for money, noted Zakusylo.
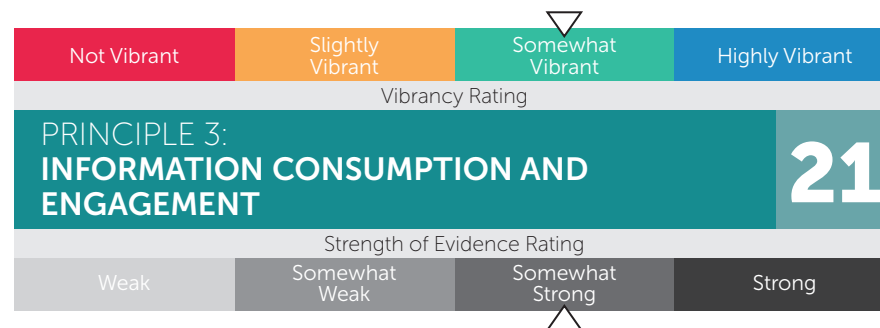
According to Bolshakova, state funding of the municipal broadcasters substantially influences editorial policy, while private advertising contracts have no effect. Bobyrenko said that if a mayor pays local media, then he dictates the content, meaning that, for example, a newspaper would submit stories to be "proofread" by the mayor/local authority. Bobyrenko said that he is sure that the parliamentary television channel RADA obtains instructions on priorities of certain committees or briefings.

Few media separate business and content production. Zakusylo said that at many online outlets, editorial staff write advertising content (partner and sponsor materials, native advertising), which compromises the integrity of business and journalism practices alike.

The parliament appoints four members of NTRBC, and the president names the other half – not according to any specific criteria. Zakusylo gave the example of Tetyana Rudenko, the PR director of Kvartal 95 studio, who was appointed on behalf of the president. NTRBC tends to be pro-presidential. In 2020, it was especially critical of Poroshenko's pool channels, Pryamyi and Espreso, and turned a blind eye to 1+1 violations.

Bolshakova noted that one of the serious barriers for private media — access to frequencies — has eased for the public broadcaster, as NTRBC is officially prioritizing its development. Municipal broadcasters do not experience any barriers to carriage on cable networks. They may obtain privileged leases of premises or property.

Ukraine state and municipal press underwent a de-statization process in 2016–2018, which left 38 state print publications. Newspapers *Holos Ukrainy* (*Voice of Ukraine*) and *Uryadovyi Kurier* (*Government Courier*) have exclusive rights to access Ukraine's laws and to publish notices first. The remainder of the state press are heralds of various authorities.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant ▽	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 3: INFORMATION CONSUMPTION AND ENGAGEMENT	21

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong △	Strong

Though media have access to necessary tools and training, only more developed media care about their digital security. Many citizens lack basic digital skills, let alone use digital security tools. Media literacy among Ukraine's population (Indicator 12) received 15, the lowest Principle 3 indicator score, as the infrastructure for media literacy education is just developing. Media engage with their audience needs and research them to the extent they can afford, but content producers, civil society, and the government do not interact sufficiently. Community media are rarities in Ukraine, according to the panelists.

Ukraine's laws protect data privacy and digital security, and criminal code articles cover cyber fraud. However, the laws have no clear mechanisms to control or monitor violations and lag behind the development of malware technology, including attacks and hacking, Belousov said. He pointed to coordinated cyberattacks on several Ukrainian police and local authority websites in September 2020, during the Ukrainian-American military exercises.

Security provisions are not used to violate personal freedoms. However, authorities attempted to introduce laws obliging Internet providers to install special equipment analyzing traffic and users' activities. At other times, authorities try to avoid providing public information under the

guise of personal data protection, Sydorenko added.

According to Belousov, media and citizens have access to training and tools, including free online courses and specialized services. Free tools against distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks, such as deflect.ca, CloudFlare, and Project Shield from Google are accessible. Currently, the key issue in digital security is that neither media nor other users give it a thought until they are attacked, Belousov noted.

Romanenko said that, thanks to the open-source community, everyone in the world can access proper technologies; legally and freely install decent webservers; and build their websites on free, tested, and safe frameworks. Internet sources and specialized organizations, such as the Ukrainian NGO Digital Security Lab, share knowledge. Various platforms encourage users to install two-factor identification and safe passwords. Ukrainian NGOs have access to free or discounted software, yet pirated software use continues.

Government agencies and private companies alike care little about personal data safety, and the public generally expresses limited awareness or concern, so leaks are possible. According to the panelists, the IT expert community is not confident in the safety of DIIA, the state's smartphone application, which allows citizens to upload various state-issued personal documents and obtain administrative services.

Torbich reported on continuous DDoS-attacks on the investigative news website Chetverta Vlada during local elections. He said that he believes the attacks were commissioned in retaliation for the site's published investigation on a mayoral candidate. Liga.net also reported DDoS-attacks in October 2020, he added.

According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine,[20] in 2019 53 percent of Ukrainians did not have basic digital skills, and 15 percent of respondents over the age of 60 have no digital skills. The ministry has an ambitious plan, with support from the Swiss-funded E-Governance for Accountability and Participation (EGAP) program, to teach digital literacy to six million Ukrainians over three years.

Governmental efforts in media literacy are still fragmented, though, the panelists said. The government launched a digital educational portal[21] offering educational videos to develop basic digital skills, media literacy, artificial intelligence, anti-corruption, and more. They were promoted on some television channels, and Belousov said that although the portal is new, approximately one percent of citizens (405,000) have already used its services.

The Ministry of Culture and Information Policy announced a new state project on media literacy starting in 2021. Zaporozhchenko said that the Ministry of Education and Science provides a number of projects, some jointly with international partners, but he pointed out they focus on certain categories such as education, culture, youth, and business and leave out socially vulnerable groups — along with those who are wary of all state-run initiatives.

In Torbich's view, low media literacy will be one of the main challenges facing Ukrainian society in the next 20 years. Combined with a lack of critical thinking, media illiteracy is the reason people are easily manipulated, drawn to populists and other disseminators of disinformation — both in political and private life — and fall victim to fraud, he said. Most people cannot distinguish journalism from black PR and other deceptions.

Ukraine has benefited from a number of donor-funded and NGO media literacy projects since 2010, including some available as online courses. Among them are Kachka-Dezinformachka, a program of the Hanns Seidel Foundation; Very Verified, a joint project of IREX and Educational Era; and Internet-Wisdom (run by Platfor.ma. Libraries, educational institutions, and some media also offer various free online tests, games, fact-checking initiatives, and projects for adults, but they do not reach most of the population.

Behind the News receives dozens of requests daily to check information,

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20 "Digital Literacy of the Ukrainian Population," Ministry of Digital Transformation of Ukraine, 2019. https://osvita.diia.gov.ua/uploads/0/585-cifrova_gramotnist_naselenna_ukraini_2019_compressed.pdf

21 https://osvita.diia.gov.ua/

Romanyuk said, but Bobyrenko commented that fact-checking websites do not attract many users. Bolshakova explained that many Ukrainians have paternalistic views on the state and are not motivated to check information themselves.

IREX's Learn to Discern initiative on media literacy, taking place from 2018 through 2022, involves 656 secondary schools, 25 post-graduate institutions for teachers, and 21 higher-education institutions. A total of 206 educational facilities have participated in the national experiment on comprehensive introduction of media education, which began 2017 and ends in 2022.

Approximately one-third of the respondents started paying more attention to the source of news and the representation of different viewpoints — even showing a more critical approach to their "favorite" media in 2020, the MCS showed.[22] General awareness of the existence of planted stories continues to increase (77 percent), but only 61 percent of Ukrainians feel confident in their ability to identify such content. Seventy-seven percent of respondents say they are aware that disinformation exists, but a majority—58 percent--do not feel it is an urgent problem. By self-evaluation, 62 percent are able to distinguish questionable content from truth; however, when these self-evaluations were tested, only three percent (down from 11 percent in 2019) correctly identified all three news pieces. Just under half (48%) managed to identify at least one news story correctly, while one-third (29 percent) declined to answer.

According to a 2020 DM survey,[23] about 65 percent of respondents doubt the truthfulness of news in media and social networks often or

sometimes; 24 percent have doubts rarely or never. Only eight percent look for additional information on the media owner or author, and 2.9 percent turn to fact-checking organizations.

Journalists and civil society activists exercise their rights of freedom of speech and access to information, but not as much as they could, in Sydorenko's view. Public debates are possible and sometimes present varied perspectives, but television talk shows are not independent. Social networks and comments on news, especially political content, are hotbeds for hate speech and manipulation, rather than healthy debates, with no mechanisms to fight it, Sydorenko added. Zaporozhchenko agreed that, with the exception of public broadcasting, talk shows are biased or only pretend to present other arguments fairly.

Torbich remarked that talk shows are rarer in regional television than in national; Rivne city has none. The public broadcaster regularly has radio call-in shows. Internet users debate in regional Facebook groups, but irresponsible statements and disinformation flow freely there. At the regional level, mayors do not typically debate the local opposition, Bobyrenko added.

> **"Social networks and comments on news, especially political content, are hotbeds for hate speech and manipulation, rather than healthy debates, with no mechanisms to fight it, added Sydorenko.**

According to Velychko, open meetings with deputies or public hearings took place during election campaigns. Due to COVID-19 restrictions of public gatherings, some people with limited online access had fewer opportunities to exercise free speech. People are not used to making the effort to flag hate speech, she said.

Quality research is affordable only for wealthy media — the largest television and radio holdings. Donors fund market research for the UA:PBC, Zakusylo reported. Many quantitative audience surveys are available. A television panel is held regularly under the auspices of the Television Industry Committee (TIC), a trade association of key oligarch-owned channels and media agencies. The Radio Committee manages radio measurement, and the online media sector has various panels.

NAM launched local television audience research for 11 regional centers

22 "2020 Media Consumption Survey," USAID-Internews. August 2020. https://internews.in.ua/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-Media-Consumption-Survey-FULL-FIN-Eng-1.pdf

23 "Trends and Changes in the Choices of Media and Consumption of Information of the Ukrainians After 2019 Elections and COVID-19 Outbreak," Detector Media. October 2, 2020. https://detector.media/infospace/article/181211/2020-10-02-trends-and-changes-in-the-choices-of-media-and-consumption-of-information-of-the-ukrainians-after-2019-elections-and-covid-19-outbreak/

in 2017, and since then it has conducted four periodic follow-up studies. The National Endowment for Democracy funded the last wave, which took place in 2019.

Torbich noted that social networks, email, and telephone are the simplest feedback modes for media. While it is not clear how much media take feedback into account, many coverage topics are reader-initiated. Lauda said that plenty of tools are available to help online media measure their audiences — yet even with training, some local media do not make use of digital metering tools.

According to Zakusylo, not all media publish their contact information, let alone publisher data, so transparency in authorship, corrections, and apologies are inherent to credible media only. On-air reactions by large television channels to audience complaints make Zakusylo doubt the strength of their feedback procedures, she noted.

Information Consumption and Engagement Indicators

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

Financial losses tied to the pandemic and sinking advertising income pushed many media to intensify attempts to bring in audience revenue through paywalls, crowdfunding, and readers' clubs. These campaigns often highlight the media outlets' trustworthiness, objectivity, and absence of *jeansa* or links with politicians. Some regional media, including Volyn Online and RIA Media, introduced paywalls as well.

In Lauda's view, CSOs often have useful research or interesting news to share, but they lack the budgets and communication skills to package and communicate them to attract

media interest — while local journalists also have insufficient resources to produce quality content. Moreover, self-censorship can be especially strong in small towns. Some journalists avoid investigating and reporting on sensitive issues for fear of ruining relations with neighbors.

Zakusylo mentioned the development of the draft law on media as an example of an effort to bring together different stakeholders. She said that the working group was limited to some MPs and select representatives of CSOs, large television holdings, and industry associations — leaving many others with vested interests out of the proceedings. She noted that the Ministry of Culture's failure to involve media members, CSO staff, and other stakeholders in drafting the 2019 law on disinformation could have served as a lesson in the need to include all key affected parties.
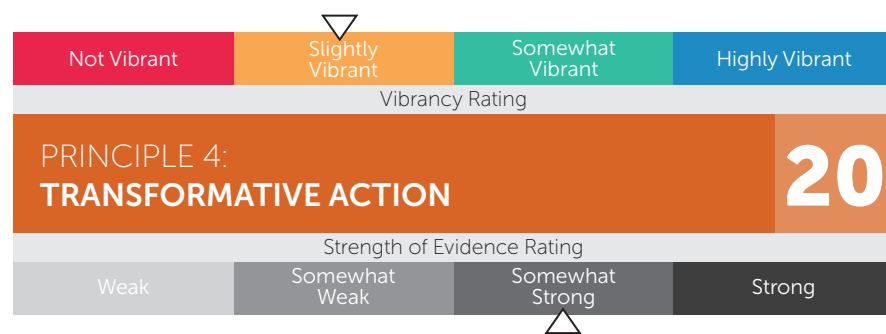
The government is the weakest link in terms of partnership with media and civil society, according to Bobyrenko. Velychko added that collaboration between activists and media is crucial for moving things forward; it takes both wide publicity and legal follow-up to prod the government into responding to anti-corruption cases.

The VIBE indicator on community media caused confusion among the panelists. Half of the panelists said Ukraine has no such media as they are traditionally understood, and refused to score it. With the destatization reform, municipal press became private, and the number of Ukrainian media that might correspond to the international criteria is negligent. About 60 municipal television stations operating across Ukraine were meant to transform into community media, but debate over their ownership, funding, structure, and editorial guidelines has stalled since 2015. Furthermore, Ukrainian legislation does not provide any definition of community media or their mandate, Bolshakova noted. Zakusylo explained that municipal broadcasters, being dependent on local government, cannot be considered community media, nor can social media groups, local private outlets, or non-profit media — even though they collect donations from the community.

Torbich said that Ukraine has local community media as defined by the VIBE methodology. They are mostly print or online and founded by NGOs

or civic activists. "Probably, our investigative reporting agency Chetverta Vlada is of this kind. However, citizens are not ready to support such media. Its crowdfunding revenues in 2020 amounted to 0.5 percent of the budget," he said.

Kazanzhy predicted further rapid growth of grassroots information sources of small local communities or groups dedicated to certain topics. Velychko added that regional Telegram channels are gaining popularity, but they definitely do not cover events objectively or reliably. Kisilyova agreed that Ukrainians have no habit of supporting community independent media through donations or volunteering.

Not Vibrant	Slightly Vibrant	Somewhat Vibrant	Highly Vibrant

Vibrancy Rating

PRINCIPLE 4: **TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION**	**20**

Strength of Evidence Rating

Weak	Somewhat Weak	Somewhat Strong	Strong

Nonpartisan news sources do not attract extensive audiences; people prefer staying within their information bubbles, according to the panelists. Constructive and healthy discussions are rarer than exchanges of accusations. Accordingly, panelists gave Principle 4's lowest score to utilization of information by individuals, seeing few signs that people base opinions and behaviors on quality information.

Panelists did give high scores to the contribution of reputable CSOs in communicating and using quality information, but they noted that media and government do not fully take advantage of the information and expertise that CSOs offer. Panelists also criticized the government for not providing strategic, consistent, or trustworthy communication.

Media cover corruption and violations of human rights and freedoms, and to certain extent prevent additional abuses. The coverage also inspires public pressure, which spurs the government to react — not always effectively, however.

Numerous media monitoring studies prove that Ukraine has reliable, verified information sources, with large audiences — but they cannot compete with oligarch-owned media or popular clickbait websites, said Romanenko. Public television has miserable ratings, but Ukrainske Radio ranks among the top 10 news radio stations, said Zakusylo.

The media landscape presents publications with different ideological lines: pro-Russian, pro-Ukrainian, loyal to certain political forces, etc., yet audiences keep to their bubbles. Discussion platforms exist mostly in social media and in comment sections, where exchanges are often toxic. Zakusylo gave a lower score to the indicator on people's trust in facts forming their perspective, citing the rapid dissemination of fake news and myths about the pandemic — "an apolitical and vitally important topic."

Belousov commented that the situation is slightly better on television, where dubious channels have hardcore — but smaller — audiences.

A few discussions on television present constructive dialogues and demonstrate respect for opposing opinions, but speakers frequently interrupt each other. Social media discussions are often marred by loutishness, amplified by the interference of bots, Velychko noted.

Kazanzhy expressed the opinion that a culture of debate is almost absent in Ukraine. The key ideological break-up in Ukrainian society is pro-Ukrainian and pro-Russian, and it is impossible for the two sides to listen and hear each other, let alone sway anyone. Garmash said that media create opportunities, but that does not mean that people use them wisely. Sometimes opening platforms only increases tension and conflict, and social media algorithms further reinforce information bubbles.

The panelists were unanimous that unreliable and manipulative information shapes the views of most people. Judging by the *Behind the News* experience, Romanyuk said, people look for confirmation of their views and prejudices regardless of truth.

During election campaigns, *jeansa* and manipulative news tend to rise. News from oligarch-owned television channels supporting certain

political projects crowds out independent, reliable information, said Romanenko. Kisilyova pointed to credible data released by CSOs OPORA, Center of United Actions, and CHESNO movement, but questioned how many citizens rely on their findings.

According to IMI monitoring of *jeansa* in the third quarter of 2020, just 11 of the 50 most popular news sites presented no commissioned materials. The vast majority — 70 percent — of planted stories amounted to political *jeansa* surrounding local elections. The main commissioner was the OPFL party, accounting for 55 percent of political *jeansa*.[24]

The pandemic showed how susceptible people are to conspiracy theories. Zakusylo pointed out that according to surveys in October 2020, 68 percent of Ukrainians recognized the danger of coronavirus. That number jumped to 78 percent in December.

According to Belousov, CSOs provide more balanced and reliable information. They conduct quality research and openly share the results as well as the methodology. Media often rely upon them as expert commentators. However, large media are not eager to tap CSOs in their coverage of important issues. Some panelists expressed the opinion that more media/CSO interaction could enrich programming currently cluttered with pseudo-experts. Velychko added that negative and critical information tend to provoke more of a reaction, so coverage of watchdog monitoring reports could engage audiences more than positive news on government achievements.

Nonetheless, the government takes into account civil society suggestions, Romanyuk said. And according to Kisilyova, people trust CSOs and volunteer organizations more than governmental bodies.

Torbich noted that Ukraine has numerous strong, influential organizations that actively cooperate with media and drive societal changes. These groups receive most funding from foreign donors. Civil society is not homogenous, though, and the panelists pointed out the dead weight of CSOs that exist only nominally.

Romanyuk scored highly this indicator for reputable CSOs and think tanks that work openly and honestly and report publicly. Most of the fact-checkers, media literacy organizations, and media- monitoring groups are NGOs; and CSOs often take the lead in debunking disinformation. On the other hand, some oligarch channels, pro-Russian websites, and bloggers conduct campaigns discrediting CSOs and fact-checkers in particular, Romanyuk said.

Transformative Action Indicators

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

For instance, ZIK channel conducted two day-long television marathons: "It Stinks of Soros" and "Sorosyatnya's Revenge" in February and November 2020, respectively. Texty looked into the Russian media origins of the "*sorosyata*" (piglets of Soros) meme.[25] The intent was to hint that Ukraine is being governed externally and to stigmatize those allegedly funded by George Soros's foundations. The meme also was a reference to the NGOs and media receiving Western donor support as well as politicians and officials that have studied in the West. Pro-Russian outlets in Ukraine amplified the term, now widely used by mainstream Ukrainian media.

In November 2020, the Ukrainian Helsinki Union, Zmina Human Rights Center, and IMI launched the Media Fuflo initiative to counteract campaigns discrediting civil society, naming the 18 worst offenders among media outlets. One such campaign attempted to smear a CSO advocating anti-tobacco legislation.

24 "Jeansa in Online Media. Monitoring Report for the 3rd Quarter of 2020," Institute Mass Information, September 17, 2020. https://imi.org.ua/monitorings/dzhynsa-v-onlajn-media-monitoryngovyj-zvit-za-3-j-kvartal-2020-roku-i35097

25 "Fables about Soros. How Russian desa turned into an internal Ukrainian discourse," Texty. December 9, 2020. https://texty.org.ua/articles/102493/bajky-pro-sorosa-yak-rosijska-deza-peretvorylasya-na-vnutrishnoukrayinskyj-dyskurs/

Sydorenko lowered his scores for the indicator now encompassing civic groups, trade unions, and religious organizations. Rather than counteracting disinformation, some religious groups are often the source of myths. Velychko emphasized that regional activists reported an increase of phony CSOs, dependent on politicians or even authorities. Bolshakova pointed to NUJU, which is a huge membership organization. Its management shifted to translate messages of certain political forces on behalf of the public.

Zakusylo added that Ukraine has many examples of CSOs founded by politicians to protect their interests. For instance, Medvedchuk leads the pro-Russian movement Ukrainskiy Vybir (Ukraine's Choice), which peddles Kremlin propaganda. Panelists also gave a few examples of CSOs that have spread fake news or shared unreliable data.

Most government actors do not disseminate misinformation — except pro-Russian elements, which spread falsehoods over local elections, or the threat of US biological labs in Ukraine. In fact, these labs monitor the destruction of biological weapons and conduct innocent research, according to Romanenko.

Civil servants or appointed officials provide more reliable information than politicians, said Kisilyova. Velychko added that press conferences, health ministry briefings, and other communications are not very informative. Often, government actions require explanation, but information is doled out sporadically and abruptly — and evidence cited is typically thin or untrustworthy.

Politicians often misinterpret or intentionally manipulate facts, take them out of context, and refer to low-quality or commissioned surveys, Romanyuk said. VoxCheck, which monitors and rates politicians by their lies and manipulations, reports that Ukraine's MPs promoted fake news stories about the pandemic, healthcare reform, bank reform, cooperation with the International Monetary Fund, utility payments, and

the sale of agricultural land.[26] Zaporozhchenko added campaign lies to that list.

Belousov noted that state officials announced plans to shift to communicating directly with their audience through social media. He said that the change is especially obvious when the president regularly publishes his video pieces, but such formats do not allow reference to quality facts or debating of decisions. In Rivne, Torbich said, local officials communicate a little better. For example, in reaction to a Chetverta Vlada complaint, both the city and the oblast councils opened their sessions for media, after initially attempting to restrict their sessions amid the pandemic.

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The new government reacts poorly to reports on corruption and abuse, said Sydorenko, who observed significant regression in the indicator on good governance and democratic rights over the last year. However, he said he is sure that media coverage of corruption keeps it in check. The government's reaction to coverage of human rights violations and civil liberties is usually higher, but paradoxically, its influence on outcomes is lower, as society tends to be more tolerant of such abuses. Only massive pressure, in rare cases, forces the government to react adequately, Belousov said.

Activists use lawyers to follow up on investigation results or to monitor relevant law enforcement and judicial bodies, and periodically their efforts succeed. According to Torbich, at times media investigations have resulted in offenders losing their position or facing criminal proceedings, but a slim few face real punishment. For instance, Suspilne showed a documentary of patients' rights violated in Ostrog Psychiatric Hospital, but its director was reelected by the oblast council — though his unprofessionalism cost the institution more than UAH 7 million

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26   "VoxCheck Reports on Popular Fakes and Manipulations Shared by MPs." Internews, September 2, 2020. https://internews.in.ua/news/voxcheck-reports-on-popular-fakes-and-manipulations-shared-by-mps/

($253,860) to cover the hospital's debts on salaries.[27]

In Sydorenko's opinion, the influence of quality publications on national elections is doubtless. But the local level has too few activists and influential outlets for publications, along with limited access to news information.

Local elections coverage was unbalanced and superficial, with little educational or analytical materials and a high amount of hidden advertising and planted stories, as an EU/Council of Europe media project in Ukraine concluded.[28] Moreover, the elections were not a news priority in local online media. Of 43,056 news items in 33 regional online media, fewer than six percent focused on the elections. However, the EU report highlighted that candidates who resort to "such dishonest methods of struggle," such as placing *jeansa*, did not always win the election.

The 66-observer mission from the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) concluded that voters seeking to make informed choices were missing "unbiased and balanced coverage" in the media and consumed "a high volume of unmarked promotional materials in broadcast media."

27   "Debt 'pit' of Ostroh psychiatric hospital," Fourth Power. December 12, 2020. https://4vlada.com/borgova-iama-ostrozkoi-psyhiatrychnoi-likarni

28   "Findings and conclusions of the media monitoring of local elections 2020," Council of Europe. November 27, 2020. https://www.coe.int/en/web/kyiv/news-event/news/-/asset_publisher/m9nDZlgeFMpW/content/findings-and-conclusions-of-the-media-monitoring-of-local-elections-2020

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